

LES STONE COLD KILLERS

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To my grandmother Dorothy Jeanette Brown,
who knew the secret of a good story

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NEW YORK

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From their perch, Perilous and Sparks had a postcard-worthy view of the hippies communing around the park's central fountain. The grubby, scrawny, shabbily-clad youth created a stark contrast with the Washington Square Arch rising heroically behind them. Scattered around their bare feet were cheap chianti bottles, emptied and abandoned. Their

heads were haloed by the smoke of a dozen joints.

“What do they really want?” Perilous asked, absently doodling a spiral in her notepad.

It was a rhetorical question as far as Sparks could tell. The girls had just landed their biggest ad campaign with The Eris Agency to date: pitching soda pop to modern youth, and Perilous had immediately begun over-thinking the proposition, as was her habit.

“I’m pretty sure they’ve already got it,” Sparks said. Her eyes were fixed on a flower child who’d just stripped down to her bikini bottom and mounted the fountain’s edge. The girl posed while a boy with long, unkempt hair serenaded her. Sparks traced the scene into the sketchpad lying across her knees, her charcoal-smudged fingers flying over the white paper.

When she finally glanced up at her silent colleague, Sparks was greeted with a familiar withering expression. It signified that she was neither amusing nor helpful.

“I need a little more than that, sis,” Perilous said. “This ad copy’s due Monday. First thing.”

Sparks straightened up, arching her back and stretching her arms over her head. It felt good after

a morning spent stooped over the drawing board. "What are the odds that drinking a soda's gonna lead the world to sing in perfect harmony? Because short of that, these kids seem pretty set."

Perilous rolled her eyes.

Beyond the arch, Washington Square North was lined with brownstones shaded from the mid-day August sun by tall oaks and elms. Sparks shared one of the walkups with Perilous. She could just make out the bright marigolds her roommate had placed in the kitchen window last week if she craned her long neck and squinted a little.

Beyond the brownstones, Manhattan rose up like a Goliath. Concrete and metal skyscrapers grazed the passing clouds. Over the tip-tops of the skyscrapers, tiny airplanes left trails of condensation that slowly dissolved into the blue sky like a child's disappearing ink.

Sparks' eyes wandered back to the spectacle in front of her. Just past the picture of wild abandon, she spotted a solitary police officer on his beat, entering the park beneath the colossal archway.

"Lady Godiva there's about to catch some heat," she said, nodding in his direction.

"Go do something, Sparks. I'm still meditating

on this scene, and that square's gonna harsh the vibe."

Sparks snorted. "Perilous Faretheewell, for a modern teen, your delivery of slang is truly abysmal."

Perilous shrugged.

"Anyway, I'm flattered by your confidence in my command, but what do you propose I do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Cajole. Persuade. You've got your pants on. Be a man. Even better—be The Man," she said and batted her long, jet-black eyelashes with mock ardor.

Sparks couldn't resist her colleague's gauntlet, and Perilous knew it. She sighed and stood, gingerly depositing a black fedora on her crown and dark sunglasses on the bridge of her aquiline nose. In her slim, tailored suit, Sparks was easily mistaken for a dashing young man about town.

Crossing the plaza in long strides, she sidestepped the sea of hippies and held her breath to avoid the potent aroma of patchouli-cloaked perspiration emanating from them. She approached the officer, a short, squat, irritable geezer, with the confidence of an old college pal though she was a decade or more his junior. With a swift evaluation

of his weary demeanor and his crumpled uniform, Sparks firmly clasped the unsuspecting man's hand.

“Officer Johnson, what a pleasure, sir. When I spoke with Captain Leary last week, he was singing your praises. Mentioned you by name, specifically. ‘You’ll need to catch up with Johnson before you head back to the Capitol,’ he said to me.”

Sparks had a working knowledge of the city's precincts owing to her prodigious years of youthful delinquency. She tracked the stats of detectives and all the top brass like a baseball fan might track their favorite players.

“Well—” began Officer Johnson. His furrowed brow unknit itself and his tense expression relaxed at the thought of the captain mentioning him by name. Specifically.

Sparks didn't give him time to finish his thought. In a fluid motion, she revealed an authentic-looking badge to the officer and then tucked it back into her inner jacket pocket, glancing around surreptitiously. She clapped her arm around his shoulder and pulled him towards her with a conspiratorial flourish. When she spoke again, her voice was low and her tone urgent.

“Johnson, listen, I don't want to step on your

toes, but I'm going to need to ask you to vacate the premises. We've got a sting happening here, and any interference could—"

"A sting?" the officer said, his forehead once more wrinkling in deep thought. "I'd of heard—"

Pivoting, her arm still around Johnson's shoulder, Sparks began walking him back in the direction of the arch, her head bent close to his.

"That's right, Johnson, a sting. We've got a son of a bitch staked out right now in this very park that would make your Captain Leary quake in his boots—a Russian gangster we've been watching for six months, responsible for the deaths of thousands of American citizens, not to mention his own comrades. That's all I can tell you—and more than I should. We don't need a flatfoot in here shaking the bag right now, capiche?"

"Well, I'll need to verify," he said, pulling his walkie-talkie from his belt.

"Certainly, Johnson," Sparks said, still shepherding the man out of the park. "But I'm afraid you'll find your frequency is jammed—due to the nature of the operation. You'll need to be at least three meters outside the park perimeter to use your radio."

Officer Johnson pressed the button on the side of his walkie-talkie to no avail. Sparks grinned and shrugged. Her agency-issued gold watch had a built-in frequency jammer—for Eris-related business only, of course. Sparks wasn't entirely sure this counted, but she'd leave it to Perilous to invent a plausible excuse later if the need arose.

"Listen," she said, pausing their progress long enough to tap the telltale Ruptured Duck on the policeman's lapel, "I see you're a veteran of the Second World War. So you understand that sometimes we've got to take orders from men we've never had the pleasure of meeting. This is one of those times, Johnson. I'm one of those men."

Any remaining doubts that the officer may have had were cast aside when a tinny beep began to emanate from the stylish watch. Sparks lifted her wrist conspicuously to the level of her mouth and said, "HQ, this is Goldfinger. Do you copy?"

There was a moment of tense silence during which time Officer Johnson's eyebrow inched incrementally upward in disbelief. When a reply finally issued from the watch, his mouth dropped open. It was a male voice with an accent that sounded sufficiently posh and continental to

persuade the officer he was dealing with a matter of international significance.

“Goldfinger,” the voice repeated with an irritable edge, “what’s your status?”

“I’ve got a public servant here—an Officer Johnson from the 6th—” Sparks said with an affable nod and a smile at the policeman, who was fidgeting nervously with his walkie-talkie, “He says he needs—”

Before she could finish the sentence, he raised his hands and began to back away. “Look, I don’t want to cause a problem, here, Agent Er—” he fumbled for words, realizing he hadn’t caught the name on the badge Sparks had flashed earlier, “I’ll just be on my way, then—I’ll check in with Leary myself.”

As he plodded back through the arch, he shook his walkie-talkie uselessly, puzzling over its silence.

Sparks turned sharply on her heel. She’d liberated the officer’s handcuffs in the midst of the exchange, and as she headed back in Perilous’ direction—a self-congratulatory spring in her step—she twirled them around one finger. She was eager to be showered with the adoration due her, and her colleague, who was paid to make things sound better

than they were in real life, had a natural flair for flattery.

The voice on the other end of the wristwatch, however, wasn't nearly so impressed with her charade.

"Goldfinger?" it said before heaving a great, put-upon sigh. "Will you never outgrow those rubbish Fleming novels?"

"We all have to have our role models, Truman."

"Look, if you've got this nonsense squared away, James Blonde, may I request a moment of your valuable time? Do you recall the word on the wire about that rogue CIA agent Cole?"

"I do. He was chasing after some highly-prized and widely-speculated-upon merchandise."

"Correct. We've got an informant who's turned up. Says he can give us Cole and intel on the merchandise. But we've got to act now. You're to rendezvous at Astroland."

Sparks grinned. "Coney Island?"

"The very same. He wanted to meet in a public place. He's worried he's being followed. You're to be on the lookout for a tall, Caucasian male in a gray suit. Brunette, with a mustache. He'll be waiting for you by the tower. I've given him a

description of the two of you, not that it'll do him much good as the park's liable to be full of hippies, beatniks, and teenyboppers, making you all but indistinguishable from your ilk."

Sparks let the dig slide. "No problem, pops. Let the kids take care of this."

Truman responded with an indecipherable grumble, and then the watch fell silent. Perilous' agency-issued diamond studs had picked up the transmission as well. She'd already gathered their things and was headed in Sparks' direction with a hint of relief in her face.

"Really, Peril, you'll take any excuse to procrastinate, won't you?"

2

“Do you think he’s going to give us a deadline extension on the ad campaign?” Perilous said, nervously biting her full bottom lip as they climbed into her Electra.

Before Sparks had time to speculate on the question, Perilous had the sleek car slicing through mid-morning traffic. When they reached the Interstate, she peeled out, leaving a Buick full of teenage boys shouting drag race challenges in her wake. They sped past the Statue of Liberty, her diadem glinting in the mid-afternoon rays. The Lower Harbor opened up in front of them. It created a broad swath of space that felt like liberation after the confines of Greenwich Village.

Or was it the looming deadline that was making Perilous feel cagey? She did this to herself every time. No matter how many campaigns she created for The Eris Agency, each new ad felt like Mission: Impossible. In a way, this little errand was a godsend. She was sick to death of staring at that blank page. Maybe stepping away from the project for a bit would shake something loose.

They pulled off the Belt Parkway and cruised over Neptune Avenue into Coney Island's sprawl of gaudy motor lodges, amusement parks, and oversized boardwalk spectacle. The ivory Astrotower was already visible—a mammoth needle puncturing the bloated August sun.

Perilous maneuvered the Electra into a narrow parking space and then took a moment to straighten her headscarf and her over-sized sunglasses. While she re-applied her lipstick, Sparks hopped out and ambled in the general direction of the Astroland entrance. She had her nose stuck in the air, inhaling the scent of 'clam bake in a bag' wafting from the Gregory and Paul's stand.

"Great. Now we'll have to stop to eat," Perilous mumbled.

A lanky cowboy who'd been leaning against a

shuttered up hot dog stand whistled slowly as Perilous emerged from her car. "You handle that deuce and a quarter like a regular west Texan on a mustang, pretty lady. Why, you might even be able to handle ol'—"

Before he could finish his thought, he slumped to the ground. Perilous slid her modified lipstick case back into her purse, pleased with the results of the new gadget the girls in Product Development had created for her. As a copywriter, she preferred using her words to clear up misunderstandings. But when time was of the essence, a tranquilizer dart was an expedient alternative. She headed towards the corner, where Sparks leaned against a light post waiting for her.

"Are you hungry? Because I'm famished. Have you smelled that 'clam bake in a bag'?" she put her arm through Perilous' arm and dragged her to the stand.

"Truman said this is urgent, Sparks. I'm 100% certain he didn't intend for you to pop off for a bite to eat on your way."

"Are you really? 100%? I'm going to counter your 100% by suggesting that I am at least 34% certain that he would want us to enter into this

mission at our peak performance. My peak performance requires fuel," she said.

"Okay. Fine. I guess I may as well get a slice of pie while we're here. God, look at the grease on that thing. Yes, please," she said pointing to the enormous pepperoni pizza on display and giving the vendor a thumb's up. "C'mon, let's hurry though."

After they placed their orders, they used the wait time to get a bead on the scene. It was a Tuesday afternoon, and the crowds were sparse. A few young families were enjoying a last hoorah before school ended their summer fun. Several old coots were out stretching their legs and walking their scruffy mutts, doing laps around the park in ill-fitting polyester leisure suits. And there were, of course, clusters of teens standing idly around looking cool in sunglasses and beach attire just as Truman had predicted.

With junk food in hand, they walked and ate, scoping out the crowds as they did. They took a circuitous route so they could survey the scene before engaging with the informant. The 270-foot gyro tower was flanked by a Tilt-A-Whirl that spun madly-screaming children to the brink of vomit as well as a kiddie roller coaster and a half-dozen

booths hawking cheap, plastic keychains and woven purses or lemonade and funnel cake.

Sparks ushered Perilous to a particularly fragrant food stand where she ordered sodas and a bag of popcorn from a young, pimpled vendor. They leaned on the counter and observed the space surrounding the tower. Sure enough, there was the informant, tapping his foot and nervously puffing on a cigarette just off to the side of the tower's entrance. He was tall and lean with a shock of dark hair that contrasted with his pale, strained face.

Perilous nudged Sparks and nodded in the direction of two goons watching their guy from a ring toss booth to his left. One had a mountainous frame and a crown as smooth as a glacier. His head seemed to have been attached directly to his shoulders, which made the black turtleneck seem superfluous. Perilous could see the bulge of a holstered gun at his side.

The Mountain stooped to talk to a smaller man with a face like a sewer rat and the same sickly gray pallor and scraggly whiskers. He was petite, but like his friend, Ratface was armed.

"He was right," Perilous said. "He's definitely being followed. I'd be interested in knowing who by.

Those are just about the most generic-looking thugs I've ever laid eyes on."

Sparks nodded in agreement. "What say we conduct informal interviews? We'll need privacy."

Perilous looked around for the most likely candidate. Though she couldn't see it, she could hear recorded screams and laughter coming from the nearby fun house. It was a space they both knew well from previous weekend excursions.

"What about the fun house? It should be easy enough to separate them in there. I'll make friends with our contact. You follow up from behind."

"Classic Zulu pincer movement. You really know how to set my heart aflutter, Peril."

She winked in response and sauntered to the Astrotower entrance, her yellow sundress swishing as she went. Sparks hung back, finishing off her soda.

"Daddy-o!" Perilous cried out, wrapping her arms around the contact's neck. "I've missed you, baby!"

Unfazed, the man pulled her into a close embrace. "Eris?"

Perilous nodded and whispered in his ear, "Follow me. We need to shake your tail."

She grasped his hand in hers and pulled him through the midway towards the fun house, laughing

and making infantile small talk as they went. In the rearview mirror of her sunglasses, she saw that Ratface and the Mountain were following them. Sparks, who'd picked up a bright red candied apple at another stand, leisurely strolled along in their wake.

"Is everything okay?" the contact asked.

"Groovy," Perilous said, pulling him towards the fun house.

Its facade was a colossal clown stooped over to swallow intrepid day-trippers in his gaping red mouth. His lurid, white face was stretched out of proportion with red and white eyes that spun hypnotically in their mechanical sockets.

"Nothing says fun like an insane, cannibal clown," Perilous mused for the hundredth time.

As they entered, they were assaulted by a cacophony of piercing screams and maniacal laughter blared through hidden speakers. Beneath the caterwauling, a twangy tune jangled unceasingly. Gauzy strips of dust-furred fabric hung from the ceiling and clung to Perilous' scarf. It gave off a nauseating stench created by the amalgamation of sweat and mildew and a dozen, dime store colognes.

A dark passageway lay on the other side of the

entrance. Its floorboards writhed and bucked, sending the contact sprawling. She helped him up and hurried him to the end of the tunnel, where they were jolted into a mirror-filled gallery. She quickly maneuvered him through the maze, which she'd navigated often enough on weekends to know by heart.

"Who are these guys?" she asked, pushing him past reflections of himself.

Before he could answer, a muffled gunshot cut through the din. Perilous heard glass shatter and glanced behind her to see the Mountain's black turtleneck and reflective pate multiplied in the mirrors. It was clear by the expression on his face that the scene inside the fun house was not his idea of a good time.

Perilous pushed the man forward out of harm's way. On the other side of the hall of mirrors was a room dominated by a spinning disk. The chamber was chaotic with glowing neon, frantically-flashing spotlights, and the blaring of sirens and uncanny sound effects. The wall on the far side had three doors.

"Take the second one," Perilous shouted. "Wait for us at the ring toss."

He looked dubious, but Perilous pushed him onto the revolving floor before he could argue. He staggered to his feet and through the second door, casting one glance behind him before he disappeared into the darkness.

Perilous waited a moment, just long enough to hear the goons ineptly making their way to the end of the maze, then she stepped onto the disk. As she launched herself through the first door, she spied Ratface making a clumsy entrance. He was caught off guard by the dizzying room and fell face forward onto the spinning platform.

“They went that way!” he shouted over his shoulder, pointing after Perilous.

The Mountain stumbled through the mirrored exit into the spinning room and tripped over Ratface. It gave Perilous time to hide herself in the depths of the black tunnel that led to the heart of the fun house. The hallway had a series of trap doors triggered by weight. Though they only dropped a few centimeters, they gave the impression of falling, which was, Perilous hoped, enough to knock her pursuers off balance and give her the advantage.

She heard another gunshot from somewhere behind her and sucked in her breath. The blast was

followed by several thuds, a shout, and a distinctive crash. She pressed a small pin on the arm of her sunglasses to trigger night vision.

The Mountain was lumbering towards her, bumbling awkwardly through the obstacle course of half-walls, padded columns, and air jets that sporadically shot out bursts of air. Ratface and Sparks were nowhere to be seen.

“Sparks, where are you?” she mumbled.

Perilous positioned herself to the side of the first trap door. She pressed against the wall to stay well out of view. The Mountain continued his beleaguered advance, cursing loudly at the inconvenient diversions that were thwarting his progress.

Finally, he made the misstep that Perilous had hoped for. His weight triggered the trap door, and it dropped beneath him.

The Mountain lurched forward, instinctively throwing his hands out to catch himself. Perilous heard his gun clatter to the floor, and she seized the opportunity to kick him squarely in the temple, which was now level with her foot. His head reeled with the force, but he was quick to recover.

He grabbed Perilous' ankle, and she crashed to

the floor beside him. The concrete jolted her spine, sending a lightning bolt of pain through her. The Mountain launched himself on top of her, pinning her to the sticky floor. He raised his thick fist, but Perilous kneed his groin before he could land the punch and squirmed out of his reach as he winced in pain.

She was back up, but so was the Mountain. He propelled himself towards her, head down, like a bull, and Perilous, like a toreador, strategically stepped out of the way. In his assault, he'd triggered another trap door, and once more, he plummeted to the ground. This time, however, he landed close enough to his gun to seize it in his meaty fist. He fired without taking time to aim. The bullet whizzed past Perilous' head and lodged in the wall behind her.

Another shot rang out, but this time, it came from behind them. Perilous spun to see Sparks holding Ratface's gun. Her shot met its target. The Mountain shouted in pain and dropped his weapon to clutch his wounded hand. Perilous grabbed the gun and trained it on him while Sparks constrained him with the nicked handcuffs she'd squirreled away in her jacket pocket.

“Who do you work for?” Perilous demanded.

The Mountain cradled his hand and grinned dopily. “I ain’t telling you nothing, little girl.”

“Suit yourself,” she said. “You can talk to my people when they come to collect you. I can assure you they won’t be nearly so sweet as I am.”

“You may as well finish me off,” the Mountain said, his face contorting in pain. “I ain’t saying nothing to nobody.”

Sparks took a moment to frisk the grimacing Mountain while Perilous sent his location to Truman. There was nothing of interest in his pockets, so they left him moaning in the darkness to catch up with the informant.

“Did you get anything out of Ratface?”

Sparks shrugged. “Just a little hemoglobin. He wasn’t talking either. The Agency can deal with them at the hospital. The most important thing right now is getting the informant back to HQ in one piece.”

They’d reached the end of the fun house, where an air jet propelled them through the clown’s rear entrance. Their contact was waiting for them, but he was in no condition to talk, and they wouldn’t be taking him anywhere. He was lying prone on the

asphalt midway, shivering and convulsing. White foam gathered around his mouth, and his hair was peeling away from his scalp. Park visitors had begun to gather around him, but none approached.

In the distance, Perilous heard police sirens blaring. Their foray through the fun house hadn't escaped the attention of the authorities.

"Come on," she said, running to their contact's side.

"Is that ice on his mustache?" Sparks said, kneeling down to examine the man's blue-tinged face. "It's coming right off."

She peeled the mustache away and then tugged at the thick mat of icy hair on his head. It came off just as easily. A wig.

"Who was this cat?" Sparks wondered aloud.

Perilous felt for his pulse. It was thin and erratic, but what disturbed her more was how cold his skin was. "And what happened to him?"

Sparks fished around in the man's pockets and found two passports. One revealed a familiar photograph of their dark-haired cold contact—a James Burton of Baltimore. The other showed a man who looked identical to Burton. In this photo, however, he had no mustache and his name was

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listed as Michael Cole. The rogue CIA agent.

