

THE KOWLOON JUKEBOX

A. Ware



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HEY!

Before you start The Kowloon Jukebox, have you read Book 1 in the series? Pick up your copy of Les Stone Cold Killers today to get to know Perilous and Sparks from the very beginning.

xoxo

A.Ware

To my mother Dorothy Brown Crisp,
who wrote the first chapters of my life

SEPTEMBER 1966

LONDON

1

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 Faretheewell. 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 aglitter 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 stinging 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.

2

Sparks' mother and father fell in love on the soundstage of the 1946 Western Wanton Sons. Her mother Ximena was cast—for the third time that year—in the role of Mexican Cantina Girl. Her father Alexei, a Russian émigré, was the film's sound engineer. Within a month, they were married, and Sparks made a mad dash for the world. She spent the next eight years of her life underfoot on busy Hollywood sets.

In other words, Sparks knew a production when she saw one.

Like Perilous, she had been observing Husher's interactions throughout the evening. She, too, had made note of his powwows with the cocktail waitresses and go go dancers. She'd seen him consult with the lanky, obnoxious proprietor of the club as well as three burly bouncers and five

bartenders. She'd felt the buzz of excitement pulsate through the cavernous club, the mischievous thrill of players preparing for their performance.

She hadn't been entirely sure what the affair would look like, but she had a few ideas. Husher intended to launch Jane as an international pop singer. It would only make sense to parlay her popularity as Jane Bond. Spiggot would no doubt relish the publicity of an extravaganza, and it's hard to beat violence if you want to grab the public's imagination.

This was a production.

"Good evening, ladies and gents," the tall faux-rogue at center stage said in a voice tinged with amusement. Her Black Cat mask filled the TV screen. Through the eyeholes, Sparks detected a merry twinkle in the baby blues that stared back at the crowd. "This, as they say, is a stick up. But not your average stick up, mind. Rather, a stick up the bottom sides of these miscreant Yes Men, here."

She kicked the lead singer in the ribcage with the toe of her black combat boot, but not too hard. From what Sparks had seen of the milquetoast musician kowtowing to Spiggot earlier in the evening, he probably liked it.

The patrons had begun to pick up on the play, and Sparks heard relieved whispers and giggles

spreading through the space. The accumulated release of adrenaline coursed through the room like a heatwave. Sparks glanced at Perilous, who returned her look with a raised eyebrow and pursed lips. She'd picked up on the ruse, too. It was going to be a struggle not to say 'I told you so' later, Sparks thought.

"We're tired of hearing the same old boy bands bleating like a bunch of sheep. They're in the right place, these lot. There's no place better for 'em than The Status Quo. But we don't like yes men, and we don't like the status quo. We're not here to play a pretty song for you!" the Black Cat shouted. Her voice became more theatrical and pitched by the second. "We're The Doomsday Device, and we're here to blow this whole bloody scene up!"

The smaller of the three interlopers, wearing a Skeleton mask, had positioned herself behind the drum set. As the Black Cat reached a frenzied ultimatum, the Skeleton launched into a drum solo that was savage and jarring and primitive. The crowd was instantly stirred to feverishness by the driving beat. The band's Red Devil snatched the crimson Thunderbird from The Yes Man's possum-playing bassist and began to sound out a spellbinding rhythm accompanied by a spectral shriek

that sent a shiver down Sparks' spine.

"Wait just a minute, kitten!" Jane projected her voice across the room via a hidden microphone.

In an instant, she was on her feet, and with the agility and speed of a cheetah, she leapt from the ottoman where Perilous was seated to the top of the tv set. The screen flashed black and gray static for a moment. When it righted itself, it showed an image of Jane, her hands on her hips. The crowd swiveled to get a look at the real deal, and Sparks could hear the murmur of wagging chins behind her.

"Who's the bird?"

"That's Jane Bond, innit? I seen one of her films over at the Paris Pullman."

"Yeah? Never heard of her."

"It's you!" said the Black Cat with all the wide-eyed kitsch surprise of a movie villain. The crowd swiveled back to the stage. "I might have known my nemesis Jane Bond would make an appearance. What a disappointment you are! Working for the man when you should be fighting for the people!"

She raised her fist, and the crowd went wild.

"I don't like yes men any more than you do," Jane said from her perch atop the television, "but this is no way for a lady to behave. I think

you need a lesson in proper etiquette.”

Jane launched herself from the television into a graceful flip that planted her on the stage less than a meter from the Black Cat. The instant she landed, she spun, kicking the plastic machine gun out of the Cat's hands. The moves had been painstakingly choreographed.

The Skeleton, whose jarring performance had tapered off during the exchange between Jane and the Cat, began to beat out a palpitating rhythm again. The Red Devil accompanied her on the Thunderbird with a staccato throb.

The Black Cat leapt into a backwards flip that took her out of Jane's reach. Jane pursued with a flying sideways kick that just grazed the Cat's jawline.

The crowd oohed, captivated by the cat fight, but the action was interrupted by the booming voice of George Spiggot projected through the multitude of television sets. It was his sallow face and brooding eyes that now dominated the screens.

“Hold on, there, girls! If you're going to play in my club, you've got to play nice...on instruments, like the boys do. You'll wreck the place at the rate you're going.”

“Who you calling girls, man?” the Black Cat wailed into the microphone.

“Yeah! Who you calling girls, man?” Jane cried, stretching out her hand.

From backstage, the hidden prop master tossed a sleek black May Queen guitar to her. The pair launched into a rowdy refrain backed by the primal drums and the caterwauling bass.

Who you callin' girl, man?
I don't think you understand!
I ain't no little girl, man!
I'm a force of nature
And I got demands!

Sparks was mesmerized by Jane's mastery of the guitar. Her nimble fingers were impossible to track as she conjured a melody from the six metal strings. Her long black hair whipped around her face as she roared into her microphone, and she'd propped one of her polished white Chelsea boots on Simon Moon's back like St. George on the dragon's scaly carcass.

I don't care about your place, man!
You can't put me in my place, man!
I make my own way, man!
Get outta my way, man!

They belted out the refrain again, and The Status Quo was transformed into a tumult of screaming fans, quickened by the charismatic performance. The Skeleton on her drums brought the song to an end with a driving solo. She crescendoed to a climax, threw her sticks up in the air, and leapt over the drum set, grabbing Jane around the waist. With a swift motion, she raised her arm over her head, and a grappling hook shot out of her sleeve. It rocketed into the ceiling, and the two girls were lifted off the ground.

The crowd went wild, but it was clear by Jane's expression that this wasn't part of the act. Sparks looked at Perilous who nodded and pulled the brooch from her dress. She triggered a small, hidden catch that released diamond-sharp edges. With a quick calculation, Perilous sent the star hurtling through the air. It met the line of the grappling hook and severed it, sending the pair plummeting.

Sparks dashed to the bandstand and lunged at the Skeleton, who was already scrambling backstage to make her escape. The audience assumed this was all part of the show, and so they cheered riotously at the bedlam. The Black Cat nodded at the Red Devil to carry on, and they began to perform a new song to cover up the chaos. Sparks

could hear the Cat howling as she chased the Skeleton down the dark hallway towards the back alley exit. The metal door was open a crack, and a bouncer was smoking a cigarette just inside.

“Grab her!” Sparks shouted, close on the heels of the Skeleton.

The bouncer threw his cigarette and reached out to nab the fugitive, but she caught his thick jaw with her elbow, sending him reeling forward with the force of her momentum. He pulled at her mask as he fell, and she looked back at Sparks with an arch smile. Sparks was stunned motionless for a moment—just long enough to give the swift-footed Skeleton the advantage. It was Bette Noire, a former agent of Eris turned mercenary. They’d crossed paths recently in Paris. Bette had been employed as a double-agent, working for both the Soviets and the shadowy Omega Foundation, a society of wealthy elites who manipulated world affairs in order to line their pockets with ill-gotten gain.

“You!” Sparks shouted and propelled herself forward, but Bette had already jumped lithely onto a metal ladder that clung to the brick wall of the alley. She clambered up, crying over her shoulder as she disappeared into the shadows, “Don’t believe everything you hear, Madero Spartakanova!”

“My friends call me Sparks!” Sparks shouted back, but she didn’t bother to give chase. She had no doubt she’d cross paths with Bette again; a counterfeit coin always turns up. Instead, she headed back down the hallway to check on Jane. She had mixed feelings. None of them were good.

3

Perilous was going to find it difficult to refrain from saying 'I told you so.' Sparks, the eternal optimist, was often inclined to casually dismiss her apprehensions and premonitions, but Perilous hardly ever went wrong when she trusted her gut. Right now, her intuition was telling her she had a golden opportunity to cinch the Fixé contract by saving the day.

Onstage, Jane had recovered from her fall. Like a pro, she'd rejoined what was left of The Doomsday Device in another rambunctious song, but the lack of a drummer left something to be desired. As it happened, Perilous was an adept musician. She'd spent a number of years studying polyrhythmic drumming as a child while traveling through the heart of Yorubaland and, later, Tobago and Haiti with her mother Isis Faretheewell, a

renowned ethnographer.