3

The following morning, Perilous and Sparks rose early and took the subway to Hell's Kitchen. The Eris Agency occupied a ten-story Art Deco building on 11th Street. Despite the historic facade, the building's interior was modern and chic. The lobby was clad in Ashford Black Marble that gave it a 'Dali Does the Inferno' vibe, and it was outfitted with aerodynamic chrome chairs that looked like instruments of torture from a German expressionist film. Several large screens mounted on the walls featured continuous loops of the public relations firm's more avant garde advertisements, which had won copious awards but hadn't sold a damn thing. They were Sparks' favorites.

“Go straight to ten, ladies,” the concierge said as they passed.

The tenth was where the agency’s founder Madam Simone Eris-Getty held court. Sparks had only met The Big Boss Herself on a few special occasions, but she’d taken an instant shine to the vivacious older woman. It wasn’t every day you got called to the penthouse suite. She was either moving up in the world or falling fast.

They passed into the third mirrored elevator. It was the only one that gave access to ten. Inside, they each took a moment to right themselves before the encounter. This primarily consisted of nervous tie-straightening in Sparks’ case. Perilous applied a fresh gloss of lipstick and gently coaxed her tight, black curls into place.

The elevator doors slid open when they reached the top floor. Unlike the stark decor of the lobby, Madam Simone’s suite was warm and textured. She’d traveled around the world hundreds of times in her life, and she marked her territory with the artifacts of her experiences. The tile that ran throughout the space was a complex array of Moroccan floral patterns in teals and indigos. The doorways and windows were trimmed with ornately

carved teakwood from Burma.

Madam Simone's personal assistant, a pert red-head named Mercy Andrews, showed them to the salon. They found The Big Boss Herself standing in front of a bank of large windows. She was looking out over the tops of neighboring buildings and across the Hudson River to New Jersey.

She was sinewy and tough and garishly ornamented with feathers and fur and beads, like a dried out chicken bone in a voodoo ritual. Her thick white hair was tucked up into a silk top hat, and she smoked a cigar while leaning casually on a silver-tipped cane. She wore a ballerina's black leotard, and a gauzy, petal-pink skirt revealed every jagged angle of her aging body. She'd foregone shoes altogether, but with the kind of money Madam Simone had, shoes were optional.

Her second husband had been an enterprising oil magnate named Buck. When he died, he left his entire fortune to his beloved widow. She used the money to launch The Eris Agency. Within a decade, she'd established it as the premier Manhattan PR firm with a client list that was a who's who of American robber barons.

But advertising had never been her primary

objective. It had only been a means to an end, a front for a far more rewarding enterprise. Whether out of a sense of righteousness or, as Sparks hoped, from sheer spite, Madam Simone had opted to use her vast network of contacts—business and personal—to undermine the men that she referred to as TNT.

Tycoons and tyrants.

They'd gotten too comfortable imposing their ego trips from the top, and Madam Simone got her kicks upsetting their apple carts. She was an anarchist at heart, and she enjoyed wreaking havoc on the wagers of wars and the hoarders of resources. She gleefully seized every opportunity to subvert the status quo.

Logistically, Madam Simone reasoned that girls would be the ideal agents of her personal brand of chaos, as social mores rendered them beneath suspicion. Fish can't imagine fire while they're blissfully swimming in their watery worlds, but they can still be cooked. Likewise, Madam Simone was fond of saying, old fogies can't imagine a girl being their undoing. Not until they're well past undone.

In addition to being girls, Perilous and Sparks each possessed two traits The Big Boss considered

critical to both black ops and propaganda: mental agility and ethical independence. A slew of supplementary talents—martial arts, close quarters combat, lock picking, et al.—were honed by the agency before they'd gone into the field for the first time a year earlier.

For her part, Sparks hadn't required much training. She was naturally adept at causing trouble; she'd just never imagined she could get paid so well for it.

"Ah, mes amies!" the wiry, old minx greeted them with a sly smile. "Apporter un peu champagne, Truman."

Truman, the agency's VP, strode to the wet bar and finessed the cork from a bottle of Dom Pérignon. He was the picture of a suave Madison Avenue ad man with his slicked-back hair and gray flannel suit.

"1953," he said while dispensing the bubbles into crystal flutes. He handed each girl a glass, and Madam Simone raised her own for a toast.

"Santé!" she said. "Et bon voyage!"

Sparks had gotten her glass as high as her lips but was taken aback and momentarily fretful. If The Big Boss thought they'd screwed the pooch on

yesterday's assignment, who knew where she might send them.

"Bon voyage?"

"Oui, mes amies. Today, the two of you fly to gay Paris!" She clapped her knobby hands together, spilling champagne onto a centuries old sheepskin rug.

Perilous and Sparks exchanged glances, their excitement barely concealed.

"It's one of the few leads we have concerning Cole," Truman explained drily.

"So—he's dead?" Perilous asked.

Truman's expression answered the question. "The doctors did all they could."

"And the cause?"

"According to the hospital—hypothermia," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"But how? It's August and blazing hot."

"That, they couldn't explain."

"What about the goons from the fun house?" Sparks asked.

"They were dosed with something before we could get to them. A mind-altering drug or—" he shrugged. "Regardless, they've been rendered drooling imbeciles is the long and short of it."

“Well, to be fair, they were drooling——” Sparks began only to be interrupted by Perilous.

“Neuroweapons? That sounds like The Omega Foundation. The CIA’s projects haven’t advanced far enough to be reliable in the field. Neither have the Chinese or Soviet governments—yet.”

Madam Simone nodded in agreement. “Oui. There can be no doubt that The Foundation is involved in this.”

She’d stumbled upon the international cabal of industrial elites purely by accident when her exploits began to interfere with its members’ attempts at fomenting wars for financial gain. Her agents’ constant disruptions became so troubling that her third husband, a fourth generation member of The Foundation, had begun talking in his sleep, revealing its secrets to her a little at a time.

The Big Boss Herself capitalized on the situation, digging deeper into her husband’s shady affairs and his anxious psyche. She used the information she gained to round out her agency’s client list with high-ranking Omega members. And then she used the money they paid her for her PR services to sabotage their more sinister schemes.

“We’ve traced Cole’s last movements via his

phony passport. He flew in from Paris where we know he'd been operating undercover for five years. He was gathering information for the CIA on weapons development using the code name Ratatoskr," explained Truman. "Before that, he was a Navy man aboard the RV Polaris in the Arctic."

"The Arctic?" Sparks said. "That's one slow-acting case of hypothermia."

Truman rolled his eyes.

"Why come all this way—why come home—and reach out to Eris?" Perilous asked. "Why not contact the CIA?"

"Maybe he believed the CIA couldn't—or wouldn't—protect him," Sparks suggested.

"We know that Omega has moles in every agency," Madam Simone said.

"Every agency?" Sparks said, giving her boss a sidelong glance.

"Almost every agency," Madam Simone replied with a mischievous smile. "And we know that every agency goes to bed with Omega when it suits them," she continued and then qualified her statement with a wink at Sparks, "except Eris, of course."

"So if Cole discovered there was a mole in the CIA while he was snooping in black market weapons

development, he wouldn't know who he could trust," said Sparks.

"Worse," added Perilous, "if he realized the CIA was involved in shady dealings, he couldn't go in either. Not in good conscience."

"Good conscience isn't necessarily a given when it comes to government agents," Sparks said. "But I suppose it could happen."

"Whatever his rationale," said Truman, "we've got it on authority that he'd been on the trail of something—"

"Something very big," Madam Simone interjected, arching her thin left eyebrow.

"But what exactly?" Sparks said.

"We don't know that," said Truman. "From the intel we recovered, we only know that Cole referred to it as 'le destin du Diable,' or LD3."

"The Devil's destiny? So some sort of flamethrower, maybe?" Sparks said with a gleam in her eyes. "Or something nuclear? That would spell trouble for someone given the disarmament talks this month."

"No," Perilous said, shaking her head. "According to Dante, the Devil was condemned to be frozen for an eternity, Sparks. He was condemned to the

lowest pit of hell—a wasteland far from God’s burning love.”

“So maybe we’ve already seen LD3 in action,” Sparks said, recalling Cole’s blue-tinged skin and frozen mustache.

“My thoughts, *précisément*,” said Madam Simone. “However, we have reason to believe that the weapon Cole uncovered would do *beaucoup plus de mal* than what you witnessed at the amusement park. Possibly a weapon of mass destruction.”

“Whatever he found, it frightened him enough to risk his cover to escape Paris and contact us. You’re going to take a closer look around his last known whereabouts, track down this weapon—whatever it may be—and destroy it before it makes the consequences of the Cold War more frigid than usual,” Truman said, adding, “And you should know we have evidence suggesting a Soviet agent is trying to get his or her hands on the same intel—but to very different ends. This is critical, ladies.”

“Do we have anything to go on other than his code name?” Sparks asked.

Truman handed her a small, linen scroll, which she unfurled. Perilous drew nearer to see. It was a portrait of a girl just a few years their senior—

perhaps, twenty or so. Her heart-shaped face was haloed by fine, blond hair, and her eyes were large and moss-green. In the lower left corner was a scrawled signature: Legrand.

“It was sewn into Cole’s coat,” Truman said.

“Who’s this Legrand?” Sparks asked. “His style doesn’t ring any bells for me.”

“Nor for any of our sources here or abroad. Nor will you find any microdots or hidden messages. Analytics has already taken a look,” Madam Simone said.

“Well, then. That’s not in the least bit useful.”

“Take it with you anyway. Show it around at some of the smaller art galleries and you may get a lead.”

“We booked you on the first flight to Paris. You’ve got—” Truman glanced at his wristwatch, “about an hour to pack up. My driver’s waiting downstairs to take you home and then drive you to the airport. No shenanigans. This is a big one.”

“Nonsense,” intervened Madam Simone. “You’ll have time for both—the big one and the shenanigans. Why bother saving the world if you’re not going to enjoy it?”

4

“Of course, Truman wouldn’t spring for first class,” Sparks said, sulking as she reached up to deposit their carry-on luggage into the overhead bin.

“Don’t worry. We’ll still get foie gras like the rich folks,” Perilous said, pushing the blonde hair of her wig behind her ear and flipping through a copy of last month’s *Vogue*.

The Starliner was a stately jet no matter where you sat. The seats were cozy, and the stewardesses were warm and generous. It would be hard to justify a complaint.

But then Perilous leaned to the left a little to get a better view of first class. The beautiful people were already lounging in their plush settees, clinking

martini glasses. Maybe she did feel a stitch of envy. Or righteous indignation. Po-tay-to. Po-tah-to.

She was just about to suggest they infiltrate when a girl sat in the row across from theirs. Her face set off alarms in Perilous' mind. Her hair was much darker, and her face was pale and drawn. But the dull, plum shadows beneath her eyes highlighted the familiar moss-green hue. She was biting her lip as she stared sullenly out the window at the tarmac.

"Sparks," Perilous whispered, nudging her partner.

"Yeah." Sparks had settled in and was sketching the celebratory atmosphere of the first class cabin to stow away for some future airline ad campaign. "I know what you're thinking, and I'm in. Let's go—"

"No. At least, not yet. Does this girl look familiar to you?"

She subtly directed Sparks' attention to the new passenger.

Sparks' eyes widened immediately, and she pulled the small portrait from her jacket's inside pocket to examine it more closely. "That can't be right, though—can it? What are the odds that the girl from the portrait would be on the plane with

us?" she whispered.

"It's more probable than you might think."

Sparks made a dubious face.

"We have a spy who believes he's in danger," Perilous said. "He flees the country that he's made his home for the last five years. He brings with him a memento of someone he's come to love in that time, but he doesn't want to endanger her should he be captured—"

"And so he sews it into his coat lining. You do spin an enchanting yarn, Peril, but that explains the portrait, not the girl."

Perilous sighed. "Look, sis, he loved her so much that he took the time to sew her portrait into his coat. If she loved him half as much, what do you think she would do when he left?"

"Ah—" Sparks replied, the light coming on.

"Exactly. She'd follow him. And if that's the case, then she probably knows what happened at the park—"

"So she's getting the hell out of Dodge. And fast."

"Only if she's got any sense." Perilous closed her magazine and leaned across the aisle, offering it to the green-eyed girl. "Would you like something to

read, mon ami?"

The girl examined her with a dazed expression for a moment before shaking her head and answering, "Non. Merci."

"Maybe I should—" Sparks began but Perilous cut her off. She'd seen the look of fear in the girl's eyes.

"She's not going to talk to anybody. She's terrified. And probably in shock. But I'm certain that's our girl."

Once the plane was in the air, Perilous took out her notebook. They hadn't gotten an extension on the ad campaign after all. While the stewardesses delivered bubbly to the parched tourist-class passengers, she scribbled strategies for selling sodas to hippies, occasionally consulting with Sparks.

Later, carts loaded with delicacies prepared by Maxim's of Paris were wheeled out for their mid-flight meal. Foie gras really was on the menu for the evening, as was smoked salmon and caviar, champagne and espresso. Once the feast was vanquished and the wine all drunk, Perilous was overwhelmed with exhaustion. The lights in the cabin were dimmed to allow the passengers to rest their eyes. Soon, she fell into a sound slumber.

She was roused after several hours when the green-eyed girl stood to make her way to the restroom. The tourist class cabin was dark and hushed, and Sparks was fast asleep, but Perilous could still hear faint murmurings in first class.

She stood, stretched, and walked to the magazine rack where she pretended to flip through an issue of LIFE while sneaking a peek through the curtain. Just as Perilous was about to make her move and steal a moment in first class, the sound of a tussle towards the back of the plane caught her attention.

A man in a black suit with a face like an undertaker had reached out and grabbed the green-eyed girl's wrist on her return from the bathroom. She snatched her arm away from him and stumbled back up the aisle to her seat. Perilous could see the panic in her face as she turned her anxious gaze toward the window and an endless night sky.

Perilous made a note of the man's appearance. He didn't look familiar to her, but the girl definitely recognized him. Abandoning her original plan, she went back to her seat and leaned across the aisle.

"Excusez moi, mademoiselle. Do you know that

man?"

"Which man?" the girl said, feigning ignorance.

Perilous could hear the strain in her voice despite her attempts to appear nonplussed.

"I saw that man put his hands on you. Do you know him?"

"Non," she said. "Perhaps he mistook me for someone—" She shrugged in a terrible approximation of nonchalance.

"If you need help—"

"Non. Je vais bien. Bonne nuit," the girl said firmly, closing her eyes to indicate that the conversation was over.

Perilous sighed and scribbled a few more thoughts into her notebook before dozing off again. When she woke, the stewardess was back with her cart, delivering dishes heaped with warm, crusty croissants and plump strawberries, tiny chocolate bars and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

"I could live on a plane," Sparks said, making a sandwich of the chocolate and croissant. "Stateless. Always in motion. A new city every day. Food. Champagne."

"Mhm," Perilous replied absently, watching the mysterious girl push food around her melamine

plate.

“What’s eating you?” Sparks asked.

Perilous told her what she’d witnessed during the night.

Sparks nodded and said, “If whoever got to Cole found out about her, she’s in danger now, too. They may think that she knows something. Maybe she does.”

“Seems that way to me.”

“Alright, then. We’ve caught our first break. We’ll follow her.”

“And the Undertaker back there?”

“If we’re lucky, he’s planning on following her, too.”

When breakfast had been devoured by the hungry passengers, the stewardesses came around to clear their plates and put their tables back up. The pilot announced over the speaker that they were circling the City of Lights.

“Bonjour, mesdames et messieurs! We’ll be landing at Orly Airport shortly. You’re in luck! Paris welcomes you with balmy weather today! Prendre plaisir!”

After circling the airfield for several minutes, the plane finally landed. Perilous and Sparks joined

the other jet-lagged passengers to form a bedraggled parade from the jet towards the bustling Orly terminal. The weather indeed was balmy, the sky brilliant azure, and the sun dazzling as they crossed the tarmac.

Perilous paused for a moment to adjust her shoe strap, allowing the Undertaker to move ahead of them so that they could keep an eye on both him and the girl. Sparks searched for her passport, fumbling through the pockets of her jacket, which had been hanging on a coat rack in the plane's entryway. When she finally fished it out, Perilous pointed to the corner of an ivory calling card poking out of the booklet.

"What's that?" she asked as they fell into step behind the tall, solemn Undertaker.

Sparks plucked it out and examined it.

"Take a look," she said, handing Perilous the card. "Somebody must've slipped it in my coat pocket during the flight."

"This is cotton—heavy. And the emblem—"

Sparks nodded. "The Foundation."

"That means somebody on the plane—"

"Somebody made us," Sparks said, glancing at the girl, "and they're sending a message."

“You’re not thinking it was her?” Perilous said incredulously, following her gaze.

The girl was approaching one of the passport control desks. The Undertaker had been sorted into the next queue over.

Sparks shrugged. “Maybe the portrait wasn’t a lover. Maybe it was an enemy. We can’t rule her out just because she’s got a face like a moping angel, can we? We, of all people, should know better than that. She could’ve been at the amusement park all along, stalking Cole. We would never have noticed.”

Perilous shook her head and glanced towards the Undertaker. “I’m for him. I saw what went down on the plane last night. If anybody’s Omega, it’s that one.”

“If he’s out to get her, he’ll follow her. If not, let’s just assume he subscribes to the generally accepted theory that it’s okay to maul any passing woman as it suits him. In other words, he’s your run-of-the-mill pervert, but not our problem. At least, not right now.”

Perilous kept both the girl and the tall man in her line of sight through passport control and customs. Neither claimed luggage. Both seemed eager

to escape the confines of the crowds arriving at and departing from the international airport. Sparks left instructions and a generous tip with a porter to send their luggage to Hôtel Regina ahead of them.

“Let’s split up,” Perilous said. “If he doesn’t follow her—”

“Then—again—he’s not our problem.”

Perilous shook her head. “I’ve got a gut feeling. I don’t like this guy. I want to know what he’s up to.”

“Okay, look,” Sparks said, impatiently. “Follow him if you want. I’m going after her. I know for a fact that she can tell us something about Cole. If we don’t all end up at the same place, meet back at the hotel.”

With that, Sparks dashed off to follow the girl, leaving Perilous to her own devices.

PARIS

5

The green-eyed girl climbed into a taxi, and Sparks rushed to claim the one in line behind it.

“Follow that cab,” she said to the driver, looking back to see Perilous trail behind the Undertaker to a bank of pay phones.

“What are you up to, Peril?” she muttered to herself, but her thought was cut short by the driver’s brutal maneuvering to keep up with their quarry. He darted out into the early morning traffic and roared northward towards the city. With the driver’s eyes on the cab ahead, Sparks kept a watch on their tail. She saw no signs they were being followed.

The cab raced through the southern suburbs of

Paris. They skirted Petit-Clamart, where Jean Bastien-Thiry had been executed by firing squad three years earlier after a failed attempt on President Charles de Gaulle's life. Today, the streets of the neighborhood were bustling with more mundane activities. Sophisticated Parisian children in pressed uniforms walked in pairs to their nearby schools. Solitary adults made their way to office buildings or post offices or boulangeries.

The driver turned onto le Avenue d'Italia and sped into the heart of the city. He slowed their pace in Montparnasse, where merchants at kiosks peddled ancient tomes and plein aire oil paintings of the French countryside to meandering tourists. Sparks could pick out the denizens of the Bohemian quarter. They had the frenetic demeanors of poets, each eager for the opportunity to leap onto a stage in a jazz club down some dark alley.

At last, the cab came to a halt in front of one of the city's tidy, beige Haussmann complexes. The girl paid her driver and dashed into the building, casting a nervous glance around her before she closed the door. Sparks' driver cruised to a stop at the end of the block and deposited her on the corner.

She tipped him and stepped out onto the sidewalk. As the cab roared off, Sparks crossed the street, pausing for a moment case the block. Cascades of emerald ivy softened the stoic facade of the buildings as did the edge of a lace curtain fluttering through an open window on the second floor. Among the walkups, a green grocer's wooden crates displayed tomatoes and leafy chard, golden pears and strings of garlic. A more spartan newsstand was wedged between the shop and the next flat.

After making a quick stop to pick up the day's edition of *Le Monde*, Sparks walked to a café on the far corner. She took a seat at a sidewalk table with a view of the girl's apartment and ordered an espresso from the waiter. Shaking open the newspaper, she settled in to observe.

The minutes passed slowly. An hour inched past, and still no one came to or left the building. Sparks finished the newspaper and began sketching the café's patrons in her pad to pass the time. There was an older gentleman whose nose had been stuck in a battered book since he took his seat, and next to him, a young couple chatted over coffee.

Two women had seated themselves to Sparks'

left. The elder was bundled up in mink as though it was mid-winter in Kiev. Her jet black hair was piled high atop her head, and her eyes and a murder of crow's feet were partially concealed behind enormous movie starlet sunglasses.