She didn't love the idea that had come to her. Center stage was not her favorite place to be. But she knew it would earn Husher's rubber stamp once and for all—so long as she could pull it off. Perilous was confident she could, and there wasn't much to lose.

She didn't ask permission. Anyway, there was no one to ask. Husher had disappeared during the ruckus, presumably to investigate the disruption. Perilous discreetly slipped onto the stage. As she went, she grabbed the tossed drumsticks and her brooch, glinting under the bright lights. She took her place behind the drum set, hands damp and trembling, and listened, with her eyes closed, to the rollicking melody that Jane was jerking out of the May Queen and the squalling rhythm of the Red Devil's bass. Then, she began to hammer a hypnotic cadence out of the drum set.

She felt herself become grounded in the main rhythm after a few seconds, and she dealt in a cross-beat that complemented the song's divisive motifs. Her nerves evaporated. She forgot where she was. She was lost in the cross-rhythms. The group finished out the set with five more songs. When the last note of the closing number finally fell silent, the audience screamed in exhilaration.

George Spiggot's voice boomed over the loudspeakers, "Ladies and gentlemen, you heard them here first! The explosive sounds of Jane Bond and The Doomsday Device!"

The stage was beset by chanting fans, calling for more, more, more of the madcap musical stylings of their new favorite band, but the curtains dropped, separating the groupies from the object of their fresh, flickering desire. Simon Moon and the other two Yes Men, whom Perilous had nearly forgotten about, stood up and stretched their limbs, which had no doubt begun to ache as they lay there on the hardwood floor.

"That w-was quite a spectacle! And you—" Simon said, looking at Perilous with admiration. "Groovy!"

Jane threw her arms around Perilous' neck, abandoning the coy act from earlier. "You saved the day, Perilous! Truly!"

"Oh, that? Just something I picked up as a kid."

"You pulled a proper blinder then, sis! Smashing!" The Black Cat pulled off her mask and reached her hand out to Perilous, "Tommy's the name."

"Yeah. You've got some chops," the Red Devil said once she'd freed herself from the elastic

string that tangled her mask in a mass of dark curls. She squeezed Perilous' hand. "Alkestis. That's me."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. Has anyone seen Sparks?"

"The suit?" Simon said. "She nearly took my head off on her w-w-way past."

"I'm here." Sparks had been standing just offstage, waiting for the performance to end. "Sorry about that, pal. I was in a bit of a rush."

"All's well that ends well. You may have realigned my s-s-spine, at that."

"My chiropractics rate is a hundred pound sterling," Sparks winked.

Simon blushed and mumbled, fidgeting with his tie.

"What got into Frankie, you reckon? She nearly made a dog's dinner of the night," Alkestis said.

"Frankie? You mean your Skeleton buddy on the drums?" Sparks asked. "She made like a wishbone and split. I take it that whole great escape bit wasn't part of the planned show."

"No," Alkestis said. "Not a bit of it."

"How well did you know Frankie?" Perilous asked.

"We've been working with her—what? A

month, Janie?" Alkestis said, looking to Jane for confirmation.

Jane nodded. "That's right. There was Al and me. We've been playing together for a few years. Silas found Frankie and Tommy here back at the end of September or so—"

"We all hit it off straight ways," Tommy said, a little defensively Perilous thought. "Frankie seemed cool enough, and she was a natural on the skins."

Perilous shrugged as if it didn't concern her though she felt that it must somehow. It couldn't be purely coincidental that their newest client's newest big name was nearly kidnapped on the first night they met. She wondered if Madam Simone had sent them on something more than a business trip.

"Perilous, Sparks," Jane said. "May I have a word? Alone?"

"Of course," Perilous said, noting Jane's serious tone. It seemed to confirm her suspicions. "Do you have a dressing room?"

They left The Yes Men and The Doomsday Device chatting and headed down the long hallway backstage. Jane opened the second door and locked it behind them. She paused for a moment, sizing them up.

"I didn't believe Joan when she first told

me.”

“Sorry,” Sparks said, “Believe what? Who’s Joan?”

Jane ignored her. “You’re not just PR people, are you,” she said. It wasn’t a question. “I saw how you handled Frankie, Sparks. And Perilous, that brooch—”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” Sparks said, leaning against the wall of the dressing room and sticking her hands in her pockets. Perilous thought for the umpteenth time how truly abysmal her partner was at looking innocent. It was only a good thing that she could pass as a boy when she saw fit or she’d never get away with anything.

“I’m Jane Bond, ladies. I know a thing or two about—well, this sort of thing. The two of you—you’re undercover agents, aren’t you?”

“I’m flattered, but—” Perilous began, only to be interrupted by Jane.