Her companion appeared to be Sparks' age and in a foul mood. Her hair was as dark as the older woman's dyed coiffure but cut into a stark bob that framed her striking features. They were quietly but heatedly discussing a collection of photographs spread out on the table.

To Sparks' other side, an unkempt young man had recently taken up residence. He had a handsome face, but it was fixed into a fierce scowl. He seemed to be measuring Sparks up, and so she kept a circumspect eye on him.

After several minutes, he spit dramatically on the sidewalk and addressed her loudly, "Hey, morceau de merde!"

All of the patrons stopped what they were doing to witness the breach in civility. The waiter watched the exchange from his station near the door, wringing his hands.

Unmoved, Sparks surveyed the rude hooligan for a long moment, her eyes gliding slowly from the tips

of his battered sneakers to his rakish mop of hair. Seated, he looked to be six foot three—a few inches taller than Sparks. He had an athletic build, but he looked drunk from the evening before.

She smiled before dismissing him. “Fous le camps.”

At that, his hand shot out, taking aim at Sparks’ demitasse. Just as quickly, she tossed the steaming espresso into his face and used her Oxford-clad foot to upend her attacker’s chair. He landed with a thud on the hard sidewalk.

Leaping up, he pulled a gleaming blade from an ankle sheath and lunged at Sparks. She flipped the small café table and wielded it like a battle shield. His knife wedged into its wooden top. The café’s patrons caught their breath in unison, and the elderly gentleman threw money on his table and rushed off with his book to escape the commotion.

Sparks yanked the table aside, pulling the man off balance. She leveraged the table’s weight and her own momentum against him, sending him crashing back to the ground with a forceful blow to the abdomen. The patrons twittered as the man crumpled and gasped for air.

Flushed with anger and damning both Sparks

and her attacker, the café's owner rushed to the side of the gaping waiter.

"This one," said the waiter, collecting himself and pointing at the man still catching his breath on the ground. "He was asking for it."

"I'll call the police straight away. Please, accept my apologies," he said to Sparks.

"That's not necessary," she replied, straightening her tie and putting the table back in its proper place. "I've got a terrible case of jet lag, and I'm in no mood to deal with the police. So long as the gentleman takes his business elsewhere."

The café owner doused the man with water. "File, crétin!"

Stumbling back on his feet, the hooligan cast a look of pure rage in Sparks' direction before sprinting off.

Sparks brushed off her traveling suit and returned to her seat to enjoy the fresh espresso the waiter brought. She left the blade lodged in the table's center, a challenge to any other loitering ne'er-do-wells.

"I admire the way you handled that ruffian, monsieur."

The compliment was delivered in heavily-

accented French by the older woman at the next table. Her voice had the dry, rustling quality of tracing paper.

"It's 'mademoiselle'," Sparks said with a playful smile.

"Ah! Quel enchantement! Like George Sand," the old woman clapped her bony hands. "S'il vous plaît—won't you join us?"

Bored and seeing no harm in passing the time in conversation, Sparks took a seat in the empty chair at their table. She noticed that the photographs had been put away.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the woman said, extending a gilt-edged calling card. It read: Mdm. Jeanne Triquet, Marchand d'Antiquités et d'Art and provided a phone number and a gallery address on Rue Tholozé. "Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"No, madam. My apologies. I'm on holiday. I don't know a soul in Paris."

"But your French! It's perfect!"

"Boarding school," Sparks lied. "And who's your lovely companion?"

"Bette Noire," the sullen brunette replied, adding without conviction, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine. I'm sure."

"And you? I see you're an artist," Triquet said, waving her hand at Sparks' sketchpad.

"Oui," Sparks offered a card of her own to Triquet. "Madero Spartakanova, illustrateur extraordinaire."

"Spartakanova? That's Russian, non?" She raised an eyebrow—a not unfamiliar reaction to Sparks' surname.

"My father was from Leningrad, but my mother was born in Coahuila."

"Mexico, eh? And you? Where do you call home?"

Sparks shrugged. "I was born in California. Grew up in Mexico. I live in New York now, but I travel for work. Home is wherever the living's easy."

Triquet prodded mischievously. "I wonder. What does that make you, then, Mademoiselle Spartakanova? Are you an American? Mexican? Russian? Surely you can't be all three. Mon dieu. That would be a paradox in this day and age, non?"

Sparks laughed. "I suppose I'm a paradox, then."

Bette smiled in spite of herself.

"Well, Mademoiselle Spartakanova, international paradox—"

“Please. Call me Sparks. All my friends do.”

“Épatant! If we’re friends already, let me come straight to the point,” Triquet said.

“So you didn’t invite me to your table for light conversation, then?”

“On the contrary, the matter is very heavy to me. You see, an attempt was made on my life recently. It’s made us both terribly skittish, but a bodyguard! Well, that would go quite a way towards putting us back at our ease. I’m willing to pay handsomely.”

“It’s a tempting offer, Madam Triquet, but I’m only in Paris a few days, and I’ve already got a satisfying career. Thanks all the same.”

The elderly woman nodded and smiled. Sparks thought she might have shrugged as well, but the bulk of the fur coat made her movements difficult to discern.

“But of course. Still—it never hurts to ask, does it?”

“Hardly ever,” Sparks agreed, catching a movement out of the corner of her eye.

The green-eyed girl had finally decided to leave her apartment building. She was walking quickly down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

Sparks glanced at her watch and sucked in her breath.

“Forgive me, mesdames. I’ve let the time slip away from me, and now, I’m late for an appointment. Perhaps, we’ll meet again?” she said, but she didn’t wait around long enough to schedule drinks.

Instead, she waved goodbye and dashed down the street in pursuit of the girl. After three blocks, she paused in front of a bakery window. Sparks slowed and pretended to adjust her watch, but it quickly became apparent that she’d been made. The girl took a deep breath and turned on her heel, boldly taking the few steps required to confront her pursuer. Her bravura was admirable if not entirely convincing.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name’s Sparks. And yours?”

“Why are you following me?” she demanded, ignoring Sparks’ extended hand and her question.

“Look, I’m sorry I’ve frightened you. We were on the same plane. My friend saw what happened between you and the man. She was worried and asked that I make sure that you got home okay.”

“I got home just fine, but you’re still following

me. Why?"

"Well," Sparks said. She didn't have a good answer to the question. "You're clearly spooked by something. I just—I wanted to make sure."

Manette's poise faltered. She bit her lip for a moment, struggling with a decision. To trust Sparks or to continue on in fear.

"Please. Let me help you," Sparks coaxed.

The girl looked from Sparks to the tips of her patent leather Mary Janes and back again, her face a mixture of fear and anguish and something like hope. She seemed eager for an ally. At last, she relented.

"You can't possibly understand how frightened I've been these past few days. I don't know whom I can trust."

"Trust me," Sparks said.

"It's Manette," she said, reaching a decision. "My name's Manette."

"Tell me, Manette. What's troubling you?"

She hesitated for a moment. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm crazy. Or lying."

"Try me," Sparks prodded.

She fidgeted with the belt of her dress, avoiding Sparks' eyes. "I'm afraid someone's trying to kill

me.”

She didn't go on. Instead, she peeked up at Sparks to gauge her expression.

“Go on.”

“Really?” she said, surprised by Sparks' acceptance of her story. “Well, you see, before I went to America, I was given a priceless painting to keep safe—by a friend. It seemed harmless, but the trouble started almost immediately.”

Sparks' mind was instantly occupied with emerging patterns. Manette, the subject of Cole's hidden portrait. A priceless painting. The art dealer Mdm. Triquet.

She touched the jacket pocket where she'd stowed Triquet's calling card. Was she related to all of this somehow? It seemed like more than a coincidence. Perhaps the painting hid intel about the weapon. Perhaps Madam Triquet wasn't what she seemed. Could she have been staking out Manette's apartment as well?

“Tell me about the painting if you don't mind. What makes it so valuable?”

“I don't know, but I can show it to you if you'd like to see for yourself.”

Giving her no time to change her mind, Sparks

hailed a cab, and they were off through lunchtime traffic. After a few turns, the driver slowed and left them on the Quai St. Bernard where tourists were strolling along the promenade overlooking the Seine. They joined the crowds for a moment, but then the girl led Sparks down a flight of stairs to a canal barge moored near the Austerlitz Bridge.

“Ici,” she said. “Allons-y. The painting is stashed here.”

Not entirely convinced of Manette’s true motives and becoming more suspicious by the moment, Sparks allowed her to board the barge first. Manette clambered aboard and led the way to the small door of the deckhouse.

Sparks followed with trepidation, but she wasn’t cautious enough. As she passed through the companionway, she was struck from behind. The patterns that had been coalescing in her mind erupted into fireworks before being extinguished by unconsciousness.

6

The gaunt Undertaker slipped into a phone booth outside the airport. Perilous followed him, taking the neighboring booth. While he made plans with someone on the other line, she transformed herself.

She stuffed the blonde wig she'd been wearing into her handbag and took a moment to pick out and then pat down her natural, ebony curls. The long yellow scarf draped across her white blouse became a cheerful head wrap. Her skirt's navy petticoat detached to reveal a snug, scarlet pencil skirt underneath, and a fresh application of crimson lipstick covered the mauve she'd worn on the plane.

When she followed the Undertaker from his booth, covering most of her face with large, cherry-

red sunglasses, she was an entirely different girl. She hurried to hail a cab next to her mark, who was already waving his hand at an approaching Renault. It pulled up to the curb, and they collided as each reached for the door handle.

Perilous laughed merrily and suggested they share a cab into the city. The Undertaker looked her up and down disdainfully.

“I ain’t sharing a cab—”

Before he could finish the sentence, Perilous stamped her kitten heel firmly down on the toe of the man’s polished loafers, using his surprise to maneuver past him into the cab’s backseat. She slammed the door and gave the driver instructions to head toward the city, leaving the Undertaker fuming on the curbside.

As the airport disappeared behind her, Perilous twisted her diamond earring until it corresponded to the frequency of the bug she’d slipped onto his tweed overcoat during their collision. She relayed the street address he gave his driver to her own, offering him a generous tip if he took her by the quickest route. The cabbie took her up on the challenge. They beat the Undertaker to his destination by several minutes.

It was a battered walkup on a one-way side street off Rue Saint-Denis. Perilous took advantage of her lead to scope out the scene. The litter-strewn street was dotted with flophouses, liquor stores, and dingy bars. Pocket-size Peugeots and Citroëns as well as an assortment of brightly colored Vespas crowded the curb. Opposite the Undertaker's walkup was a by-the-hour crib, an ideal spot for a stake out.

At the front desk, a drowsy clerk precariously balanced a cigarette that amounted to two inches of ash at the corner of his mouth. He exchanged money for a key, which Perilous accepted as carefully as one might accept a chemical weapon. Considering the number and variety of germs crawling on its sticky surface, she felt justified in her precaution.

She climbed up a flight of rickety stairs and let herself into a cramped, water-stained room that overlooked the street. Digging under the wig that occupied the bulk of her purse, she pulled out a small set of binoculars and settled into a threadbare Louis XV chair that looked like it had been plundered from a dumpster.

Perilous scanned the windows of the apartment building across the street. After a few minutes, the

Undertaker appeared in a room on the second floor. He deposited his coat and hat on a tabletop and disappeared from the window's frame momentarily. When he returned, he had a glass of whiskey in a tumbler. He turned the knob on a small radio until a staticky recording of Nina Simone singing "Ne Me Quitte Pas" filled the room.

Perilous' brother Arthur had met the singer here in Paris when he was in law school and again in the States just before he died. She'd sung at his funeral—ne me quitte pas. Perilous took a deep breath to keep the unexpected flood of emotions checked.

Mercifully, the song was in its final refrain. When the last note trailed off, an announcer began relaying the news. He warned of early signs of unrest in French Somaliland ahead of de Gaulle's planned visit at the end of the month. Then, he moved on to a brief account of a pending power summit in Brussels where the world's most powerful leaders would lie to one another about their nation's nuclear capabilities. Perilous recognized several of the attendees as long-standing members of Omega, including Madam Simone's nervous little husband Manfred Getty and the U.S. Secretary of

State.

From there, the announcer launched into a breaking story about a formation of Soviet MiG-21 supersonic jet fighters brought down by mechanical failure. Inexplicably, the planes had begun to come apart in mid-air, leaving several pilots dead.

A door slammed, and the radio was drowned out by brusque greetings. The Undertaker had been joined by a short, stout man with bristling hair and a deep scar on his left cheek and a man wearing the traditional tan djellaba, saffron slippers, and black, felt fez of North Africa.

“What happened in New York? You told us your people could handle this,” Scarface growled.

“Relax. Cole’s dead. Wasn’t that the order?”

Perilous’ ears perked up.

“The order was to find and eliminate the LD3 leak. You got rid of Cole, but according to The Foundation’s reports, you picked up two more problems to take his place. A couple of kids, no less.”

The Foundation. LD3. Perilous’ heart rate picked up. She’d been right to follow the Undertaker. He was Omega.

“These weren’t ordinary kids. They took down

two of our men," said the Undertaker.

He must have been at Astroland all along, trailing behind his less fortunate colleagues as risk management. He was the one who finally finished Cole off, then.

"Give me the KGB any day," said the man in the fez. "They don't make these mistakes."

"The Algerian prefers the KGB? There's one for the history books," said the Undertaker with obvious distaste. "The Soviets weren't invited to this little joint endeavor, comrade. Anyway, it was no mistake. We need to know where these kids came from and why Cole contacted them."

"He's right," said Scarface grimly. "The Foundation's been under attack for a while now. These two may be our first real lead on a possible culprit."

"So where are they now?" the Algerian said. "Because I don't see them here providing us with the answers you're so sure they have."

The Undertaker pulled a tracking device from his pocket and held it up for his colleagues to see. "As luck would have it, we shared a flight. They're in Paris as we speak. Montparnasse, to be precise. I've got their coordinates right here. I told you.

Relax.”

The calling card, thought Perilous with a groan. It must have a tracking chip in it.

“And what if they talk to the girl?”

“I hope they do. I hope she tells ‘em everything she knows. And I hope she knows everything. The sooner we find out who leaked the intel to Cole, the sooner we can get rid of her and the two kids and move forward.”

“The whole project is coming apart at the seams,” Scarface said. “First, the Soviets get wind of LD3. Now, this.”

“The difference is that Omega’s KGB mole isn’t an incompetent imbecile. Or worse, a turncoat,” said the Algerian.

“Watch yourself,” said the Undertaker. “I came to Omega as soon as I knew Cole was going to be a problem.”

“We knew about the Soviet leak before it ever became a problem. That’s the difference. We knew where the leak came from and exactly how many ears it had reached within an hour of contact. The trifling Red agent will be out of our hair by this weekend.

“It looks as if Cole, on the other hand, worked

out your connection with Omega and side-stepped the CIA altogether. And since you opted to kill him rather than question him, we can't be certain of who else he's taken his intel to."

It was starting to make sense to Perilous. The Undertaker was an Omega mole in the CIA. If Cole had figured that out, of course he'd be wary of whom he could trust.

"You got ice here?" Scarface asked, distracting the men from their argument.

The Undertaker nodded and then jerked his head towards the back of the apartment, "Frigidaire."

Scarface and the Algerian disappeared from view, but Perilous could hear them discussing the downed Soviet jets faintly in the background. They returned with drinks of their own and then settled around the apartment's small table to discuss the news, play seven-card stud, and keep tabs on Sparks' movements.

Over the course of several unbearably long, dull hours, Perilous made some progress on the soda campaign. She also finished the crossword puzzle in a newspaper left by the room's previous occupant. She didn't learn anything additional about LD3 or

Cole, however.

The Omega thugs' marathon poker game was interrupted when they discovered that Sparks' tracking chip had malfunctioned. The incident led to a noisy exchange of insults between the Undertaker and the Algerian.

"Wonderful! Now we've lost them all. Well done, Agent Miller. You're a credit to your country," the Algerian said to the Undertaker.

The Undertaker jumped to his feet and pulled back his arm to swing at his colleague, but Scarface stopped him with a cold look. "You didn't think I'd leave it all to you, did you? I've got somebody tailing the girl. Somebody who knows what they're doing."

The Undertaker grabbed his drink and took it to the kitchen to refill it, grumbling all the while.

Perilous twisted the diamond earring that transmitted to Sparks, but there was no reply.

"Sparks?" she said, twisting again.

Nothing. It wasn't just the calling card's transmitter that was out of commission. Sparks was off the radar entirely.

Shortly after they'd made a tenuous peace and returned to the game, they were once more

interrupted—this time by the ringing phone. Scarface picked up the receiver and responded with a series of monosyllabic answers that provided Perilous with no insight into the situation at all. He hung up and nodded at the Algerian.

“A tip from our friend with the KGB. Cole’s girl is at an artist’s studio in the Latin Quarter.”

“Quelle surprise! Omega’s Soviet mole continues to run rings around you,” the Algerian goaded the Undertaker, who scowled in return.

“Just take care of it,” Scarface said, reeling off an address. “If we’re lucky, the kids from Coney Island will turn up, too.”

“Les doigts dans le nez,” he said and disappeared from view again to take his tumbler back to the kitchen.

Perilous stayed long enough to witness the man return with a small, white container in his hand. Then, she was on the move. She tossed the room key at the hotel clerk, who was still balancing the same two inches of ash in the corner of his mouth.

Traffic would be a problem for the Algerian, but it wouldn’t be a problem for a girl on a Vespa. She picked a turquoise scooter towards the end of the block and popped the ignition cover off. Once she’d

stripped the battery and ignition wires, she twisted them together and hoped for the best.

The dashboard lights came on, and Perilous kickstarted the motor. She zipped out of the tight parking space and headed south towards Montparnasse.

7

The world around Sparks ground to a halt and darkened, miring her in a murky silence. When she gasped for breath, she swallowed water instead. The shock jolted her into consciousness, and she began to kick wildly, propelling herself upwards. Surfacing, Sparks coughed up filthy, green water from the Seine, only to be doused and re-submerged by a passing barge. Her lungs burned and her head throbbed when she surfaced again.

Paddling in place, she tried to get her bearings. To the left, les Jardin des Plantes was giving way to the newly constructed buildings of Paris' grim Campus de Jussieu. To the right, two old men were fishing from the Quai de la Seine. Somewhere in

between, Sparks was an insignificant speck in the turbid flow of the river.

She took a deep breath and launched herself towards the Left Bank. Her throbbing head and heavy limbs made progress slow and painful. When she finally reached the stone quay, she pulled herself up and collapsed on her stomach. A spasm of retching eliminated what was left of the foul water from her system.

Rolling onto her back, Sparks rested for a moment beneath the plane trees that shaded the quay's promenade and let the August sun massage her sore, trembling limbs. Her linen suit was already drying, but when she attempted to contact Perilous via her wristwatch, she discovered that the dunking had taken a toll on its performance.

"Waterproof my foot," she muttered.

Once she was sufficiently recovered, she trekked back along the quay towards le Pont d'Austerlitz on the off chance that Manette was still aboard the house boat, but the old tug was silent as the deep. Upon a closer inspection, Sparks found all the tell-tale signs of neglect: moss growing on the rope coils and dull teak slats that hadn't been oiled in years.

Of course Manette wasn't aboard. She and her

accomplice had used an abandoned boat to set a trap for her. So much for the innocent girl abroad routine. Sparks had been right about her all along.

She hailed a cab and directed the driver to take her to the Hôtel Regina. Her luggage would already be there, and she needed a change—pronto. She couldn't think in wet clothes.

The hotel manager, a slim, fastidious man in a pink cravat, grimaced when Sparks approached the desk, as though her disheveled appearance pained him. He raised an eyebrow, but refrained from open judgment.

“Your luggage has been taken to your room—301.”

“Has my traveling companion Mademoiselle Faretheewell arrived?”

“Non. Only you.” The disappointment in his voice was palpable.

Sparks headed up to their room to take a much-needed shower. When she emerged, she found housekeeping had removed her damp suit and waterlogged Oxfords for cleaning. Her sketchpad, which she'd assumed to be in the depths of the Seine, lay on the room's small writing desk. She flipped through the pages, wondering how it had gotten

from the houseboat, where she'd dropped it, to the hotel. But that wasn't the only thing she wanted to know.

Who was Manette and what had she gotten herself tangled up in? Was she another spy like Cole? An Omega agent? Or was she really just a frightened girl making every effort to stay alive?

Sparks stopped by the concierge's desk on her way out to ask about the sketchpad.

"Oui, mademoiselle. A young woman delivered it just a short while ago."

"Dark hair and green eyes?"

"Dark hair. Oui. As for her eyes, I can't say. She was wearing sunglasses."

"And she didn't leave a message?"

"Non, mademoiselle. Only the sketchpad."

Sparks left and caught a cab back to Manette's flat where she abandoned all pretense of discretion. The door was answered by a portly woman—the landlady, presumably—wearing a yellow wig that would have been comical had it not been so frightening. Her ghoulis countenance didn't improve the effect.

"Pardon, mademoiselle. I'm looking for Manette," Sparks said and then qualified her

statement. "That may not be her name, actually. She's got dark-hair and green eyes, but until very recently, she was a blonde like yourself. Well, not quite as notable as you, madam. Not nearly so—arresting in her appearance. She lives here."

The woman shrugged, unmoved by Sparks' roundabout flattery. "Lived, oui. But she's gone now. She left an hour ago and said she wouldn't be back."

"Did she leave a forwarding address?"

"Non. Je suis désolé. She told me nothing of her plans."

Sparks thanked the woman and began to walk aimlessly, considering what to do next. The scent of garlic wafted down the street from a tucked away bistro, and her stomach responded with a plaintive growl. Swimming always left her famished.

"There's no sense trying to think on an empty stomach," she told herself, sliding through the door.

She took a seat towards the back of the bistro and ordered the roasted escargots with butter and garlic and a glass of cognac. She was due for a little fortification. After she'd indulged, Sparks felt better prepared to endure whatever lay ahead.

"If Manette's vanished without a trace," she

reasoned, "I'm back to Legrand."

She asked the server for a phone directory and made a list of promising art galleries and artist supply stores in the vicinity. Once she'd paid the bill, she headed out on foot. It was a pleasant diversion after a day of either sitting or drowning.

However, after a half-hour of futile queries, she'd nearly given up hope. She leaned against the stone facade of a residential building and stuck her hands in her pockets, recoiling when her fingertips met with something damp. The two calling cards were stuck to the side of her brass calling card case. They were both worse for wear, but Triquet's phone number was still visible.

Sparks headed for the nearest pay phone.

"Madam Jeanne Triquet, Marchand d'Antiquités et d'Art. Bonjour."

"Bonjour. This is Madero Spartakanova. We met earlier today," Sparks said, assuming the receptionist was Triquet's assistant Bette.

"Oui. Your friends call you Sparks."

"That's the one."

"So you've decided to be our knight in shining armor, after all?" She seemed to be in a better mood than she had been at the café.

“No. I’m afraid not. I’m calling to enquire about an artist—Somebody Legrand. Have you heard of him?”

“Hm—” she was quiet for a moment as if in thought. “Oui. The name is familiar. I seem to recall that he wasn’t very talented. Are you interested in purchasing a piece of his art?”

“No. But I do have an urgent need to speak with him. I haven’t been able to track him down though. I don’t suppose Madam Triquet might have his address on file somewhere?”

“Pardon, Mademoiselle Sparks. Allow me to check for you. Please hold.”

After several seconds had passed, Bette returned to the phone with an address near Quai Saint-Michel.

Sparks thanked her and hailed the next cab that passed.

8

Perilous parked the Vespa and surveyed the scene. The address was a squalid affair—a narrow stone tenement on a claustrophobic but still active side street. The dueling effluvium of backed-up sewer muck and day-old dumpster stew melded into a nauseating aroma that took up immediate residence in her sinuses. Not even a hearty breeze from the river could vanquish the odors that had laid siege to the street.

The mailboxes at the building's entryway indicated the address Perilous was looking for was on the top floor, and the front door of the building was ajar. She peered down the dimly lit hallway, but there was no sign of a concierge in the shabby foyer.

Three closed doors ran down the silent, central corridor. From one of the rooms, she could hear a faint thread of music, but otherwise the space was still and silent.

She made her way up the derelict stairwell towards the garret. The treads groaned breathily as she passed over them. After a few meters, the stairwell bent itself backwards in its upward pursuit, putting the foyer downstairs and out of view. Perilous paused to listen. She'd detected the faint creak of the front door; she was sure of it.

From below, she heard the sound of soft, rapid footsteps approaching. She pressed into the shadows and found her lipstick case in the side pocket of her purse, expecting to see the Algerian. Instead, she found herself face to face with Sparks looking fresh as a daisy in a crisp, new suit.

"I thought you were following the girl?" Perilous hissed.

Sparks raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I followed the girl alright. Right into the Seine."

"What?"

"She tried to drown me. She's definitely no simpering sweetheart, whatever her relationship to Cole. How'd you find Legrand's place?"

"So it's Legrand, then?" Perilous said, continuing up the stairs. "I suppose I might've guessed. I was eavesdropping on the Undertaker from the airplane. He'd holed up with a couple of Omega goons, thank you very much."

"So your guy was Omega after all. I guess we were both right," Sparks said.

They'd reached the top floor. The landing in front of the garret apartment was narrow, dark, and confined.

"One of the goons is on his way right now to knock off the girl and the two of us," Perilous said, "so let's make this quick."

"The two of us?" Sparks said. "What'd we do?"

Perilous glared at Sparks before knocking at the door.

"Qu'est-ce?" said a gruff voice on the other side.

"Un ami," she responded.

When the door creaked open, a rakish young man squinted back at them through the gloom of the windowless passageway. By the time his eyes adjusted and widened in surprise, Sparks had already gotten a foot across the threshold. She took advantage of his shock to push fiercely at the door and snake her way into the brightly lit room with

Perilous in tow.

The afternoon sun poured through the garret's skylight, illuminating a small, cluttered artist's studio. Large canvases were propped against every wall. Mediocre cityscapes of Paris—at night and by day, in summer and winter—were in abundance as were more inspired portraits of the girl from the plane, staring forlornly at the viewer with those moss-green, moping angel eyes.

In the center of the room was the moping angel herself, her mouth agape and her face flushed.

"You! But how?" she said to Sparks.

"I took the prize at the Newport Bermuda Race two years ago. You don't sail that far without knowing how to swim," Sparks said.

"But how did you find us?"

Legrand had begun inching towards Sparks, but she cut off his progress with a wry smile. "I'm afraid you've missed your window of opportunity, Monsieur Legrand. I've already demonstrated once today that you're no match for me when I see you coming. Now, have a seat. We've got our own questions."

"Legrand?" Perilous said. "Well, I'll be."

"Sorry, Peril. Allow me to make introductions.

The not-so-talented artist, there, is Monsieur Legrand. We first met at a charming little bistro this morning when he tried to kill me. You'll recognize his girlfriend from the plane. She's also had a go at me today. They're a delightful pair, the two of them."

"Cousin," Manette corrected her, taking a seat on a shabby, overstuffed sofa. "Leo is my cousin. I pose for him because he can't afford an artist's model—yet." She smiled gently at her cousin.

"Cousin, then. Leo, please have a seat next to your cousin Manette—is that your real name?"

She nodded, defeated, and patted the cushion to reassure Leo. Like a scolded mongrel, he joined her. Sparks leaned against the wall, tucking her hands casually into her pant pockets.

"Perilous, would you care to do the honors?"

"With pleasure," she said, and turned her full attention on the girl who was, apparently, more than she seemed. "What's your connection to Michael Cole, Manette? The condensed version. Company's on the way."

Manette bit her lip and looked at her cousin, who merely shrugged irritably. "Michael is—was—my fiancé."

Her large eyes filled with tears that threatened to brim over at any moment. Legrand, softened by the show of emotion, discarded his anger and took her hand in his.

“Why did he leave Paris? Do you know?”

“He was in danger. He told me to stay behind—that I’d be safer without him, but—” Her voice broke.

“I know this is difficult, but Manette, if you’re in danger, we may be able to help. Tell me about the man on the plane.”

“I don’t know who he is, but I’ve seen him once before. Here. In Paris. He was following us. Michael spotted him, and that’s when he decided to leave.”

“Why didn’t he make contact with the CIA when he went home, Manette? Do you know?”

“You know, then, that he was an agent?” She looked at Perilous with surprise and examined her more closely.

Perilous nodded.

“He’d learned about a weapon being developed in France—something sophisticated enough to alter weather patterns—but his handler—Merrill or Mills —”

“Miller?” Perilous suggested, remembering the

conversation she'd listened in on earlier.

"Oui, Miller told him to forget about it. That it was a confirmed hoax."

"Michael disagreed?"

Manette nodded vehemently. "He was sure about the weapon—he had inside information from someone he trusted. Someone he trusted more than the CIA or his handler. Then, just a couple of weeks ago, a passenger jet flying from Madrid to Monaco went down over the Iberian Sea. Everyone on board died—more than one hundred people. It was terrible."

"I read about that," Perilous said. "He thought it might be connected with the weapon?" The room was beginning to feel stuffy, and Perilous' head was pulsing.

"What would you believe? The investigation was inconclusive, but the plane had simply come apart in the sky. In the pilot's last report to the tower, he said ice was forming on the wings."

"So he told Agent Miller his fears?"

Manette nodded. "This Miller, he said they were unfounded—absurd. He told Michael to drop it, but Michael knew he was onto something. He wouldn't let it go. He said he was going to go through with

the rendezvous because—”

“Hold up. The rendezvous?” Perilous said. Now, they were getting somewhere.

“Oui. He’d arranged a meeting with his contact at le Château de Bonhomme. The local landowner there holds a fête to celebrate the lavender harvest every year.”

“When?” Sparks said, practically salivating with eagerness.

“Saturday.”

“This Saturday?”

Manette nodded her head.

“Did he tell you anything else?” Perilous urged. “Where exactly the drop would be? The name of his contact? A description? Anything?”

Manette stood, a little wobbly, and walked towards the back of the room. She lifted a canvas depicting a Parisian market in the early morning hours. Flipping it over, Manette ran her fingers around the wooden frame and pulled out a key.

“What does it unlock?” Perilous asked.

“A safe box at a jewelry shop in la Goutte d’Or. Boîte à Bijoux, it’s called. The jeweler Abderrahmane is an old friend of Michael’s.”

“And what was in the safe box?”

“He used it as a drop off, you see. To protect his identity from his contacts on the black market. He said his source would leave the details nearer time,” Manette said, rubbing her eyes. “But then he left. And then—I’m sorry. My head—”

“It’s okay, Manette. It’s been a long day. Do you know anything about his contact? Anything at all?”

“Only his code name. Jacques Verglas.”

“Like Jack Frost?” Sparks chuckled. “That fits.”

Perilous had grown silent. Something was wrong.

“Do you smell that?” she said and walked to Legrand’s door. “It’s almost like almonds.”

The closer she drew to it, the more light-headed she became. She paused to slip on chemical-resistant driving gloves from her purse and cover her mouth and nose with an agency-tailored handkerchief for protection from fumes before she opened the door.

On the other side, an ice cube was melting rapidly in the heat of the airless hallway. A wave of vertigo overwhelmed Perilous, and she reached for the door frame to steady herself. She gingerly picked up the ice, carried it to the skylight, and hurled it through one of the open windowpanes.

Before she had a chance to turn back and

explain herself, a thunderous blast shook the building. The explosion threw Perilous to the floor. For a moment, everything was black. Her ears were filled with a high-pitched whistle. When the whistle receded and her head cleared, Sparks was standing over her, hand extended to help her up. Perilous stood and shook slivers of glass from her dress and hair.

“Is everyone okay?” Perilous asked, glancing around the room.

Legrand had covered Manette with his sturdy frame. The two were shaken, but not injured.

“Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?”

“The ice—” Perilous said. “The Algerian must have planted it outside while we were talking. I knew something was wrong—my head, the vertigo. And then—he'd asked where the ice was back at the apartment. I thought he meant for drinks.”

“Ice as a chemical weapon?” Sparks asked.

“If they encased a toxin inside the ice—yes. It's possible. By the odor, I'd say hydrogen cyanide. As the ice cube melted, it was releasing the gas.”

“It would've released us all from this mortal coil if it wasn't for you. HCN is lethal,” Sparks said.

“But the explosion?” Legrand asked.

“Hydrogen cyanide becomes volatile when it comes in contact with alkaline materials,” Perilous said. “With the sewage backed up outside the way it is, it’s no wonder.”

“Mon dieu,” Manette said, choking on a frightened sob. “They’re coming for me, too.”

Legrand, who had taken a moment to wipe a trickle of sweat from his brow, tried his best to comfort her with soft words before turning back to Perilous. “What do we do now?”

She thought for a moment. Down below the shattered window, a crowd was gathering to gape and point. “The Algerian is probably waiting down there to make sure he got the job done. You won’t get far with him on your tail.”

“We should use that to our advantage—steer into the skid. If we can lure him out after Manette, maybe we can get some answers,” Sparks said and then addressed Manette. “If you’re up for it, that is.”

The girl straightened herself, wiping the tears from her face with the back of her trembling hand. “I am. Tell me what to do.”

9

“First thing’s first, do you have a ride?” Sparks asked.

“There’s a Vespa waiting to go downstairs,” Perilous said. “No keys necessary.”

“Perfect.”

Sparks and Manette left through the building’s back doorway to avoid detection. They slipped through the side alley and circled around a knot of onlookers gathered to speculate on the cause of the explosion. It had shaken the street, but it hadn’t done considerable harm to its ramshackle buildings. Or, perhaps, the street was already so battered that a few broken windows and a cloud of foul smoke seemed in keeping with the general state of things.

Sirens were howling into the quarter from all directions.

“You’re sure this is safe?” Manette asked, nervously pushing her hair behind her ear.

Sparks laughed. “Absolutely not. Someone’s trying to kill you. When he sees that you’re still kicking, he’s going to try again.”

Manette’s pace slowed, and Sparks mentally kicked herself for being flippant. “But, look, we’re going to stay cool, right? He’s going to follow. We’re going to capitalize on that. *Les doigts dans le nez.*”

“*Les doigts dans le nez,*” Manette repeated with less confidence.

Sparks found the Vespa leaned against a blighted tree that had once offered shade to the street’s residents. She held it while Manette took her seat.

“Alright, sis,” Sparks said, climbing on behind her. “You know the way. Not too fast. Not too slow.”

“*Pas de problème.*”

“Start it. When I say go—”

Through the rearview prism in her sunglasses, Sparks watched a man in a fez break off from the crowd.

“Here’s our man, now,” she said. “Just wait—”

The Algerian had his eyes fixed on Manette and the Vespa. He climbed into a blue Citroën and revved the engine.

“Go,” Sparks said and gripped Manette’s waist.

She pulled the Vespa off the curb and shot out into the street. At the corner, she took a hard right and led the man zigzagging through the Latin Quarter, up and down one-way streets. She followed Sparks’ instructions to the letter. Whatever fear she may have felt, she wasn’t letting it interfere with the plan. Sparks was impressed. When they reached Boulevard Saint-Michel, Manette made a swift right turn and merged with traffic headed towards the Right Bank.

Sparks could see their stalker in her sunglasses. His pursuit was being frustrated by the other cars on the road. Manette put a safe distance between them, but she kept the Vespa clearly in his line of sight. Sparks had questions for the man, but before she asked them, she needed to get Manette tucked away safely.

When they came to the corner of Place du Châtelet and Avenue Victoria, they hopped off the Vespa and left it in plain sight. A wide, iron gate

led through a criss-crossing hedge of mulberry trees into le Square de la tour Saint-Jacques. The focal point of the square, an ornate Gothic tower, juttred up nearly sixteen stories at the rear of the landscaped lot. Its lofty heights housed a motley congregation of apocalyptic beasts, beguiling sirens, and solemn saints.

Sparks and Manette darted across the lawn under their watchful gaze and up the steps that led to the tower's pedestal. They slipped through the high, peaked archway into the exposed ground floor.

"Here's some cash," Sparks said, pulling several large bills from her wallet. "As soon as he goes up the stairs, you bail, got it? Leo and Perilous will be waiting for you at Gare du Nord. Get as far away as you can, and don't contact anyone until you hear from us. Send a postcard to this address so we'll know where to find you." She scribbled the number of a P.O. box in Manhattan on one of the bills.

"Oui," Manette said, anxiously. Her hand was shaking as she took the money from Sparks. "But you?"

"Don't worry about me."

Manette nodded. "Sparks, I'm sorry about this morning. I was scared. I thought you were—"

“It’s in the past,” Sparks said. “I’d have done the same.”

By the time the Algerian caught up to them, Sparks had picked the large, iron lock that secured the tower and was noisily bounding up its narrow, spiral stairwell. She’d left Manette ensconced in shadows at the tower’s base. The Algerian took the bait. Sparks could hear his heavy footsteps echoing after hers, giving Manette time to disappear.

The shallow, worn treads that led up to the tower’s apex were treacherous. A few pale fingers of fading sunlight penetrated through the tower’s lancet windows, but Sparks didn’t need the light to make her way upwards. She’d spent her childhood racing through craggy mountain passes, and her footing was as sure as any mountain goat’s.

When she finally burst through the arched doorway at the top of the tower, she was met by a dizzying 360 degree view of Paris shimmering in the rosy glow of the setting sun. Saint-Jacques himself was poised atop the stairwell’s bulkhead. The city’s jewels—the Eiffel Tower, the gilded dome of Les Invalides, Sacré-Cœur on its Montmartre hilltop—competed for his attention. A squad of grinning gargoyles stood watch around him.

When the Algerian stormed through the door, Sparks was ready with a roundhouse kick that sent him stumbling backwards into the bulkhead. She followed it up quickly with a blow to his jaw.

He doubled over, and pulled a knife from the fold of his tunic. Sparks moved, but not before the blade tore through her jacket sleeve, slicing into the skin of her bicep.

The goon lunged, taking advantage of her surprise. She scrambled to get beyond his reach, but there was no room. He fell on her, wrapping his thick fingers around her neck and pressing her into the stone haunches of a winged lion.

“Who do you work for?”

Sparks’ head was pulsing and pinpoints of light were invading her vision.

“Va te faire enculer!” she spit, jabbing her thumbs into his eyes.

He released his grip on her throat to pry at her hands. Sparks swiftly changed her tactic, grabbing a handful of his hair in one hand and his chin in the other. She wrenched his head sideways, forcing his body to follow suit.

The low balustrade behind him caught the back of his knee. He fumbled and his arms flailed wildly

for a split-second. Then, before Sparks could reach for him, he tumbled over the railing and plummeted to the ground below. She didn't spare time to watch his descent. She focused instead on clearing out quickly before the city's caped gendarmes arrived with questions of their own.

She dashed down the stairs and through the park to the waiting Vespa. As twilight fell and the city's famous lights flickered on, Sparks sped out into the street. She hadn't learned anything from the Algerian, but Manette, at least, had escaped.

10

The next morning, Perilous rose early to the sound of rain tapping on the window. She dressed quietly, tucking Cole's key into her purse. If this Verglas character didn't know about the Coney Island incident, the rendezvous was still on. Perilous planned to plunder that safe box for intel and have a word with Cole's friend Abderrahmane while she was at it.

She scribbled a note to Sparks and left it on the bedside table. She'd undertaken a number of dangerous tasks in her employ as an agent of Eris, but none that compared with waking her roommate before she was ready. Since they'd stayed up late into the evening swapping stories, Perilous decided

to play it safe. She left Sparks snoring soundly in their hotel room.

The Hotel Régina's concierge offered Perilous a wide, black umbrella as she passed through the lobby. She took that as a sign that she should walk. Rain or no rain, she intended to soak up the sights before they had to leave the city, and she enjoyed drizzly days. As more conscientious people took cover inside cafés and under awnings, the sidewalks were left to those who weren't afraid to get a little wet.

It also heightened the potency of the already-intoxicating metropolitan musk unique to Paris. The spicy scent of scarlet geraniums growing in window boxes and the comforting aroma of baking bread mingled with the urban bouquet of exhaust fumes and overflowing gutters to create something that surpassed even Chanel No. 5 in terms of complexity.

When the rain picked up, Perilous ducked down into the nearest Metro station to find a quicker route to la Goutte d'Or. She stepped out again at the Château Rouge stop and found the shower had passed. Ahead of her lay the bustling Marché Dejean, where the neighborhood's North African residents sold their wares.

Statuesque women in long, brightly colored boubous and elaborate head wraps were selling steaming corn on the cob and Tunisian pastries at makeshift stalls. Tuarag merchants in indigo robes haggled with wandering shoppers over the price of potent aphrodisiacs and of vials filled with mysterious elixirs from Mali, hemp bags heavy with salt from the mines at Amadghor, and ostrich feathers and ivory from beyond the Sahara.

Baskets filled with dates and chili peppers, tangerines and raw millet lined the Rue Dejean, and fishmongers were busily calling out the day's fresh catches as they lopped off the heads of enormous, silvery Bonito. Even the aroma of freshly cut mint couldn't overcome the salty odor of the goggle-eyed fish heads heaped onto neatly spread newspapers.

Perilous jostled her way through the crowds, finally emerging on the other side carrying a cloth bag filled with mangoes and a new indigo head wrap. In a few blocks, she found herself at the jeweler's address.