“You don’t have to pretend. I know about your—organization,” she said.

Perilous and Sparks exchanged a glance.

“Listen, sis, I don’t know what you think you know,” Sparks said.

“I know a lot. My mother used to tell us stories. I thought they were just make believe. I didn’t believe any of it, naturally, but Joan said—

Joan said they were true, and she was never prone to flights of fancy—”

“What are you talking about, Jane? What stories?” Perilous asked.

“Your group. Your secret society.”

“A secret society? Sounds awfully fanciful to me.”

“I thought so too, but then Joan disappeared —”

“The plot thickens,” Sparks said. “Joan is your sister I take it.”

“Yes. She went missing in April, and we haven’t heard from her since. Then, tonight—Frankie. I had my doubts when Joan first went missing. I thought maybe she’d—I don’t know—run off. Now, I’m not so sure. Maybe someone is targeting my family. Maybe Joan was trying to warn me,” Jane bit her lip and looked at Perilous with guilt in her eyes. “I didn’t listen. Maybe if I’d listened—”

“Let’s focus on what you know. Or, at least, what you think you know,” Perilous said. “You think this secret society might be behind your sister’s disappearance? Maybe tonight’s fiasco, too?”

“No,” Jane said, shaking her head vehemently. “Joan said The Daughters would protect us when we were in danger.”

“The Daughters?” Perilous said, relieved. She’d been concerned for a moment that their cover had been blown—that Madam Simone’s cover had been blown, but Jane was barking up a different tree.

“Yes. Well. The Exalted Daughters of Guanyin, but that’s a mouthful, isn’t it?”

“Mm,” Perilous said, nodding. “And your sister believed you were both in danger, but she didn’t say from whom? Just that this group, these Daughters of Guanyin, would protect you?”

“Yes. That’s right. I thought she was—” Jane shrugged, “She’d been obsessed with her work lately. She was in her laboratory night and day—”

“Her laboratory?” Perilous repeated. Now, they were getting somewhere. She nodded at her colleague, “Sparks, bugs.”

“On it,” Sparks said, removing a wallet from her inner breast pocket. She fished out an agency-issued credit card with a small bug detector embedded in the thin plastic. Sparks scanned the room’s sculptural dressing table and two matching chairs, all molded from a gaudy crimson lucite. She ran the card over the white princess phone and the cantilevered platinum floor lamp.

“It’s clear,” she said, returning the card to her wallet and her wallet to her inner pocket.

“So you are with the Daughters! I knew it!”
Jane cried.

It would've been convenient to confess allegiance to the society, but Perilous didn't want to get tangled up in a lie that could come back to haunt her later.

“We're not at liberty to speak to that, Jane. All I can tell you is we're here to help.”

“But that means we're going to need your help, Jane,” Sparks said. “Why would someone kidnap your sister? What was she working on before she disappeared? You said she was spending all of her time in her laboratory. She was—is—a scientist, I take it?”

“Not just a scientist,” Jane said, her voice filled with pride. “Joan is a genius. She was admitted into Oxford when she was only fourteen.”

“A genius, no less,” Sparks said. “Don't tell me. She builds weapons of mass destruction.”

“No! Never!” Jane cried.

“Are you sure? Because in my limited experience—”

“I'm certain!” Jane said, shaking her head vigorously. “She's an acoustician, not a weapons engineer. And no one is more principled than my sister. She might be the first Chinese woman to win a Nobel Prize for science. Mother said so. So did

Silas.”

“An acoustician?” Sparks said, shrugging off Jane’s protests. She knew that draconian virtue was the Achilles heel of the well-meaning. “It’s not a particularly exciting field. I can’t imagine anyone would kidnap your sister for acoustics secrets.”

“She was pioneering the music industry, really innovating the sound of recordings. It’s one of the things that’s put Fixé ahead of the competition.”

“So she worked for Sir Silas, too?” Perilous asked.

“That’s right.”

“Interesting,” Sparks said.

“No,” Jane said, guessing Sparks’ train of thought. “I’m sure Silas isn’t involved, and it didn’t have anything to do with her work. The music industry may be cut throat, but it’s not mercenary. Anyway, if they were after her work secrets, why come after me? I don’t think it’s related to that at all. It’s money. My mother is wealthy, you know. Or maybe politics. I found this in General Sheng’s coat pocket when he visited our mother, just after Joan disappeared.”

She reached into a travel bag that had been tossed on the floor sometime before the show and fished out a small, bean-shaped device. Perilous took

it and looked it over before passing it to Sparks.

“General Sheng?” Sparks asked, examining the small instrument.