In addition to the locals going about their daily business, slipping into and out of the shops along the street, cops were milling around la Boîte à Bijoux. The jewelry store's iron security grille had

been lifted, and the interior was a flurry of activity. A couple of detectives, their surly bag men, and a slew of city police were scouring the glass display cases.

“What happened here?” she asked a young gendarme smoking a cigarette on the fringes of the commotion.

He shrugged noncommittally.

She peered past him into the showroom. “I can’t imagine this place would offer much of a payoff to a petty thief. It’s all paste jewelry, isn’t it?”

Again with the shrug. “Nothing to worry your pretty head about. The owner’s wife says nothing of any value is missing.”

“The owner’s wife? Where’s the owner?”

“Pardon,” the officer said dismissively. “This is none of your concern, mademoiselle.”

He flicked his cigarette into the gutter and ducked back into the building.

Perilous surveyed the street to determine where the most reliable and abundant intelligence could be had. Every neighborhood had its information hub. A butcher who’d been entrusted with the care of his neighbors’ keys. A five and dime where the housewives swapped gossip with the cashier. A cheap

liquor store where local workers went to drown their sorrows like Zola's Gervaise.

Just a few doors up, a shopkeeper at a little tabac called La Lanterne du Pharaon was standing outside his door watching the officers take apart la Boîte à Bijoux. Each person who passed him—whether preschooler or pensioner, madam or monsieur—stopped to put their heads together with his in earnest conversation for a moment or two.

"Bingo," Perilous said to herself, crossing the street and heading towards the shop.

"Bonjour!" she said as she drew nearer to the store's owner.

"Bonjour, mademoiselle!" he replied kindly. "Comment se passe votre journée?"

"Bien. Et le vôtre?"

"The same, mademoiselle. Won't you step inside?"

Perilous nodded and entered the cave-like tobacco store. The tobacconist followed, taking his seat at the cash register. Fragrant smoke trickled from pyramids of burning incense, curling and twisting in the glow of a half-dozen large, brass lanterns. Thin boxes of Gauloises and Gitanes were displayed on the shelves alongside an assortment of

brass hookahs and imported Persian tobacco blends in large glass canisters. A variety of homemade Algerian sweets were on display beneath a large glass dome by the cash register. Perilous browsed for a moment before purchasing two diamond-shaped almond cookies coated with pink icing.

“*Désirez-vous autre chose?*” the shopkeeper asked.

“I’m curious. Do you know what’s going on across the street back there?”

His face grew grim, and he ran his fingers through his sparse hair. “*Oui, mademoiselle. There was a burglary last night. Bad business.*”

“But the police said nothing of any value was stolen.”

He shook his head and frowned, leaning across the glass countertop conspiratorially. “*Oui. But the owner vanished a week or more back.*”

“Vanished? You think foul play’s involved, then?”

“There were no signs of it, but Dramane’s a dependable, honest man, *mademoiselle*,” he said, referring to the shop owner by his sobriquet. “He would never leave his family.”

“How tragic,” she said. “What do you suppose

happened to him, monsieur?"

The shop's door bells tinkled, and a wizened man in a jade green kalansuwa and robe walked in and ordered a pack of tobacco from the shopkeeper. They exchanged a few words, and then the old man left the owner to resume his train of thought.

"Bad business, to be sure. He had a friend—an American whom he had known in Rabat. This friend, I suspect he was in some sort of trouble. He'd visited Dramane more frequently during the past month, and then he abruptly stopped coming."

"When was that?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Just before Dramane disappeared, mademoiselle."

"Was there anything else?"

The man squinted at her suspiciously. "Why are you so concerned with Abderrahmane?"

Perilous smiled sheepishly and pulled her notepad from her purse. "I'm a journalist, monsieur. I'm sorry for not being forthright, but I was afraid you wouldn't speak with me. I'm very interested in learning what happened to your friend."

"But why? Why would any newspaper be interested in Abderrahmane?"

She looked around her slowly and leaned in

closer to whisper, "It's part of something much bigger."

He nodded sagely. "As I suspected. Just before he disappeared, two men came to see Dramane. I didn't like the way that they looked. One was wearing a djellaba. He might have been from this neighborhood, but I'd never seen him before. The other looked European—or maybe American. He was wearing a cheap, dark suit."

"What was it that made you suspicious of them?"

The man shook his head. "After three decades of working with the people, mademoiselle, you get a sense of them. And then, you see, the next day Dramane's wife Sabine reported him missing, which made the visit stand out to me."

Perilous placed her hand on top of his. "Merci beaucoup, monsieur. You've been very helpful."

"If you learn what's happened to Dramane—"

Perilous nodded. "I'll let you know."

When she left La Lanterne du Pharaon, the police were still busily scavenging for clues in all the wrong places. The Algerian and his cohort were without a doubt the same thugs she'd been staking out yesterday. Omega was behind Dramane's

disappearance, and no doubt, Omega had dispatched with the safe box, using the cover of a robbery. They were clearing their tracks. Perilous was certain of it.

11

The morning shower had passed, and a finger of sunlight made its way through the damask curtains of the dark hotel room, fearlessly prodding Sparks awake. She stretched and rolled over to see if her watch was back in working order only to find that she'd slept until well past ten.

The bandaged knife wound on her arm was aching, and her head throbbed from the blow she'd taken from Legrand at the houseboat, but relative to yesterday, she felt like a million bucks. Once room service had furnished the requisite amount of hot, black coffee, Sparks put in a call to Truman to detail Cole's Bonhomme arrangement.

"Bonhomme, hm? The name's familiar," Truman

said thoughtfully.

“Do you think you could swing invitations to the Count’s soiree in two days?”

“I’m sure we can arrange something.”

“Fabuleux!”

“Where’s your partner this morning?”

“She went to la Goutte D’or to see if she could find out anything else about the jeweler and his safe box.”

“Ah. Splendid. She’s left you free for the morning, then. Well, enjoy it, I suppose. Not that I need to tell you that. Ciao.”

Sparks stepped out onto the terrace of the suite. The Rue de Rivoli was already in full swing with window shoppers leisurely stretching their legs. Across the way, the emerald lawn of the Jardin des Tuileries spread out in one direction, and in the other, le Musée Des Arts Décoratifs.

“It would be a shame to come all this way and not visit the Louvre,” she reasoned, finishing off the last of the coffee.

After leaving a note for Perilous, Sparks tucked her sketchpad under her arm and walked to the museum. It was a Thursday morning, and only a few visitors loitered in the main gallery. A sign

posted at the entrance boasted of the most complete exhibition of Mexican art ever collected in one place in la Chapelle. Sparks couldn't resist.

Glass cases displayed stone knives used in ritual sacrifices, styled with the heads of Aztec gods and sacred patterns. Mayan fertility sculptures carved from green jade were showcased alongside painted ceramic bowls from the Olmec period. The walls were hung with feather-work images crafted by Mexican amantecas using European motifs, and there were more modern paintings depicting the heroes of the Mexican Revolution, including a portrait of Sparks' namesake Francisco Madero.

As she perused the artwork, a familiar face caught her attention.

"Bette?"

Madam Triquet's assistant was wandering through the gallery making notes in a little, black book. Sparks' voice startled her, and she blushed as though she'd been caught at something. She closed the notebook and tucked it into her purse.

"Bonjour, Sparks. Did you find your artist friend Legrand?"

"I did. And you were right. Not particularly talented. Shouldn't you be at the gallery?"

"I have the day off."

It could hardly be a coincidence that she was in the gallery this morning, could it? And if this meeting wasn't coincidental, Sparks had to assume that it had also been no accident that she'd first met Triquet and Bette outside Manette's apartment.

"So what are you doing here?" she asked. "Casing the joint for a heist?"

Bette laughed and shook her head. "I've been meaning to see the exhibit before it moves on. Et toi?"

"I couldn't very well not stop by to see it when our hotel is just across the street, and Perilous was already out sight-seeing for the day."

"Perilous," she said, tilting her head to one side in amusement. "Is that a person? What an unusual name."

"Something to do with Camelot. Her father's obsessed with King Arthur and his merry men."

"You mean his knights of the Round Table."

"Sure," Sparks said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Is Perilous your—" she raised an eyebrow without finishing the sentence.

"She's my roommate. And my esteemed

colleague.”

“I see. Well, if you’re on your own for the day, join me for lunch. I’m famished.”

Sparks realized that she was hungry, too. She’d only had coffee for breakfast, and due to her late start, the day was well underway.

“Bien sûr. As it happens, I haven’t had a bite to eat since—has it really been that long?” she said more to herself than to Bette. “Yesterday got a little hectic.”

“You can tell me all about it over lunch. Allons manger.”

They left the Louvre, and Bette led Sparks to a nearby café where they took seats at one of the sidewalk tables.

“So you say your day became more hectic after the café brawl?” Bette said with a chuckle once they’d placed their orders.

Sparks laughed, too. “Believe it or not.”

“It seems you’re a magnet for trouble. Tell me, honestly. You’re not just an illustrator, are you? I saw the way you handled that boor yesterday. There’s more to you than meets the eye, I suspect. Perhaps you’re a spy? An assassin?” she said playfully.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you," Sparks replied.

Bette's expression—something between a smile and a dare—made Mona Lisa seem like an open book.

"Well, spy or not, you're clearly no run-of-the-mill artist," she said. "How did you really spend the rest of your day?"

"Extreme sightseeing," Sparks said. "We're leaving town first thing in the morning, so I'm trying to squeeze the whole city into two days."

"Impossible!" Bette cried. "You couldn't see all the city in two years. The best parts aren't in the tourist guides. They're not so easy to find. The best parts are the hidden places that only a local can show you. If you were staying a bit longer, I'd take you to some of them."

The waiter brought a bottle of chilled champagne to the table, popped the cork, and poured a glass for each of them.

"Santé!" Bette said, lifting her glass so that the sun played on the bubbles breaking the surface.

"Salut!"

"Where are you off to tomorrow, then?"

"South of here. A place called Bonhomme. Have

you heard of it?"

"Oui," she said. "There's a lovely harvest festival in the village every year."

"That's the one. Our boss is finagling invitations to Count Bonhomme's soiree."

"How fortunate for you! Invitations to the count's fête are very hard to come by."

The waiter returned with their meals. The aroma of wine and garlic drifting nose-ward from Sparks' steamed mussels made her mouth water. Bette had ordered a bloody steak, and she devoured it as if she'd chased it across the Serengeti.

"Madam Triquet and I are attending as well," she said between gluttonous mouthfuls.

"Really? Does she know the count?"

Bette shrugged. "She has a nephew who works at his institute."

She took another ravenous bite. Her zeal fascinated Sparks. It was entirely out of proportion with her demure appearance.

"Will you be wearing a tuxedo?" Bette asked, wiping her mouth daintily with the corner of her napkin.

Sparks gave the question some thought. She'd prefer a tux—more pockets, a better range of

motion, and a very flattering silhouette. But according to Perilous, the Omega agents had mistaken her for a young man. Deep cover, then, required a dress.

“How often does a girl get to wear an evening gown?” she said, making up her mind. “Although, I admit I came unprepared.”

“Oh! How exciting!” Bette said, a note of mischief in her voice. “Let me take you to a little boutique I know of.”

“One of the hidden places?”

Bette winked in response.

After they'd finished their meals, she took Sparks on a walking tour of the 1st arrondissement. She adroitly navigated a maze of narrow, cobblestone streets that dated back as far as the Middle Ages, bypassing the boutiques that were crowded with tony women in Chanel and Givenchy.

“Here we are,” she said.

Bette was right. Sparks never would have found the shop, and she had her doubts as to what it could possibly offer. The tall windows were obscured by wooden shutters with peeling black paint, and there was no sign to speak of. At one time, the door had been crimson, but it had faded to a pale

coral with years of neglect.

“Here?”

“Don’t let the outside fool you. Allons,” she said, opening the door.

Sparks hesitated, looking around her. The last time she followed a girl blindly, she’d wound up pitched in the river, and she hadn’t already had suspicions about that girl. But the scent of macaroons wafted invitingly through the open door, and when Sparks leaned to one side, she could see that the space was indeed the showroom of a boutique.

“Well?” Bette said, still holding the door.

Sparks walked into the shop’s front room and gasped. Bette had been right: the outside was deceptive. The walls of the showroom were painted a rich, emerald green broken up by glossy black columns and cornices. Chandeliers in various styles and sizes hid the ceiling and cast a warm light over the space.

The dresses on display were the most remarkable part of the shop. One was constructed entirely of iridescent plumes in shades of indigo and gold and jade. Its train spread out across the floor like a peacock’s showy backside. Another was made of

gleaming PVC panels. Each dress was a marvel of ingenuity and imagination. Many were made from materials that Sparks had never seen used in fashion.

“Bonjour, mesdames!” A young, willowy woman in a long, gauzy dress approached them with her hand extended. Her blonde hair was heaped on top of her head and ornamented with strings of pearls and sprigs of baby’s breath. To take so much time with one’s appearance merely to be cloistered in a tiny, backstreet boutique was a commitment to fashion that was over even Sparks’ head. But she didn’t disapprove. À chacun ses propres.

“Bonjour, Xaviere!” Bette cried, throwing her arms around the woman.

“Bette, mon ami!” the proprietress said, kissing each of her cheeks. “What brings you to me today?”

“La Fête du Bonhomme.”

“Ooh la la. Then you will need something très exquis!”

“Oui, and I want to find something lovely for my friend as well. As you can see, she has singular tastes.”

Xaviere appraised Sparks’ tailored linen suit. “I like it. Très chic.”

“Yes, she is, but for the fête, she’s looking for something more—traditional. But not too traditional, Xaviere.”

“Un compromis,” Xaviere said, nodding. She placed a finger to her lip and tapped, considering Sparks thoughtfully. “Oui. Yes. I see. Hm. Ah! Un moment, s’il vous plaît. I have something that will be idéal for your friend.”

She disappeared into the back of the shop momentarily and returned with a dress that took Sparks’ breath away.

“Et voilà!”

“Que c’est beau! Sparks, you must try it on this instant,” cried Bette, ushering her through a crystal curtain into a small but opulent dressing room. “I’ll give you some privacy.”

Sparks carefully undressed, draping her suit over a velvet-covered ottoman. She found the little clasps that held the dress together on the side, and then pulled it over her head.

It was composed almost entirely of thin rectangles of polished aluminum held together by bronze jump rings. The breastplate was molded from a larger sheet of aluminum, and the whole affair was held in place by a chainmail collar that encircled

Sparks' long neck. Though it wasn't as comfortable as linen, its short length didn't hinder movement as a longer evening gown would, and it was surprisingly lightweight.

When she stepped out into the showroom again, both Xaviere and Bette clapped their hands and exclaimed.

"Jeanne d'Arc!" Bette said. "You look fit to ride into battle to vanquish your enemies."

"Stunning!" said Xaviere. "It's as if it was made for you."

12

Perilous paused at a phone box on her walk back to the hotel to see if Sparks had managed to rouse herself.

“Bonjour. Hotel Rêgina. Comment puis-je vous aider?” said an operator on the other end of the line.

“Connect me with room 301, s’il vous plaît.”

“Oui. Merci,” the operator replied and clicked off the line to forward the call to the girls’ room.

The phone buzzed twice. Perilous was just about to hang up to avoid waking Sparks when a familiar voice bid her bonjour. It was the Undertaker. Perilous was certain. Her stomach twisted in knots. How had he found their hotel? Had Sparks been

caught unaware? Her mind was racing.

“Who is this?” she replied.

“You rang me. You oughta know who you’re calling.”

“Ratatoskr?” she said. If the Undertaker was looking for intel about Cole’s contact, maybe she could use that to her advantage.

There was a long pause, and then the Undertaker replied. “Yeah. That’s right. What’dya want?”

“Actually, I’m calling about something you want.”

“Yeah?” the Undertaker said. “Tell me what I want, then, sweetheart.”

“Intel on LD3,” Perilous said, twisting and untwisting the phone cord around her finger.

“What do you know about it?” The Undertaker’s smug smirk was audible.

“I know you’re not Ratatoskr,” she said, “but I suspect you’re interested in the same thing he was.”

“Verglas?” the Undertaker said.

“Oui. That’s right.”

She had his attention now. Perilous crossed her fingers. Using the code name was risky, especially since she didn’t know who Verglas was or how much

the Undertaker knew about the mysterious informant. Based on his conversation the previous day, however, Perilous suspected he was just as eager as she was to find out who had been providing Cole with intel. "I'll make you the same deal I made him—\$100k."

"And the drop? Where will it take place?" the Undertaker said, taking the bait.

"Chateâu Bonhomme. Saturday," Perilous said.

Before he could ask questions, she placed the phone back on the hook and caught the next cab. The driver barely had time to pull to a complete stop in the hotel's stately porte cochère before Perilous threw money at him and dashed into the lobby. She hurried to the concierge and asked if Sparks was in their room.

He glanced over his shoulder at the key rack and shook his head. "Non, mademoiselle. It appears that Mademoiselle Sparks is still out. Here's her key waiting for her."

"Merci," she said, relieved.

She took the elevator up to the third floor and exited cautiously. The dim hall was quiet and empty. Perilous' stomach fluttered as it always did in still places. It was anticipation of the unknown. Of the

voices hushed and listening, just out of view. She could feel the mute possibilities waiting to waylay her.

She removed her shoes and padded softly down the narrow passage, her ears straining. Pausing outside room 301, she pressed her ear to the door, but there was no sound at all issuing from within.

She turned her key in the lock and twisted the knob gently, pushing the door ajar with the toe of her shoe. Nothing. She pushed the door wider and stepped into the room, glancing around her for signs of disturbances. The closet was open and empty. The bathroom door was closed, but nothing lay on the other side. There was nothing under the bed or behind the drapes. No villain lurked on the terrace.

“What’s the door doing wide open?” Sparks said, startling Perilous as she barged in with a bellhop in tow.

“I just walked in myself,” Perilous said, annoyed.

She paced to the room’s small teak writing desk to pen a note for Sparks. The bellhop lay two large dress boxes on the bed and left the girls alone, closing the door behind him.

“Aren’t you going to ask about the boxes?”

“Mm, yeah,” Perilous said, handing the slip of paper to her partner. “Tell me about the boxes.”

Sparks read the note: Someone’s been here.

“Well, I ran into that girl I told you about— from the café,” she said, removing an agency-issued credit card from her money clip. A small bug detector was embedded in the thin rectangle of plastic. She walked casually about the room with the card in her hand, waving it over each piece of furniture that she passed. “At the museum.”

“Oh! You had a chance to go to the museum? That’s wonderful.”

The numbers on the credit card gave off a pale white glow when Sparks came to the telephone.

“Yeah. They had a special exhibit. Mexican art,” Sparks said, unscrewing the phone’s mouthpiece. Inside was a small bug, which she held up for Perilous to see.

“And what happened with your new friend?” Perilous said. She took the bug to the bathroom and dropped it into the toilet, flushing it down the drain.

“We had lunch, and then she took me to a boutique that was hidden away on this ancient street. Cobblestones. The whole nine,” Sparks said,

giving the bathroom the once over with the card. "It looks like that's it, Peril. How'd you know?"

"The Undertaker was here."

"Well, he's gone now. And just in time because I need your full attention, Peril."

"Okay. You've got it," Perilous said, though she found herself once more looking behind the curtains just to be certain the intruder was indeed gone.

Sparks opened up the top box and pulled out a dress, holding it up for Perilous to admire. The designer had draped an intricately woven floral lace over a black, satin shell, cinching the waist with a simple, silk ribbon. It was short, but not too short for Perilous' more modest sensibilities. The skirt had a nice swish to it when she ran her hand across it.

"For you, mademoiselle."

"Beautiful," Perilous said with genuine appreciation in her voice.

"It's silk Chantilly lace—actually made on a loom in Chantilly. It was Marie Antoinette's favorite, y'know."

"I didn't, but I can see why. And what did you get for yourself?"

"Later," Sparks said.

Perilous filled two tumblers with Scotch from

the room's ample wet bar. "I could use a drink. You?"

The sterling silver ice bucket was frosted with condensation.

"Did you get ice?" Sparks asked.

"This isn't a Howard Johnson, Sparks. They stock the wet bar and the ice bucket."

Before Perilous had a chance to poke the matching silver tongs into the bucket, Sparks raced across the room, snatched it from the bar, and pitched it out the open French doors. There was a moment of silence and then an angry shout and clatter from below. Sparks stepped out onto the terrace and peered cautiously down at the sidewalk. A man in a bowler hat was waving his fist in their general direction.

"Well," said Sparks sheepishly. "You can never be too safe."

"Y'know what?" Perilous said. "I think we're getting a little jumpy here. Let's not wait until tomorrow morning to blow this joint. Let's head south today. Before we get kicked out for destruction of property or thrown in jail for assault with a deadly ice bucket. I think we've learned all we're going to learn here anyway."