“Yes. He was once a student of my mother. Back then, he and Joan were very close, but that was a long time ago when they were kids. Before she went away to England. I don’t think he ever forgave her for leaving him behind.”

“And now?”

Joan looked at Sparks with worry. “He’s gone over to the People’s Republic of China. He’s in the Red Army. He came to see Joan and mother several times in the last year—mostly to warn mother about her corrupt Western ways and to try to persuade Joan to go back with him to the mainland. He said she should put her mind to work where it would do the most good. For Mao and his zealots.”

“Your mother is Madam Dee, the opera singer, yes?” Perilous said. They’d gleaned a little about Jane’s family history from Truman, Madam Simone’s right-hand man. Madam Dee Wenling was an illustrious soprano beloved in Hong Kong and respected throughout the opera world. Jane’s father, a successful British businessman, had died years ago, leaving the family a small fortune. Truman had failed to mention the missing sister, which surprised

Perilous. Surely, he would have known.

“That’s right. You’ve heard of her?” Jane said.

“In fact, I met her once—long ago,” Perilous said. Both Sparks and Jane were taken aback. “My mother brought me to Hong Kong as a child. We saw her perform in The Red Chamber. She was breath-taking.”

Jane beamed, as proud of her mother as her sister. “Yes. She is. Still.”

“Madam Dee has a reputation as a great scholar of musical studies,” Perilous said to Sparks. “She’d read Mother’s book on the role of music in the African diaspora. We were invited to her dressing room after the performance. Madam Dee wanted to ask Mother about ‘infectious rhythms,’ a term she’d coined in her first book. They had quite a lively conversation. I remember it well.”

“Also interesting,” Sparks said.

“And this?” Perilous asked, pointing to the small contraption Jane had given them.

“It’s a hearing device,” Sparks answered for Jane. “A fairly new invention to help the deaf to hear. Is your sister deaf, then?”

Jane nodded.

“A deaf acoustician?” Perilous said.

“It’s not necessary to hear sound to study

it," Sparks replied. "You only need to be clever enough to read waves, and it sounds like Joan was plenty clever enough."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was Husher, coming to check up on his protégé. Jane put her finger to her lips, insinuating the matter would remain among the three of them, and then she opened the door with a smile.

"Come in, Silas. I was just asking Perilous and Sparks what they thought of our little PR stunt."

"We couldn't have done it much better ourselves," Sparks said. "Quite a show you put on."

"Damn near ruined by that lunatic Frankie. What in the hell was she thinking? What's her game?" Husher said. He wasn't nearly the calm, cool customer he'd been earlier in the evening, Perilous noted.

He grabbed Jane by the shoulders and held her out to examine her closely before pulling her to his chest. "Are you well, Janie? Were you hurt?"

Jane wriggled out of his grasp, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "Of course. What's got into you? I'm fine."

It was Husher's turn to look embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I was worried."

"What's going on in here?" Spiggot barged

into the crowded room. "What's the deal with that flipped out drummer of yours? I don't recall any grappling hooks in the rehearsal. There's quite a bit of damage out there, I'll have you know, Husher. I'll be sending a bill to cover it. Oh, why, hello, Missus Faretheewell. You were quite keen on the drums. A wild thing, you are, despite your modest demeanor."

Perilous grimaced, but Husher was already escorting Spiggot out of the dressing room.

"Ladies," he called back over his shoulder. "The limo will arrive for the after party at my home in fifteen. Can you be ready? We'll meet out front. Come, Spiggot. I've got a check here in my jacket."

4

Husher's Chelsea penthouse was all chic mod stagecraft—trendy, tasteful and dramatically dull. The walls, the long, leather sofa and the scattered cocktail chairs—even the swollen paper lanterns—were ivory and antiseptic. The parquet floors, a wall of gold and silver records, and a large, curved fig tree in one corner were the only hint of color native to the room. Nothing about the space seemed intimate. If Husher had a personality, which Sparks wasn't entirely convinced of, his decorator most certainly did not.

It wasn't just the space that seemed produced either. The party guests gave off the vibe of extras waiting to make an impression on a renowned director while conscientiously pretending indifference. The women were styled to fit neatly into the categories of femme fatale, golden goddess,

or doe-eyed ingenue. The men were wannabe Monkees and Beatles, appropriately suited and booted.

A bartender in a black tux was mixing concoctions in one corner of the salon, and servants in matching penguin suits were passing through the crowd with flutes of champagne and hors d'oeuvres on silver platters. Husher and Jane were holding court in front of a lavish picture window overlooking the Thames, and Perilous was in conversation with The Yes Men's drummer, a pasty-faced boy of twenty-five or so, on the terrace beyond them. Even from a distance, Sparks could tell he was smitten.

She yawned and leaned against the stairwell, which led to a mezzanine overlooking the living room. She was thinking about Bette Noire, wondering what her old pal was doing in London. A mellow crowd had gathered in the loft area above her to listen to a woman croon as she strummed a sitar. Incense and marijuana smoke trickled down from the upper floor and settled over the heads of the partygoers below like a gauzy fog.

"What a drag, yeah?" Alkestis said, sidling up next to Sparks, interrupting her thoughts. She was still wearing the sleek black bodysuit she'd worn during her earlier performance, and she'd teased her

hair up into a bold afro. Her dark eyes were outlined with gold leaf, and she wore a glossy gold lipstick as well.

“Not my scene.”

“What’s your scene, then?” Alkestis asked, plucking two glasses of champagne off the tray of a passing server. She handed one to Sparks. “Wait. Lemme guess.”

She took a moment to study Sparks playfully over her glass. “If I know my own, I’d peg you for a rabble-rouser, yeah? Always up for a bit of rough and tumble’s my guess.”

“What gave me away?”

“The way you leapt across the stage tonight—you were on it like a car bonnet.”

“You’re not so shabby yourself. You played hell on that Thunderbird. Where’d you learn it?”

“Once upon a time, some bloke told me a girl couldn’t play in a rock and roll band. Maybe I was fifteen or so,” Alkestis shrugged. “I gave him a wallop and nicked his bass. Been playing ever since.”

Sparks laughed. “You’re a girl after my own heart, sis.”

“Cheers to that!”

They clinked glasses. The room was beginning to din, and someone had opened the door to the terrace, letting in a gust of cool fall air and

nighttime sounds.

“So what’s it you do, then, Sparks, for that fancy Yank PR firm?”

“Design work for advertising campaigns mostly.”

“Mm,” Alkestis said with disappointment. “That’s it? Sitting at a desk all day doing The Man’s work?”

“What else were you expecting?”

She shrugged and grinned. “Dunno. It’s just you’re awfully fit for a corporate shill.”

“Well, I’m not just a corporate shill. I’m an all-round trifler if you must know. I do some racing—on land, by sea, up yonder,” she said, generally indicating the atmosphere. She’d learned to fly a biplane for sport last year. “I’m up for general adventuring and gallivanting when the opportunity presents itself. Naturally, I’ve indulged in my share of mischief-making and standard-fare mayhem when the mood strikes as well as all the usual what-have-yous and why-you-shouldn’t-haves.”

“Gallivanting and what-have-yous. You’re talking my language now, sweetheart.”

“I take it you do some gallivanting, then, Alkestis?”

“Call me Al—and naturally. How else would an East End girl end up in Hong Kong without a

bit of gallivanting under her belt?"

Sparks chuckled. "Al Diablo," she said, referring to Alkestis' charade earlier in the evening. "How did you end up in Hong Kong, anyway, Al?"

Alkestis sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. "It was Joan who got me over there. Jane's sis. We were roommates in Oxford, and when she went home, she took me with her. She says I'm like a stray cat. Impossible to put out."

Sparks didn't ask about Joan since Jane had made it clear their earlier conversation was private. It wouldn't hurt to get to know the band members though if they were going to look into Joan's disappearance, which seemed to be how things were rolling out. And Alkestis was by far the most interesting bit of mischief in Husher's digs. "You went to Oxford, then?"

Alkestis snorted. "Not exactly, love, but kind of you to assume as much. When I was 16, I legged it out of the city and traveled a bit. Here and there."

"With your newly acquired bass."

Alkestis grinned and cocked her head at Sparks. "That's right. I brought her with me on the road and got a regular gig at a little pub in Oxford playing blues. The Corn Dolly. Heard of it?"

Sparks shook her head.

“I was discovered by Silas at the Dolly.” She said discovered with a theatrical flourish. “He hired me to play backup to better knowns. That was when he was just getting set up—oh, five years back. Had a teensy little studio in his big old la-di-da family estate over in Kensington, so I found myself back in London again. At the time, I was a regular Billy No-Mates, avoiding old troubles, yeah? I was staying here and there, no particular place to go, as Chuck says. Joan was working for Silas, too. A bit more than working, if I’m to be honest, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

“A romance?” Sparks asked.

Alkestis arched a pretty eyebrow but otherwise didn’t respond. “Anyhow, Joan had a spare room in her flat, and I had a head with no pillow. By the time the pair of ‘em went back to Hong Kong to set up Fixé HQ, we were all thick as thieves. They brought me along, and Bob’s your uncle, Jane and me start playing together.”