Sparks agreed, and they quickly packed up their luggage and caught a cab headed for the Gare de Lyon. The only train headed towards Bonhomme was the Calais-Méditerranée Express, so they splurged on one of the first-class sleeper cars Le Train Bleu was famous for.

When it pulled out of the station an hour later, they'd already made themselves at home in the swank dining car. Once they'd shared their day's adventures, they put their cares behind them for the evening. They focused all their energies on deciding between the roasted pork loin with parsnips or the Guinea hen with porcini. Champagne was a given though Perilous cautioned the waiter to forego the ice bucket it was customarily served in. Just to be safe.

The train sped headlong into the evening, leaving little stone cottages and broad, rustling vineyards in its inky wake. Perilous and Sparks were warm and drowsy in the afterglow of a fine meal and a bottle of bubbly, and the last vestiges of daylight were slipping below the horizon. They retired to their sleeping car to put in a call to Truman, who assured them that invitations to the fête would be awaiting them at L'Auberge de

Lavande in Bonhomme.

“And we’ll need a car,” said Sparks. “Something posh, s’il vous plaît.”

“Yes, well, I’ll see what I can do. I’ll have something waiting for you in Nice, to be sure,” he said. “Though I’d think you’d have had enough of posh after a night aboard the Blue Train.”

“It was the only one available. What were we supposed to do?”

“Bah,” said Truman, irritably. “I suppose you’ll want to take a hot air balloon to Brussels Monday.”

“Brussels Monday?”

“You’re headed up to rendezvous with Madam Eris. She’s leaving for Paris with her husband in the morning, and then they’re on to Brussels for the summit. It’ll make her day if you’ve got good news for her by then.”

“We’ll have something,” Sparks assured him.

“On another note, I’ve remembered how I know the name Bonhomme and feel ridiculous for having forgotten—given the circumstances. His research was integral in developing the flash-freezing technology used in several of our clients’ TV dinner lines.”

“Oh,” said Perilous with a wink at Sparks. “Well, that’s not fishy at all.”

“Your infernal puns,” he groaned. “The lowest form of humor. And, actually, it’s incredibly fishy. He stumbled onto the technique while on an expedition in the Arctic—”

“Let me guess—the RV *Polaris*?”

“Indeed,” replied Truman. “It seems likely that he may have known Cole.”

“And what was Bonhomme doing in the Arctic?”

“He was studying the ice caps throughout the 50s. He believes they’re melting, and he’s predicted it could lead to serious global consequences.”

“Interesting.”

“While they were underway, he saw Inuit fishermen freeze their catches with water and ice to keep them fresh. When he returned to France, he experimented with more modern methods of instant freezing. *Et voilà!* Frozen fish in a flash!”

“We don’t need the alliterative sales pitch, Truman,” said Sparks. “Clearly, this is our guy.”

“Mm, well—” Truman said, dubiously. “I wouldn’t jump to any conclusions. Bonhomme developed flash-freezing as a means of coping with food scarcity, which he predicted would follow on the heels of rising atmospheric temperatures and sea levels. He invested every penny he made from the

patent into his research center in Bonhomme, where he's studying avenues for slowing the effects of global warming. That's not the MO of a scoundrel."

"What is it that Madam Simone always says about high ideals?" Sparks prodded.

"Show me a man's noblest ideal, and I'll show you his Achille's heel," quoted Perilous in a sing-song voice.

"And don't forget: virtue does not preclude villainy," Sparks said.

Truman sighed. "Fine. But keep your minds open. This doesn't feel right to me."

"While we're on the subject of suspicious characters, I've got two. Do the names Jeanne Triquet or Bette Noire ring any bells with you?"

Truman was silent for a moment. "Yes. Triquet is KGB."

"And Bette?"

"Oh, it's Bette, is it? Good friends already, are we?"

"We crossed paths a few times in Paris."

"You were barely in Paris twenty-four hours. How could you possibly run into anyone a few times?"

"I doubt it was luck."

“And you’d be right. Your mission is the same. Find and destroy the weapon—personal risk be damned. However, a word of warning, your personal risk increases each time you interact with Mademoiselle Bette Noire. She’s far more dangerous than she appears.”

“So I’m right to assume she’s a Soviet agent?” Sparks said.

“You’re right to assume she’s not your friend.”

ALPES-DE-HAUTE-PROVENCE

13

A quick nap in the sleeper car of a train traveling through the south of France is worth eight hours in a feather bed anywhere else in the world. Le Train Bleu lulled Perilous and Sparks into a deep slumber with its rhythmic clatter and hum and whir, and they didn't wake until golden, mid-morning light began to flicker through the curtained windows.

The scent of lavender seeped through little crevices in the train's steel construction, faintly perfuming the cabin. Sparks pushed back the curtain to get a better view. Rows of freshly harvested lavender fields came and went in a green blur, giving way to a small village and then a larger town surrounded by a medieval battlement. It wouldn't

be long before they were in Nice.

She rang for the porter and requested coffee and eggs Benedict for the two of them. When he returned with their breakfast, he also left a copy of the day's newspaper. On the front page, there was an interview with the sole surviving pilot from the downed Soviet jets. He stated that the jet had come apart in mid-air, much like the Madrid to Monaco flight Manette had mentioned. A piece about Wednesday's summit in Brussels was on page ten accompanied by a small, black and white photograph of Manfred Getty and his wife Simone at a recent gala in Manhattan.

After passing through half a dozen French Riviera resort towns, the train pulled into Gare du Nice-Ville at the center of Nice. The airy station was flooded with sunlight, and potted palms gave it the atmosphere of a tropical conservatory. Sparks could smell the sea air over the train's exhaust.

"Ah, the Riviera," she sighed, heading towards the tourist office. "Could this day get any better?"

The receptionist in the tourist office said a car had been delivered for them and handed a silver key on a ring to Sparks. They found the car parked just outside the station.

"This can't be right, can it?" Sparks said, feeling the color drain from her face.

Perilous twisted her diamond earring. "Truman. There's an Aston-Martin Volante parked in front of the Nice station."

"My god, but you two are astute observers," came Truman's tinny, droll reply after a moment. "You're in the French Riviera, ladies. That was the cheapest car I could find last minute. Trust me. I looked."

The girls stared in silent appreciation for a moment. The Volante was all curve and polish. The automotive equivalent of a little black dress by Chanel. Perilous ran her hand over the gleaming hood while Sparks tested the supple leather of the driver's seat. She turned the key in the ignition and listened to the purr of the engine for a moment.

"You do realize—" began Sparks emotionally.

"Yes. It's James Bond's car. I know, Sparks. You may drive, but at minimum, we're going to need to throw our luggage in back before you peel out, sis."

Sparks had the luggage loaded and the top down in a matter of seconds. When she put her foot to the gas, the car shot forward like a curled fist in a

kid glove. In no time, they'd left the boutiques and beaches of the coastal resort towns behind, and they were cruising northward towards Bonhomme.

Rolling fields gave way to gentle hills, which soon turned temperamental and morphed into the jutting mountains and plummeting valleys of des Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. The Volante handled the narrow roads and hairpin curves easily even at top speeds, and in under two hours, they set their eyes on the ancient village of Bonhomme for the first time. Sparks took the next opportunity that presented itself to ease the car off the road for a better view.

They climbed out and stretched, gazing across a valley striped with rows of green lavender plants. Though the blooms had been harvested already, their scent still hung in the air.

Nestled into the far side of the field was a grand château. A serpentine river curved around the back of it, and beyond that, the pale, stone village of Bonhomme climbed a cone-shaped hill, finally giving way to a grove of dusky-leaved olive trees. Towards the summit, the grove yielded to pines and large oaks so dense they nearly obscured the domed chapel crowning the hill's peak.

“Where do you suppose the famed research institute is?” Sparks asked, kicking a stone from the road’s edge and watching it tumble down the steep cliff face.

“Let’s go check into the hotel and find out.”

The road narrowed as it crossed an arched, stone bridge over the river, depositing the Volante onto the village’s main cobblestone street. The wrought iron balconies of the residences and shops were all strung with blue and gold bunting, and every ancient, wooden door was hung with a bunch of fresh-cut lavender.

L’Auberge de Lavande formed one perimeter of the village’s main square. A Renaissance era fountain gurgled at its center, and white tents had been set up round about it. In their shade, merchants were hawking all manner of lavender-infused dainties—soaps and teas, cachets and perfumes, even candies and pastries.

The hotel’s stout, friendly concierge gave them directions to the research institute ‘de l’autre côté de le roc’ and assured them that she was holding their invitations for la fête Bonhomme. Once they’d checked in and dropped off their luggage, Perilous and Sparks took a moment to freshen up and

change into trim, smart dresses with sensible shoes.

Truman had already arranged a private tour of the institute for them. He'd insinuated to Bonhomme's public liaison that The Eris Agency was developing a campaign to educate the public on the subject of climate change. She'd been more than happy to oblige his request for an interview with the institute's founder.

Sparks tossed the car keys to Perilous. "Go ahead. I'm not going to bogart the experience."

Perilous was surprised by her colleague's generosity, and she was eager to test out the Volante. She wheeled out of the village, sending little pebbles flying behind them. Once they'd passed out of the village, the main road rounded the hill that the concierge had called Le Roc de Verglas. Its craggy backside was dominated by a large construction of steel and glass that glinted in the sun.

Perilous spotted the institute's barrier gate and pulled up to the security booth. After showing the guard her identification, she was waved forward to park in the building's underground garage.

They took an elevator to the lobby, where the institute's glass wall offered a sweeping view of

fields and mountains and cerulean skies. The other walls had been carved directly into the stone hillside. It was a vast space, empty and silent save for the clicking of heels on marble as a severe woman in a lab coat crossed to greet them. She identified herself as Sophia Dubois, chief public liaison for L'Institute de Bonhomme.

"You're from l'agence de publicité in New York, non?"

"Oui," Perilous said, shaking her hand. "Perilous Faretheewell."

"Madero Spartakanova," Sparks said, extending her hand.

"Suivez-moi, s'il vous plaît," she said, turning on her heels and heading towards another bank of elevators. The girls followed as instructed.

A short ride downward brought them to the institute's main research area. Row after row of computer servers hummed throughout the space. On the far wall was an enormous screen revealing a topographical map of the world, including the ice sheets of the Arctic region. A man was seated at a large table in front of the map, engrossed in a pile of papers. Dubois' heels roused him from his reverie, and he stood to greet them.

“Puis-je introduire l'incomparable Compte Bonhomme,” Dubois said with a flourish that seemed out of keeping with her otherwise anemic demeanor.

“Behave, Sophia,” the count said, covering the distance between them in a few strides. He was a giant of a man—seven feet at least—with a great, loping gait. His face was covered by a bushy, brown beard, and his hair was an abandoned crow’s nest, stuck through with pencils and pens and what appeared to be a thermometer.

“As you can see, the institute is not open today. You’ve heard, no doubt, about the upcoming festivities at the château. Everyone is on holiday.”

Perilous nodded politely. “We appreciate your willingness to see us.”

He demurred only a moment before launching into an introduction of the research facility’s many scientific advances and cutting-edge technologies. His excitement was contagious.

“I’d like to say that it’s normally busier,” he said sadly, “that the village’s little celebration is momentarily stealing our spotlight, but in truth, there’s not much interest in the subject of climate change in the public sector.

“But you—you’re here, aren’t you?” he said,

perking up again. "That means the Americans are finally paying attention to my warnings. We can do something. Before it's too late. I always knew if I could just get the American government on board —"

"Get the American government on board? Are you kidding?" Sparks guffawed. "They're probably working out how to melt the ice caps faster and establish an exclusive tropical paradise in the North Pole."

Bonhomme's face dropped.

Perilous elbowed Sparks in the ribs. "What my colleague means to say is that some media outlets have begun to recognize the importance of your research. I, personally, am deeply affected by your work."

"How kind of you," he said, somewhat mollified. "How did you become interested in the subject?"

"My uncle was aboard the RV *Polaris* in '51," Perilous said. "He came back with vivid descriptions of the blue-green sheets of ice glowing in the light of the Aurora Borealis and horrifying accounts of what the world might come to if those sheets melted. I knew straight away that I wanted to dedicate myself to their study."

“The RV Polaris? That was my vessel as well. Who was your uncle?”

“Michael Cole,” Perilous said. “Perhaps you knew him?”

The count’s jolly countenance fell for a moment, but he quickly recovered. “No. I’m sorry. That name isn’t familiar to me. I was absorbed in my studies at the time. You may go, Madam Dubois. I’ll show these young ladies around.”

Bonhomme’s research center was light years ahead in terms of technology, and he was passionate on the topic of global warming. He spoke excitedly about the possibility of re-freezing thawed permafrost to slow rising sea levels and gain control over changing weather patterns. Perilous and Sparks quickly became caught up in his visionary speculations.

“How could you possibly control temperatures like that?” Perilous asked, genuinely intrigued.

“With a laser trap generated from satellites positioned over the arctic,” he said. “You see, the laser traps will slow the momentum of atoms caught in it.”

“No movement, no heat,” Sparks said.

“Précisément,” Bonhomme replied, pleased with

her answer.

“And you’ve actually accomplished that?”

He smiled. “Plus ou moins.”

He was interrupted when the elevator doors opened again. A younger man with a haughty expression emerged, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his white lab coat. “I’m leaving for the day, Bonhomme,” he said and then nodded politely at Perilous and Sparks.

“Laissez-moi vous présenter le Docteur Petrov,” Bonhomme said graciously. “Without him, the institute would not be what it is today. Docteur, Mesdemoiselles Farethewell and Spartakanova. They’re from an American PR firm interested in our work.”

“How nice. Don’t stay too long. The fête is at your château, after all,” Petrov said before disappearing into the elevator.

“Forgive his manners. He’s as personable as a raw potato, but brilliant,” Bonhomme said, waving Petrov off and continuing his discourse.

“Wouldn’t it be incredibly difficult—not to mention prohibitively expensive—to re-freeze those large swaths of permafrost—even with a very large laser trap?” Sparks asked.

Bonhomme ran his large hand through his hair and nodded. "Oui."

"And you've said that there's little interest in your studies."

"Oui."

"I'm curious as to how you're funding your research then, Count Bonhomme. Do you have backing for such a large undertaking—the re-freezing that you're talking about."

"Oh, well," he said absently. "Like many scientists, I fund our research with more mundane innovations. One of our earlier studies led to the development of—"

"Flash-freezing," Perilous said with wide-eyed admiration.

Count Bonhomme smiled broadly. "There are plenty of uses for the technologies we're developing. Funding won't be a problem. Now, I'm sorry to cut our visit short, but Petrov was right. I've a non-iceberg-related ordeal to attend to, and I'm sure you ladies will want to explore the village. It's full of activity this weekend."

"Oui. Merci beaucoup," Perilous said. "It was generous of you to take the time to show us your facility, Count Bonhomme. It's truly an inspiration."

14

“Before we head back to the village, let’s check out the chapel up top,” Perilous said, already pointing the car in that direction.

“You don’t have to make excuses. You can just say you want to drive James Bond’s car a little longer.”

“Have I ever told you how much I appreciate your generous spirit?” Perilous said, darting out onto the narrow mountain road. “Your thoughts on Bonhomme?”

“To be honest, I have to agree with Truman. I don’t like him for a villain. But it was clear from his reaction he knew Cole, and flash-freezing isn’t going to fund the kind of undertaking he’s talking

about. He'd need bigger backers."

"And he's got them—Omega. But if he's developing LD3 here, it's not going to be in that research center. He'll have it tucked away somewhere. Somewhere nearby but out of sight."

After several switchbacks and hazardous curves that swept between harrowing vistas of the valley below and claustrophobic wooded passes, they crested Le Roc de Verglas. Perilous pulled the car under a colossal, gnarled oak, and they climbed out to take a closer look at the chapel they'd seen earlier as they approached Bonhomme.

A winged seraph stood guard at each corner of the octagonal structure. Its domed roof was gilded and held aloft a large, golden statue of the Virgin Mary, whose spiked diadem glinted in the sunlight. They circled the structure, but there was no entrance. The slender, stained glass windows afforded no view of the chapel's interior.

According to a placard, it was a fairly recent addition to the landscape. Once upon a time, the hill had been the home of a walled citadel, but that had fallen more than a thousand years before. Victorians had constructed the Byzantine-inspired chapel as an elaborate folly in a turn-of-the-century

beautification campaign, but it had begun to fall into disrepair in the years following World War I. Count Bonhomme had it restored just a decade ago.

"Nothing here," said Sparks. "And we've got a ball to prepare for. Let's head back."

"You wanna drive?" Perilous asked, dangling the keys in front of Sparks.

"No. Go ahead. I'll drive tomorrow."

"Suit yourself," Perilous said.

She peeled out and began the descent to the village. Around the second curve, a black Peugeot darted in front of them from a path that had been screened by a stand of pines.

"Did you get a look at that driver?" Perilous said, leaning forward in her seat. "It was one of the thugs from Paris. I recognized the scar."

"Well, catch up to him," Sparks said, unable to hide her delight at the prospect of a chase.

"Already on it," Perilous said, pressing down on the pedal so that the Volante was flying around the curves in pursuit.

The wheel wrenched from her hands with a jolt, and for a moment, she lost control of the car.

"What was that?" she said, struggling with the wheel.

“Black ice,” Sparks replied, pointing at the Peugeot’s tailpipe. It released a burst of gray vapor that dropped to the road’s surface and quickly coated it. Perilous jerked the wheel to one side to avoid the slippery emissions.

“Can you do something about that?”

“On it,” Sparks said.

She pulled the extra button from the inner seam of her silk blouse. All agency-tailored clothing came standard with buttons containing micro-explosives for non-sewing-related emergencies.

While she chewed on a stick of gum she’d found in Perilous’ purse, Sparks paired the button bomb with her wristwatch and set the timer for sixty seconds. She wrapped the button in the gum and stuck the wad onto the end of a pen tube.

Perilous jerked at the wheel again, sending the makeshift blowgun tumbling onto the floorboard.

“Careful!” Sparks yelled.

“Well, hurry up!”

“To the left just a—dammit—”

The car jerked to the right to avoid another patch of black ice.

“Just to the——got it,” she said.

The wad of gum was stuck to the Peugeot’s

tailpipe. Perilous slammed on the brakes, and in the next moment, the rear of Scarface's car exploded into flames.

"Oh," said Sparks, "Wow. I didn't remember the explosives being so—explosive."

The Peugeot swerved and spun on the twisted road, leaving a blazing wake in its path. It crashed into the safety railing and then soared out over the abyss where it seemed to hang for a moment before tumbling hood over bumper down the rocky hill face.

Perilous pulled the Volante onto the shoulder, and they leapt out of the car to see what had become of Scarface. The car was still crashing downward, lighting little patches of undergrowth on fire as it went. A bent tire had jarred loose from the Peugeot and landed in the limbs of a tall pine. A trail of broken glass glittered among the wildflowers and weeds. When the car finally came to a violent halt at the base of the hill, it was already engulfed in flames.

"Well," said Sparks, but she didn't seem to have anything to add.

"Get in," Perilous said. "There's nothing we can do for him now but get the local authorities out

here to claim his body.”

They drove in silence back to L’Auberge de Lavande, where they notified the concierge of the accident.

“Oh, pauvres enfants!” she cried. “How horrible! I’ll alert the police right away. Please, go to your room. I’ll send up something to calm your nerves. These things, they happen on such twisting roads. It’s overly-confident drivers. You shouldn’t let it ruin your stay, mes amies. There’s nothing you could have done.”

The girls headed up to their room to collect themselves. Perilous added a few drops of the hotel’s lavender oil to a hot bath and soaked for a bit, and the concierge sent a bellhop up with a local vintage and two glasses.

“Someone sent that guy after us,” Sparks said, leaning in the bathroom doorway. “My suspicion is it was someone at the institute. The mention of Cole must’ve been a tip-off.”

Perilous nodded in agreement. “That’s two down now. The Algerian and Scarface. I think it’s a safe bet that our friend Miller from the CIA is lurking around somewhere.”

“I’m sure everyone who’s anyone will be at the

fête tonight,” Sparks said. “We’ll just need to keep our eyes peeled.”

15

The sloping streets of the village of Bonhomme were lit by centuries-old brass lanterns. They were awash with revelers out for an evening stroll. In the square beside L'Auberge de Lavande, a small Romani orchestra had replaced the merchants. The young virtuosos wore lavishly embroidered vests and played their violins as though they'd been born with bows in their hands. Their complex rhythms lured in a tangle of bacchanalians, who swayed boozily to the music.