“Sounds like that bass was your lucky charm, then.”

“Likes of me doesn’t need luck,” she said, “but sure it didn’t hurt.”

“So where’s Joan tonight, then?” Sparks asked, feigning ignorance. “She didn’t want to come along to her kid sister’s big opening?”

“You don’t know then? I guess not. They’ve kept it hush-hush—”

“Kept what hush-hush?”

“She’s gone missing. Kidnapped, they reckon,” Alkestis said, lowering her voice.

“What?”

“It’s true. Just a few months ago Joan up and vanished. Haven’t seen hide nor hair of her since.”

“But why would they keep that on the down low? Seems like they’d put it in every newspaper. For leads, I mean.”

Alkestis shrugged. “Dunno. I keep my neck rolled in where the rich and famous are concerned, sweetheart. I can’t afford their problems, and it’s not my place to speculate anyhow. Could be kidnapers told ‘em if they made any racket, she’d be tossed in the drink or something.”

“But you’re certain she was kidnapped? It’s not possible she might’ve run off on her own?”

Alkestis gazed at the crowd of sycophants seeking an audience with Husher and Jane, mulling the question over. “Doesn’t seem likely to me. Husher’s mad about her. Never seen anything like it. He’d lick her boots, I dare say. He was a regular playboy before they got tangled. Look at him now— a proper puddle of a man, he is.” Her expression

revealed disappointment. She preferred a roguish sort, Sparks suspected. "And she had a posh setup at Fixé, not that she needed the money. Her family's bleeding rich. What's she got to run away from?"

"Fair points though even the well-heeled sometimes prefer to hotfoot it. Say, given that, what do you make of the drummer's performance tonight?" Sparks said, as if she'd just thought of it.

Alkestis looked at her and squinted. "Frankie? It's odd, yeah? She seemed on the up and up. Husher hired her, same as me. It's odd, alright, but—"

"Alkestis!" Husher called out across the room and motioned for her to join them.

"Later, Sparks. I'm being summoned by the peerage," Alkestis said and slipped into the crowd with a wink over her shoulder.

"Sure. Later, Al," Sparks said mostly to herself. She was contemplating what she'd learned, and it led right back to where she started—Bette. Sparks wondered who her French friend was working for now.

Madam Simone, the Big Boss Herself, had insinuated that Bette's betrayal of the agency may not have been complete. She'd led Sparks to consider the possibility that Bette may have

infiltrated The Omega Foundation as a means of giving aid to the agents of Eris. On the other hand, Truman, the boss' Boy Friday, had made it abundantly clear that Bette wasn't to be trusted under any circumstances; she posed an immediate danger to both Perilous and Sparks.

Now, here she was in London with the apparent objective of abducting Jane Dee. Jane may have been a swell singer and a stellar stuntwoman, but Sparks couldn't imagine she'd have any value to the Foundation. Her sister on the other hand—that was yet to be seen.

Husher had hired Bette, or Frankie as she'd taken to calling herself these days, and he had an intimate relationship with Joan, according to Alkestis. That made him a person of interest in Sparks' eyes, too. It seemed hardly a coincidence that Joan and her little sister Jane had both worked for Husher and that both had been targeted by kidnappers.

"Hullo, mate," Simon Moon said, approaching her with his hands in his pockets. Once more, Sparks' thoughts were put on ice. "You look like you could do w-w-with some company."

He was a sweet-looking kid with large, dopey eyes and a friendly smile.

"Sure, Simon. Happy to have the company."

"I'm a bit of a w-w-wallflower myself. Never cared much for a party, me. Excuse—" he said, waving for a waiter to pause so he could pinch a glass of champagne. The waiter didn't appear to notice him though and so Simon shrugged awkwardly. "I could go to the bar if you like."

"I'm fine, thanks," Sparks said, swirling her glass to show she still had a little bubbly left. "Hey! You guys were bang up tonight! Great show! You been playing together long?"

Simon lit up and pushed his hair back from his brown eyes. "Yeah. Few years. We're regular at The Status Quo. Been knowing G-g-George since school days."

While Simon's relationship with George may have been beneficial on some level, Sparks could tell by his demeanor that it wasn't altogether satisfactory. "No offense, but he seems like a real—uh—what's the word you use in these parts—ponce?"

Simon giggled and then straightened up. "Oh, he's alright. But yeah. That's the word."

Sparks grinned, drained her glass and pinched two more from a different waiter making the rounds. She handed a glass to Simon and winked. "You got a record deal, yet?"

"Not yet. Hoping to ride Jane's coattails if

I'm to be honest. Wouldn't mind lying around on stage an hour or so for a little visibility and some w-w-walking cash."