Dressed in their Parisian finery, Perilous and Sparks slipped through the pagan congregation and made their way down to the village's riverfront several blocks away. The bistros and wine bars that

faced out over the water were raucous due to the harvest festival, and the air was thick with the scent of lavender and turned earth and spilled wine.

Across the river, the moonlit château's pale walls glowed like a firefly in a cupped palm. Paper lanterns were strung throughout the estate's formal gardens, casting the shadows of topiary lions onto the high walls of the château's towering central keep. Its roofscape was the chaotic skyline of a delusional man's utopia, crowded with a schizophrenic array of competing architectural features. Minarets that would have been at home in Constantinople neighbored spires and turrets and loggia typical of the Italian Renaissance.

"Magnificent," Sparks sighed, wishing there was time for just one sketch.

The château was connected with its village by a medieval drawbridge. Its iron chains had been woven with stalks of lavender for the occasion. Lanterns hung from shepherd's hooks along either side and cast a soft glow over the wanderers passing between the public festival and the private soiree at the château. As they crossed, they could hear music on the far side of the river. The faint chords mingled with the soft, rhythmic lapping of the water against

its stone embankment and provided a harmony to the village's joyful noise-making behind them.

On the château side, two guards in ancient costumes sorted party-goers from party-crashers. Perilous and Sparks delivered their invitations to the guards and crossed the threshold to le Château Bonhomme. A gurgling fountain with a nude goddess at its peak was the centerpiece of the sprawling formal lawn. Count Bonhomme stood before it, personally greeting guests as they arrived. His hair had been tamed with pomade and his beard trimmed. He wore a tuxedo that must have been tailor-made for his large frame.

“Bonne soirée et bienvenue, mes amies!” he said when he saw them. “Ravissant!”

“Merci, Count Bonhomme. You clean up rather well yourself!” Perilous said with a warm smile.

“Ladies, please, make yourselves at home. Eat! Drink! Be merry!”

They left the count to his duties and wandered through the château's gardens, taking in the scenery and discreetly observing the other guests. Madam Dubois from the Institute stopped to speak with them politely for a moment before wandering off again, but the girls saw no signs of anyone else with

a familiar face.

“Let’s head inside,” Sparks said.

She stopped a passing server to pinch a canapé from his silver platter, and then they circled back around to the château’s main entrance. A colossal, helix-shaped staircase dominated the cavernous foyer, and doorways on either side led into an equally extravagant ballroom. A dozen crystal chandeliers spilled rainbows across the milling crowd, and a formally-attired orchestra tempted some of the guests to a spin around the dance floor with a Berlioz waltz.

Perilous and Sparks stayed close to the edges, working their way around the room while lightening the loads of countless servers carrying champagne flutes and bite-sized delicacies. After a pass around the ballroom, they stepped outside into the château’s rear walled gardens where more guests were mingling.

“Sparks, darling!” came a cry from across the courtyard.

It was Madam Triquet in a full-length black gown, shimmering with hand-stitched sequins. Her bouffant had been run through with black feathers and bejeweled hair pins. Bette was at her side,

dressed only slightly more modestly in one of Xaviere's creations. She'd foresworn her trademark black in favor of a silk, ivory gown that draped over her figure luxuriously.

"What a beautiful gown," Perilous said to Bette after Sparks made introductions.

"And it has pockets," Bette said with a raised eyebrow. She slid her hands into the lush folds to demonstrate. Both Perilous and Sparks oohed in response.

"Well, now that you've found some playmates, Bette, perhaps I'll see if I can find that nephew of mine," Madam Triquet said.

"Of course, madam," Bette replied, linking arms with Perilous and Sparks. "Don't mind us. We'll entertain one another."

Madam Triquet wandered across the courtyard, stopping to speak with other guests along the way. Sparks kept an eye on her while Perilous and Bette became acquainted.

"How long have you worked for Madam Triquet?" Perilous asked as they circled a reflecting pool crowded with enormous lily pads.

"Two years in October."

"And you—"

"Mostly, I answer the phone and attend to madam's daily itinerary. I take care of all the little, trivial things that she can't be bothered with," Bette said, anticipating Perilous' question. "And you?"

"I work with Sparks in New York."

"You're an artist also?"

"No. A writer."

"Ah!" Bette smiled slyly. "A propagandist selling the American dream."

"American propagandists hardly ever use the word 'propaganda,' Bette. We prefer 'consent engineers.'"

"Ah, yes. That does sound much more American."

"Is that Madam Triquet's nephew?" Sparks asked, pointing to Dr. Petrov from the institute. He and Triquet were engaged in an animated conversation.

Bette peered across the crowd. "I suppose."

"You've never met him?"

"No. Madam rarely speaks about her personal life with me, and I've never met any of her family," Bette replied, and then changed the subject. "What about you, Perilous? Sparks tells me that your

father is an expert on the Arthurian literary cycle. What about your mother?" Bette asked.

"She's an anthropologist. Folklore is her specialty."

"Oh la vache! You must've been privy to some very interesting bedtime stories growing up. No wonder you're a writer!"

They took another turn around the reflecting pool. Bette plied them with questions about life in New York and about their work at The Eris Agency, and they answered vaguely, remembering Truman's cautionary advice. Across the gardens, Madam Triquet's companion glanced around and then left her, slipping into the château through one of the French doors. A moment later, Triquet followed.

"Pardon me, girls. I need to powder my nose," Sparks said, demurely.

"Certainly! It gives me time to get to know your delightful colleague better," Bette said, squeezing Perilous' arm. Perilous, for her part, offered a pinched smile.

With an apologetic smile, Sparks left them and made her way back inside the ballroom. She kept her eyes trained on Triquet's bouffant, which

towered and wobbled above the other guests as she sashayed across the dance floor. A handsome, young man in need of a dance partner took Sparks by the arm and pulled her onto the dance floor, sweeping her into a waltz.

"I beg your pardon," she said, watching Triquet disappear. "I'm not in the mood for a spin around the dance floor right now if it's all the same."

She twisted from his embrace and set off in pursuit again, pushing her way through the couples spinning on the dance floor. When she emerged on the other side of the crowd, Triquet was ascending the spiraling stone stairwell in the foyer. Sparks let a cluster of revelers pass before she followed in the Soviet agent's tracks. She paused at the first landing and listened. Above her, she could hear the click of Triquet's heels as she continued her ascent.

Sparks caught up to the woman just in time to see her slip down a gallery lined with ancient oil portraits of the Bonhomme family patriarchs. Midway down its length, Triquet disappeared through a shadow-cloaked archway. Sparks trailed behind, pausing to peer around the corner.

The entrance opened onto a yawning library lit by two large fireplaces, one on either end. Bookcases

lined three walls from floor to ceiling, and the books enshrined there were all bound in richly-hued linen and leather. Parchments and maps were spread out across several oak tables that ran the length of the room. A series of stained glass windows allowed a whisper of moonlight into the still space.

In the far corner of the room, the heavily-laden shelves were interrupted by a tapestry depicting a scene of courtly romance. Sparks noticed a corner of the woven masterpiece wavering in a breeze originating somewhere on the other side.

She crossed the room stealthily and eased back the hanging to expose a cramped stone stairwell. It spiraled upward into one of the towers that Sparks had observed from across the river. She crept up quietly, pausing after each cautious step to listen for voices, but there was only silence.

She'd begun to doubt if Triquet had come this way at all when she felt the temperature drop considerably. The stairwell's stone walls began to blossom with frost, and Sparks' breath condensed into a thin mist of ice crystals around her.

16

“Excusez moi s’il vous plaît,” Bette said, just a few moments after Sparks left them. “I just realized that I need to make a trip to the ladies’ room as well.”

Perilous smiled and nodded distractedly. She’d spotted a familiar face in the château’s gardens—the Undertaker. He was speaking intently with Bonhomme, who’d apparently wrapped up his responsibilities as the welcome wagon.

“Of course, I’m sure I’ll see you later.”

Perilous waited a moment after Bette took her leave and then slipped into the crowded ballroom. She made her way through the throng of dancers and exited through a French door on the other side.

She emerged much closer to where she'd originally spied the Undertaker, but he was already gone. She didn't see a sign of him anywhere.

An agitated Bonhomme, however, was still contemplating the conversation. He mumbled for a few moments and then seemed to make a decision. Stalking across the gardens, he vanished behind a tall hedgerow that abutted one of the château's curtain walls. Perilous followed.

The hedge hid a heavy wooden door that was still slightly ajar. Beyond the door was a cold, damp void. Perilous pulled her glasses from her clutch and slipped them on, triggering night vision. Through the doorway, she could see the glowing outline of a steep stone stairwell. She glanced around to make sure no one had seen her and then stepped down into the darkness.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, and with each step, Perilous grew chillier. At last, they leveled out into a tight tunnel. She proceeded cautiously as many of the passageway's ancient flagstones were broken. Their jagged shards jutted up unexpectedly in spots and would send any careless intruder sprawling face forward.

Droplets of icy water seeped between the stones

and formed thread-like rivulets. These slid down the mossy walls, pooling in crevices left by time and erosion. Perilous could just make out a flickering, crimson pinpoint rushing into the darkness far ahead, and then it vanished as the tunnel began to push back upwards. They were on the other side of the river, under the village.

Up ahead, she heard a mechanical whirring and then silence. She slowed her pace and eased in the direction of the noise. The tunnel widened and then ended at a solid metal door with a security keypad that required three digits.

Perilous tried numerical encryptions of the word 'ice' first, though she felt fairly confident that Bonhomme's code wouldn't be so easy to crack. Then she tried variations of 196, the celsius temperature at which flash-freezing occurs, and then meteorological numbers. No luck.

If Bonhomme named the weapon after Dante's Satan mired waist deep in ice, the code could be related. Bette had been right. Her bedtime tales hadn't been standard issue. She and her brother had cut their teeth on Dante's Inferno, and she was sure the right set of numbers was stowed away in her memory. Perilous typed in the obvious 666.

Nothing.

In the final canto, Dante's beatific guide Beatrice prophesied the destruction of the harlot and the giant by the 'Five hundred ten and five.' Perilous' father had explained that the harlot was Philip the Fair, whom Dante referred to as the plague of France. The king was engaged in a ruthless battle for European dominance with Pope Boniface VIII, the giant. Philip had hoped to tip the power struggle in his favor by being appointed Rex Bellator of the Knights Temple. When the Templars denied him the title, he tried and burned them all in order to steal their wealth.

Of course, Dante had no more love for the arrogant, power-hungry Boniface than he had for his nemesis Philip. He considered both men to be mere mortals, susceptible to corruption, and believed that no one man should be given absolute authority on earth.

A secret order funding global power struggles? It seemed like a fit. Perilous entered the number 515, and the door slid open with a soft, mechanical whir.

On the other side lay a large man-made cavern. A monolithic pylon rose up hundreds of meters from

the center of the space, disappearing into the dark recesses of its vaulted roof high above. Perilous suspected that the pylon connected with a transmitter hidden by the chapel at the top of Le Roc de Verglas. The transmitter would link with a satellite, enabling Bonhomme to capture just about anything—whether an ice cap or an airplane—within a frigid laser trap.

The ground-level of the cavern was sectioned off by thick partitions of industrial glass, creating a disorienting maze of offices and storage rooms. Perilous slipped from one hallway to the next, moving quietly towards the center of the maze. The only movement was the sporadic flickering of green and red lights on the massive computer towers dispersed among the rooms.

Finally, she reached the pylon at the heart of the cavern. Mounted on its metal surface, a monitor the size of a billboard displayed a fragment of the data being analyzed by the blinking computers. Bonhomme was busily entering commands into an instrument panel, muttering under his breath all the while. This was it—le destin du Diable—and Bonhomme was preparing to use it.

A hand clamped down on Perilous' shoulder

with a vise-like grip.

“Hello, chameleon,” the Undertaker growled in her ear.

Perilous spun out of his clutches and thrust the heel of her hand into the bridge of his nose. He pulled out a pistol and shoved it into her ribcage, grabbing her by the arm. With his free hand, he wiped away a trickle of blood from his nose.

“Count Bonhomme,” he shouted, pushing Perilous towards the pylon. “It looks like somebody got a special backstage pass for your party.”

Bonhomme flinched and turned to face them. He frowned at Perilous. “What are you doing here?”

“I took a wrong turn at the ladies room.”

“I should’ve known the two of you were up to no good,” he said, his voice bitter. “It was too much to hope that Americans would be interested in my work.”

“I’m disappointed, too, Bonhomme. You didn’t seem the type to take funding from criminals.”

“I’m not the type!” he exclaimed, throwing his hands up in frustration. “None of this was what I wanted, but I needed money. Can’t you see? I’d found a way to slow the loss of the arctic ices, but when I sought funding through the normal channels,

the scientific community mocked me. The Omega Foundation, however, was more than happy to supply me with all the money I needed to do my research and build a prototype. With a stipulation.”

“Weaponize it.”

Bonhomme pulled a shaking hand through his hair. “With new bans on nuclear proliferation, they’re all looking for weapons that comply with the letter of the law if not the spirit, and LD3 fits the bill.”

“And Omega foots it.”

The Undertaker snorted and shoved Perilous again, drawing nearer to Bonhomme. “Yeah. We’d all save the world if we had a little more dough. And we’d all watch it burn for just a few bucks more.”

Bonhomme looked at the Undertaker as if he was seeing him for the first time. “What are you doing here? Didn’t you already find the leak Omega was looking for?”

“We found one leak. We suspected there was a mole in the institute selling secrets when LD3 suddenly started popping up all over the black market switchboards, and we were right. Petrov took advantage of his position to make a little extra

money on the side. We've handled that problem. But Cole didn't get his intel from your chief engineer Petrov, did he?"

"What do you know about Cole?" Bonhomme asked, backing towards the instrument panel.

"I know he's an old friend of yours—Verglas. You thought the CIA would—what?—crack down on The Omega Foundation? Shut down the weapon's development?" He laughed in disbelief. "Sad. Truly sad. You're so smart, but so dumb."

"When you got in touch with your old friend Cole," Perilous said, "he appealed to the CIA for intervention. That's when he learned—a little too late—that Omega has moles in every agency."

Bonhomme nodded, wearily. "Yes. We're all learning whom we can trust now, aren't we? We're all having to make our alliances. Choose our paths. It's not easy, is it? I wanted to do good, but—"

He was pressed against the instrument panel now, one hand hovering over the keyboard.

"I left Petrov in charge of the weapons development. It didn't interest me, and I didn't want to know. I wanted to keep my innocence, but I'm still guilty. I knew when that first plane went down—"

He was overcome with emotion for a moment but recovered himself.

"I'm going to put an end to it tonight. I'm going to destroy LD3. But not until I've dealt a measure of justice to Omega."

"What do you mean?" Perilous asked, subtly shifting her position.

"The Foundation's best and brightest are on a plane for Brussels tonight—your Secretary of State among them—to discuss the parameters of a nuclear nonproliferation treaty. I'm going to give them a first-hand demonstration of the weapon they were so eager to build."

"I don't think so," the Undertaker said, removing the gun from Perilous' rib cage to point it at the count. "That's my paycheck up there."

Perilous used the distraction to her advantage, ramming her heel into the Undertaker's foot and jabbing her elbow into his ribs. As he doubled forward, Perilous reached for his pistol, but he snapped back quickly and took aim at Bonhomme and fired before she could stop him.

"You idiot!" she shouted at the Undertaker, rushing to Bonhomme, now slumped over the instrument panel. "He'd already started the

initiation sequence. Do you have any idea how to stop it?"

"Not one," he said and leveled the gun at Perilous. As he pulled the trigger, a robotic voice from within LD3 began counting down to initiation.

17

Just as she'd made the decision to backtrack down the stairs and avoid Cole's fate, Sparks realized that she didn't feel nearly as cold as she should've. In fact, as the stairwell became chillier, the thin aluminum plates of Sparks' dress seemed to be growing warmer. The warmth spread to her fingers and toes.

She crept to the top of the stairwell, proceeding more carefully than before as ice had made the steps slick and treacherous. At the top, her passage was blocked by a wooden door. She knelt and peered through the keyhole. On the other side was an open-air rotunda with a stone table at its center.

Framed by the tower room's thick travertine

columns, Triquet and Petrov created a chilling tableau against a backdrop of night-shrouded mountains. The old woman was peering in shock towards some unseen vision. Her black wig was frosted with ice crystals and her skin was a pale violet hue. Petrov's face was frozen into a mask of horror. He'd been in motion—his icy fingers were splayed out in front of him and he was leaning in the direction of Triquet's gaze.

Sparks took a deep breath and pressed on the door. It creaked open, and cold air rushed towards her. It caught in her chest like an icy fog despite the warmth the dress emitted. Aside from Triquet and Petrov, the tower room was empty. Drawing nearer to the icebound pair, Sparks saw that four of Triquet's fingers had been snapped off and lay shattered on the table. A rectangle of stone hadn't been coated in ice. A box of some sort had been there when the weapon was fired.

Someone had interrupted the clandestine meeting and stolen away with the drop. Following the old woman's eyes, Sparks ran to a window that plummeted several meters to a steeply slanting ridge. Spires and minarets, cupolas and columns, cluttered her view, but in the distance, Sparks saw a

pale figure disappear behind an onion-shaped dome.

She climbed onto the rotunda's ledge and vaulted towards a neighboring tower, grasping at a copper finial that jutted from its corner with a grunt. From there, she lowered herself to the tower's open window frame and then dropped to the parapet below, dashing off in pursuit of her quarry.

A door had been left ajar at the base of the tower where Sparks had seen the figure vanish. She slid into the darkness on the other side and listened for the sound of footsteps, but she heard nothing. Stepping away from the tower, Sparks peered over the roof's parapet. A shadow rounded the large corner tower and leapt onto a lower roof.

Sparks followed, pushing herself to catch up to Triquet's assassin, but she was too late. The killer dove outward and into the river at the point where it slunk moat-like against the château's perimeter. Sparks followed, splashing down into the water and launching across the rippling surface in pursuit.

On the other bank, Bette emerged from the murky river, her white dress clinging to her. She stood silhouetted in the moonlight.

"You," Sparks said in disgust, scrambling out of

the water after her.

In one hand, Bette held the rectangular box she'd pried from her employer's frozen hand. In the other, she clutched a strange gun—the cause of Triquet's demise, no doubt. She kept it lowered by her side.

"I'm not here for you," she said.

"Then who are you here for? Omega?"

Her lips curled into the same cryptic smile that had intrigued Sparks at the café in Paris.

"I infiltrated the KGB two years ago to be Omega's eyes and ears in the Eastern Bloc. When I learned that Petrov was selling information concerning The Foundation's new pet project, it became my responsibility to get the situation under control. That meant getting rid of Triquet and Petrov. Now, I've done what I was sent to do, which means I'm free to enjoy the rest of the festival if you'd like to join me. However, I suspect you haven't got the time."

"Even if I did—"

Bette didn't let her finish. "Your partner followed Bonhomme in order to find LD3—the big boy, not these little toy guns. And another Omega agent—one much less generous than yours truly—

went after her. You can come after me, or you can go after her. You don't have time to do both."

Bette tossed the gun she was holding to Sparks. It was cold and heavy in her hand. She pointed it at Bette and nodded at the box. "Give it to me."

"I don't think so. Xaviere made my dress, too. As you can imagine, the minute I got wind of these little ice-makers, I had her accommodate my entire wardrobe. The fabric uses cutting edge microscopic particles that react to extreme temperatures. Brilliant, non? Madam Simone's Product Development team doesn't have anything like this, I bet."

Sparks didn't know which question to ask first.

"Listen, Sparks, mon ami. I work for profit, not principles. I have no enemies, only allies, obstacles, and marks. I think you'd be happier as the former though perhaps more fun as one of the latter."

"But why?"

"Madam Simone set me on this lucrative path years ago. I suppose I harbor a little nostalgia for the old days when I did believe in good guys and bad guys. It was all much easier to sort back then."

"You were Eris?"

"Once upon a time," she said. "But then Omega

made me a better offer, and I'm not immune to the allure of the almighty dollar, Sparks. That being said, I'm also not a workaholic. My orders were clear—plug the Russian leak. I've done that. Now, I'm going to enjoy some local culture before I head back to Paris with my souvenir," she said, patting her stolen goods. "You, conversely, still have a job to do, don't you? May I give you a tip? That Aston-Martin you've got—it can make it to the chapel in under ten minutes if you push it. But, sadly, you'll need to run now."

Sparks twisted her earring in an effort to contact Perilous but got nothing.

"Doubtful that she has reception where she is."

"Dammit," Sparks said and dashed past Bette towards the village center where Perilous had last parked the car.

The streets were still congested with revelers milling from bar to bar, and Sparks had to push her way through the mob of drunken carousers that had been lured into the central square by the Romani orchestra.

She jumped into the driver's seat and shot into the street, veering to avoid a troupe of sots stumbling on the old cobblestone. She tore around

the hairpin curves on two wheels and made the summit in under ten minutes.

Below her, the lights of the village twinkled and the strains of the Romani orchestra whispered through the pines that surrounded the chapel. She climbed out of the car and circled the small structure as she and Perilous had done earlier. What was inside? Sparks picked up a large rock and tossed it at one of the stained glass windows, but it only bounced back and clattered to the ground.

The golden statue of the Madonna balanced atop the dome caught her attention. Its pointed circlet had begun to emit a pale light. If this chapel served as a transmitter for LD3, the weapon—and possibly Perilous—might be somewhere below. She couldn't get to Perilous. It was wishful thinking. But it was possible that she could take out the weapon from here, using Omega technology.

She took aim at the chapel with Bette's gun. When she pulled the trigger, a film of luminescent blue ice engulfed the madonna on her perch. It inched down the chapel and crystallized the grass that grew up around its base. Sparks didn't let up her grip on the trigger, even when she felt the earth beneath her feet begin to crack and groan.

18

Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen.

Perilous opened her eyes and winced at the pain in her abdomen. She reached to touch the spot, expecting to find blood, but the bullet hadn't penetrated the dress. The black lace sheath appeared completely unharmed.

Twelve, eleven, ten—the metallic countdown continued.

Particles of ice had begun to accumulate on the pylon at the center of the room, and the metal groaned with the sudden temperature change. She heard a loud pop. A moment later an industrial-sized bolt shot past her ear. Perilous scrambled to her feet.

Nine, eight.

Strains of jagged ice streaked further down the pylon, compressing and weakening the metal shaft's structure. More bolts burst free, spraying the space with rocketing projectiles. Still the crystalline cold flowed downward, creeping across the instrumentation, inching towards the Undertaker's fingers as he raced to reverse the initiation sequence.

Seven, six.

The ice continued its conquest of le destin du Diable, rending apart the metal panels as it inched its way outward. Abandoning hope, he backed away from the control panel and turned to run for the exit. The ice slipped silently to the floor behind him.

Five.

Perilous rushed the Undertaker, knocking him to the ground. His pistol slipped from his hand and skidded across the floor, bouncing from one glass wall to the next like a pinball.

Four.

The room's temperature dropped dramatically, and the ice gained speed. Perilous lunged for the gun, but it was a moot point. The Undertaker was already frozen up to his knees, and the ice was

climbing up his thighs. He screamed in terror.

Three.

Perilous sprinted towards the exit. All around her, the maze of glass was splintering with sharp cracks.

Two.

Le destin du Diable had begun to collapse under the weight of the icy pylon. Shards of metal and loose fittings tore across the room, ripping through the glass walls and battering at the computer towers until they burst into flames.

One.

Her fingers flew as she frantically entered the code. The mechanical door slid open, and Perilous threw herself through the door just as the pylon came crashing down. A wave of tremors cascaded through the hillside.

She bolted back through the tunnel, not wasting any time. The upheaval had been enough to upset the ancient stones. Dripping rivulets had become fast-flowing water spouts. Halfway through the tunnel, Perilous could feel the shallow puddles begin to fill. She raced over the jagged flagstones, caution be damned. When she reached the end of the tunnel, she darted up the narrow staircase into the

count's courtyard.

All around her, snow was falling. Flakes landed on the hedgerow and the topiary. The geometric flower beds and the gurgling fountain were coated with a thin veil of white. Count Bonhomme's guests laughed and clapped their hands gleefully, as though they'd witnessed an extravagant parlor trick.

"What happened?" she asked a woman who was standing and staring out across the strange summer landscape.

"I—I don't know. There was a loud boom and then something that felt like an earthquake tremor and then—this."

Perilous pushed through the delighted crowd, rushing to the front of the château. Across the river, the tremor had blown a transformer. The electric lights of the village were blacked out, but she could still hear revelers singing and shouting in the streets. Their shadows danced in the dim glow of antiquated lanterns.

Her gaze traveled from the unharmed village to the hill's summit. The chapel was gone, and it had taken an entire copse of ancient oak trees with it.

She twisted her earring. "Sparks?"

Silence.

“Sparks?”

“Yeah, Peril. I’m here.”

“Oh, thank god.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got some good news and some bad news.”

“I think I know the good news.”

“Snow day!”

“Right. And the bad news?”

“Aston-Martins are no match for sinkholes. Do you know if there are any cabs in Bonhomme? I could use a lift.”

BRUSSELS

19

“I have to say I’m a little bit disappointed that you didn’t let Bonhomme take down that plane,” Madam Simone said, swirling the wine in her glass carelessly.

The Big Boss Herself had summoned Perilous and Sparks to her private suite. It encompassed half the upper story of an ornate Belle Epoch hotel at the heart of Brussels. The bustling street below was aglow with neon signs advertising everything from sodas to mixers to ‘le bon chocolat.’ Crowds were queuing on the sidewalk to buy tickets to a late night cinema showing of Godard’s film ‘Masculin Féminin’ at the Eldorado.

“Madam Simone,” Perilous said in an exasperated voice, “you were aboard the plane.”

“To fear suffering—”

“Is to suffer fear,” Perilous finished the sentence for her. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“But then again,” the older woman said, taking a sip from her glass, “I’d never pass up one more glass of wine—especially a celebratory glass. You both did well, but I knew you would. I have an eye for talent.”

Sparks rummaged through the suite’s antique wine cellarette aimlessly. She was avoiding comment as best she could.

“I know what you’re thinking, Madero Spartakanova,” Madam Simone said mischievously.

“Oh, do you?” she answered, finally settling on a Bordeaux.

“What of Bette?”

Sparks raised an eyebrow as she uncorked the bottle and refilled their glasses.

“I didn’t make a mistake when I took her on. She’s brilliant. One of the most talented operators I’ve ever trained. Very dangerous. What more could I want?”

“Loyalty?” Sparks suggested.

“Perhaps, but not mindless loyalty. We all must

operate according to our own moral compass. Has it occurred to you that I asked Bette to undertake a task that she found morally reprehensible?"

"Did you?" Perilous asked.

"Of course not. I'm no monster. But you might have at least considered it. It doesn't do to trust people blindly in our industry. No. Bette had her own reasons, but I don't think she's lost to me. She provided you both with considerable aide. That's something to consider before you judge her."

"I'll agree that your Product Development department could take instruction from her tailor," Sparks said.

"Yes," the Big Boss agreed. "Beautiful gowns made with an unassailable fabric."

"With pockets. That's the trifecta, really," Perilous added.

"Indeed."

"Mhm," Sparks said, settling onto the end of the room's velvet chaise lounge. "It's just a shame the LD3 technology was lost. I had it right in my hand. Perhaps Bonhomme could have done some good. If global warming really is the problem he believed it to be."

"Who says the technology's lost?" Madam Simone

said, sipping her wine thoughtfully.

“The gun went the way of the Aston-Martin,” Sparks said. She’d dropped it in her scramble to save herself from the sinkhole she’d opened up using it. “LD3 is definitely gone. The only thing left of Bonhomme’s work is the gun that Bette gave to —”

The two agents looked at one another and then at Madam Simone.

“You told us before that Omega has moles in every agency—”

“Except one. Oui.”

“Do any agencies have moles in Omega?”

“Oh, my dear. How ever would I know?”

Before Sparks could reply, there was a knock at the suite’s door. She excused herself to answer it. When she returned, Manfred Getty trailed behind her, a small man with weak eyes that peered out from behind old-fashioned wire-rim spectacles.

“Mon amour,” he said to his wife, kissing her hand. “I’ve missed you. The affair downstairs is so dull. It desperately needs your wit and color.”

“Of course, darling,” she said. “Have you met Perilous and Sparks?”

He kissed each girl’s hand in turn and bowed

stiffly.

"It's such a pleasure to meet Simone's girls. You both must be very clever to do such demanding work," he said. With a curious glance at Sparks' linen suit, he added, "And I quite fancy your taste in ties."

"Yes, dear, they're very clever girls with very good taste," Simone said, rolling her eyes. "Now come along and leave them. They've got work to do."

Perilous and Sparks exchanged quizzical glances.

"The soda campaign—or had you forgotten?" Madam Simone said. "The deadline is tomorrow."

"But—" Perilous began to protest.

"Oh, Simone, give them the night off. What's the point in dragging them all the way to Brussels if you won't let them enjoy it?" Manfred said with a sly wink.

"Of course you're right, darling," she murmured, draping herself over her husband's arm. "Take the night, girls. We'll start again in the morning."

COMING IN 2019 THE KOWLOON JUKEBOX

Perilous and Sparks rush to find a missing Chinese scientist whose wave-making discovery could be used to enslave the human race, but they may already be too late.

Turn the page to read Chapter One of **THE
KOWLOON JUKEBOX.**

SEPTEMBER 1966

LONDON

Perilous doubted whether George Spiggot could maintain The Status Quo through the end of the year. It was an interesting concept and meticulously carried out, but still, she thought, it was a bit on the nose. She suspected the faddishness of the establishment would be its undoing.

Instead of the usual tiny tables and chairs that littered most nightclub floors, Spiggot had outfitted his trendy Greek Street hotspot with living room suites in fruity reds and greens and yellows. The love seats were sleek and covered in clear plastic, and at the front of each arrangement of furniture, a television was ensconced in a faux cherry cabinet.

At the moment, live feed of a blustering comedian in a bad toupee was being transmitted from the main stage at the front of the club to semicircles of socializing patrons nestled in their cozy suites. The camera magnified each bead of sweat on the entertainer's forehead. It captured the hypnotic flapping of his precariously attached hairpiece and projected his large, bobbling head onto

the small screens like a distorting funhouse mirror. His rambling routine was amplified and multiplied across the idiot boxes, creating an echo chamber of poorly timed jokes coming from everywhere and nowhere in particular.

“It’s the best of both worlds if you think about it,” Spiggot said, his elocution the epitome of private school snobbery.

He’d been trying to make time with Perilous from the moment they were introduced by Sir Silas Husher, Perilous’ and Sparks’ host for the evening. Perilous found Spiggot striking in a lanky, ghoulish sort of way, but he was altogether intolerable as a personality. His arrogance knew no bounds, and he didn’t seem capable of holding a conversation about anything that wasn’t strictly Spiggot-related.

He leaned his long body forward so that a lock of sandy hair fell in front of his solemn gray eyes. “It’s like being at home, but out.” His breath reeked of a sickeningly sweet cinnamon liquor.

“It’s diabolical,” Perilous said with aggressive indifference. “It’s like being home, but expensive. It’s like being out, but sitting in front of the tv. It’s the worst of both worlds.”

“Yes,” Spiggot said. A sardonic grin tugged at his thin lips. “Yes. You’re right. It’s brilliant. Do make yourself at home, Miss Farethewell. We’ll

talk more later, shall we? Perhaps you can entice me to join you for a nightcap.”

Still congratulating himself on his achievement and utterly oblivious to Perilous’ rebuff, he sauntered off to tell other patrons how remarkable The Status Quo was.

With Spiggot finally gone, Perilous could turn her attention to the business at hand. She scanned the crowd for Husher. Amid a shifting throng of Teddy Boys in skinny ties and unkempt hippies, he stood out for his wool suit and heavily pomaded hair. He couldn’t be more square if he had corners, Perilous thought.

Madam Simone, founder of The Eris Agency and signer of Perilous’ paychecks, had described Husher as a playboy record producer. Perilous spent the evening observing his interactions with the go go dancers in their miniskirts and thigh high boots. He’d maintained attentive eye contact throughout every conversation. Husher was a perfect gentleman with his eyeballs in their sockets exactly as they ought to be. Madam Simone rarely misjudged a character, yet Husher didn’t fit the playboy bill at all. The incongruity set off Perilous’ intuitive alarms.

Whatever her own misgivings, his dull attire and stoic demeanor weren’t a deterrent to the queue of

starry-eyed youth eager to be signed to his record label Fixé. Though it was only five years old, Husher had already launched thirteen songbirds to number one spots on the Billboard charts. For a solid three months this year, his talent had completely dominated the radio waves. He was making a ton of money and garnering scads of attention, and it was Perilous' and Sparks' job to relieve him of a little of both. Madam Simone had entrusted them with Fixé's stateside PR campaign, and Perilous wanted to knock it out of the proverbial ballpark.

Sparks had other things on her mind. She'd immediately hit it off with Husher's ingenue Jane Dee, Hong Kong's sweetheart of cinema. Jane had become an overnight sensation in a series of campy spy films burlesquing the 007 franchise. As Jane Bond, she'd high-kicked her way into the hearts of Cantonese cinema-goers seeking an escape from the ominous shadow cast by Mao and his Red Army. She'd also made an indelible impression on Perilous' colleague, whose mother had been a bit actress in Hollywood. It didn't hurt that Sparks was an unapologetic Ian Fleming enthusiast.

The two were sharing a love seat near the main stage, and Jane appeared to be regaling Sparks with a tale of epic adventure. Sparks' eyes were a-glimmer

with admiration and excitement, and she leaned forward in breathless anticipation. Perilous tugged at her agency-issued diamond earring to eavesdrop on the conversation for a moment and caught the climax of a story about a vintage fighter plane, a stunt double with a case of the hiccups, and a bottle of champagne that had been shaken too vigorously. Sparks would be utterly useless tonight at this rate.

Perilous sighed and wandered over to Husher, who was whispering with a cocktail waitress dressed in a quaint, domestic frock. She called to mind advertisements for labor-saving vacuum cleaners and new and improved Frigidaires. When he saw Perilous, Husher sent the waitress on her way, but not before ordering two more flutes of pink champagne. Perilous' glass was dangerously low after half an hour in the company of the club's proprietor.

Husher was wearing a mischievous grin when he addressed her, "George isn't your cup of tea, I take it, Miss Faretheewell."

"If Mister Spiggot is a cup of tea, it's been laced with strychnine."

"Surely, he can't be all that bad." Husher's eyes, creased with amusement around the corners, belied his protest.

"Not a fatal dose of strychnine," Perilous

clarified. "A stingy dose that forces you to linger on in interminable agony for days."

Husher chuckled. "He's dreadful, I'll admit. Sorry to abandon you to him. I didn't want to be presumptuous. One never knows what a girl might fancy in a fellow, and you seem like the sort of bird who can disentangle herself without a gentleman's intervention."

"Only when I can get a word in edgewise."

The record producer's eyes began to wander in a more rakish direction, but to Perilous' relief, it was her brooch, also agency-issued, that had caught his attention. It was a diamond-encrusted, five-pointed star, rather large for her taste, but positively arresting when it sparkled under the club's glaring lights.

"Wherever did you get it?" he asked.

"It was made for me," Perilous said, pride evident in her voice. "It was a gift from Madam Simone. Diamond is my birthstone."

"Ah, the notorious Madam Simone," he said, still gazing at the diamonds.

"The one and only."

The waitress returned with their champagne, and Husher suggested they make their way over to Sparks and Jane. Spiggot's house band The Yes Men were about to take to the stage. The comedian was

already wrapping up his act. Despite the fact that his face was on a dozen or more screens, no one seemed to notice or care that his time was up.

“Peril!” Sparks cried when they approached. She was waving for Perilous to join them on the love seat, but Perilous sat opposite on a lime green ottoman and smoothed out the crisp pleats of her little black dress.

“You won’t believe this, Peril. Jane does all her own stunts. She’s broken just about every bone in her body. Isn’t she dynamite?”

Jane smiled coyly and pushed her long black hair over her shoulder. She and Sparks looked as if they’d coordinated for the evening. Sparks was in a slim black suit that she’d picked up earlier in the day at a Savile Row tailor. With her blonde hair cropped close to her head, she cut a sleek, handsome figure. Jane had also opted for a fitted suit, in keeping with her most notorious dramatis personae, but hers was white linen that accentuated her dark features. They had similar frames, lithe and built for sport, and they shared a bristling energy that was palpable, as if at any moment they might leap into action.

“Sparks has seen all of your movies,” Perilous said, leaning forward and smiling warmly at Jane. “She’s your biggest fan.”

“She’s not lying,” Sparks said, dispensing with her usual aloof air. “I thought James Bond was something, but you—really, you’re something else entirely.”

Onstage, the comedian had been replaced by a trio of young men with shaggy coifs, also in suits, performing a sound check. The lead singer, a downtrodden friend of Spiggot named Simon Moon, was stuttering into the microphone. Perilous glanced at Husher.

“Oh, that,” he said with a wink. “You’ll never know when he’s singing. Jane, can I have a word?”

“Sure, boss,” she said, and the two excused themselves, giving Perilous an opportunity to remind Sparks of the purpose of their trip to merry old England.

“I know, Peril. I know,” she sighed. “The contract’s in the bag. Never fear. I’ve been watching you tonight, and as it happens, so has Husher. I think he’s got a thing for you.”

“I have been watching Sir Silas all night, and he doesn’t have eyes for anyone. Least of all me. Fishy behavior for a playboy if you ask me.”

Sparks shrugged. “Anyway, I’ve been working my charms on Miss Dee, who also has some influence on the gentleman. She says he’s been a friend of her family for years. So you see? Nothing could

possibly go wrong.”

“For Pete’s sake, Sparks. Don’t you think that’s tempting fate?”

“It’s what I do. Look, here they come now—all smiles. Enjoy yourself, why don’t you? For once.”

Perilous smoothed her skirt again, grimacing as Moon’s stammering sound check reverberated through the space. The camera had zeroed in on his thin lips, and they dominated the tv set in front of them. They didn’t quite match up with the sound, and the effect was disconcerting.

Perilous felt nausea welling up in the pit of her stomach despite Sparks’ assurances. She knew her colleague was probably right, but she had a feeling they’d been kept in the dark about something—something potentially important. Chivalrous though Husher had been, he’d also held lengthy sidebar with several of the club’s denizens over the course of the evening. Something was in the works, and Perilous didn’t like that they weren’t included in the intrigue. As Madam Simone had said on more than one occasion, if you aren’t privy to a conspiracy, you’re a pawn in it.

Husher and Jane returned and both were practically quivering with excitement.

“Ladies,” Husher said, holding up his champagne glass. “To new friends, new partnerships, and new

possibilities. Chin chin!”

They clinked glasses, and as if on cue, The Yes Men launched into a boisterous song that would have been classified as rock if it had contained even the slightest hint of insubordination in its message. Instead, the boys howled about how dandy it would be to work until retirement and then possibly work some more if the boss would keep them on. There was something about a wife and babies and bologna sandwiches and how wonderful it would be to do the same thing day in and day out, how lovely to be able to predict what’s around the next bend, how marvelous it would be if there wasn’t a bend at all, if everything was a clean, straight line like the one at the Public Record Office, and none of it made any sense in the context of the raucous rhythm and wildly swaying band members.

Just as the boys were ascending towards a throbbing crescendo in ecstatic praise of the mundane, the club’s lights and sound failed. The band continued to play for a second or two, so caught up were the musicians in their own jubilation, but then there was a scuffling, a shout, and the muffled vibration of a catapulted stringed instrument.

Perilous strained to see what was happening, but the club had no exterior windows. The darkness was

complete. She'd left her night vision glasses in her purse in the coatroom, seeing no need for additional agency accoutrements since this was purely PR business. She might have known.

Nervous yips and giggles spread throughout the space as the patrons waited expectantly for whatever might come next. Perilous waited with them, her spine stiff and her ears tingling in the ensuing, angst-laden silence.

At last, the power surged back on. Lights flooded the large room again, and the speakers emitted a piercing howl of feedback that caused everyone to clap their hands over their ears in protest. Onstage, Simon Moon and his band mates lay prone. A trickle of crimson traced a line along the lead singer's temple. They'd been replaced by three lean goons wearing plastic Halloween masks and pointing automatic weapons into the crowd of formerly giddy club-goers. The scene grew tense and quiet as the audience continued to wait for instructions or spectacle, whichever might come next.

Perilous glanced at Sparks, who leaned back into the love seat and crossed her arms across her tailored vest with the vaguely affected air of a seasoned theater-goer.

"Enjoy yourself, Perilous. What could possibly go wrong?" Perilous muttered and then drained the

champagne in her glass.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AUTUMN WARE began writing campy adventure novels when she was a single mother living on a public teacher's salary. It was the only vacation she could afford. As her characters grew bolder and more daring, they became her imaginary role models, encouraging her to take more calculated risks in her own life.

Today, she's the owner of Aware Copywriting, a New Orleans-based agency that produces magnetic propaganda for clients around the world, and the novelist behind the Perilous and Sparks series. She lives on a vintage sailboat with her husband, son, two cats, and a dog. Perilous and Sparks empowered her when she was feeling overwhelmed by her own powerlessness. She hopes they'll do the same for you.

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