"Say, speaking of. Sorry again about stepping on your noggin earlier."

"Think nothing of it. You were—" he stopped, unable to come up with the right word, and instead lifted his glass. "Wh-wh-what a showstopper, yeah? Took me by surprise. Can't imagine what got into Frankie. Not like her at all."

"You knew her, then?" Sparks said, surprised.

He blushed and took another swallow of his champagne. "We went out on the town a few times. I introduced her to G-g-g-George."

"And George introduced her to Husher."

He nodded.

"She was quite a drummer," Sparks said, remembering the performance earlier in the evening. She hadn't had time to think about Bette's skills on the drum set. She wondered what other talents the former agent of Eris might have.

"She could sing like the dickens, too," Simon said as though he'd been reading her mind.

"She wasn't too shabby with a grappling hook either, as it happens," Sparks replied with a chuckle. The two of them shared a silent moment in

thought, staring out across the room, both reflecting on what had become of the very gifted drummer.

“Your friend Perilous, she’s even better than Frankie, truth be told. Seems Stu’s quite captivated,” he said, nodding towards Perilous and the drummer.

Sparks recognized the look on her colleague’s face. Perilous was trying to think of a way to disentangle herself from the conversation. No point making her suffer.

“Indeed,” Sparks said. “Perhaps we should go chaperone. Anyway, it’s getting a bit stuffy in here. What say you?”

Simon grinned. “Lead the way.”

HONG KONG

5

Jane Dee's explosive inaugural performance with The Doomsday Device made headlines the next morning and set off a firestorm of promotional activity. The Telegraph dubbed the show "The Status Quo Shocker" while The Sun proclaimed with gusto "GIRLS: Gunning for your Guitars!" Jane and the gang were whisked between radio interviews and television appearances where they were met with screaming fans. Word had spread quickly, and the band's song "Don't Call Me Girl, Man!" was already climbing the charts.

Behind the scenes, events were more humdrum. Several days of work followed for Perilous and Sparks. They joined Husher in a succession of PR meetings with bigwigs from a dozen or more brands that wanted to cash in on the media frenzy. Mixed in with the tailored executive types

that Perilous had grown accustomed to were aging hepcats and a few chain-smoking beats and freaks.

Perilous and Sparks had proven their PR savvy, but Perilous suspected Jane would have found a way to get them back to Hong Kong with her even if they'd been less than competent. She was convinced the duo were emissaries from her mysterious organization The Exalted Daughters of Guanyin. When they explained the situation to Madam Simone over a phone call, she asked that they not dispel Jane of the notion.

"If Bette's involved, we're involved," she said and added in mock annoyance, "In the meantime, I'll have Truman investigate these Daughters of Guanyin thoroughly. They must be a parvenu in the world of clandestine outfits if I haven't heard of them."

With Madam Simone's go-ahead, Perilous and Sparks traveled to Hong Kong with Husher, Jane, and The Doomsday Device. The trip took only half a day aboard Husher's small private jet. They landed at an exclusive airstrip just off Lantau Island.

A valet in a dark suit and sunglasses met them as they deboarded and escorted them to a spacious sedan of a motorboat tied up nearby. Once they'd all gotten settled into the sleek craft, he

steered it through the blue-green waters of the Pearl River Delta towards Hong Kong Island. To their starboard side, Lantau luxuriated in the morning sun. Jane pointed out a crimson temple nestled among the emerald pines near the island's peak. On the boat's port side, the delta stretched out to the horizon, its progress interrupted only by the occasional small, humped island.

One of those, Perilous speculated, was actually not an island at all but the coastal hills of mainland China. She wondered if Joan had been kidnapped by Sheng and taken there to work for the Communists or if she'd gone of her own accord. Perilous would do whatever she could to help, but if Joan was in Red China, retrieving her would be a tall order, even for trained agents.

The valet steered the boat in a southerly direction as they cleared the eastern reach of Lantau, veering out of the open waters into the Ma Wan Channel. Ahead of them, the eight rugged mountain peaks of the Kowloon Peninsula jutted out of the South China Sea. Their forested faces plummeted towards the chaotic jumble of the Kowloon Walled City with its do-it-yourself approach to urban development. The boat sliced effortlessly between the more sluggish commercial vessels entering Victoria Harbor. In no time, they were

edging into the Royal Yacht Club.

Once they'd docked, the valet led them through the exclusive clubhouse. The local beau monde coolly observed their passage. Husher and Jane greeted several members in passing, but her fellow band members were all too eager to clear out quickly. They weren't dressed for the posh scene or accustomed to high society unless it was backstage after a show.

A black Bentley awaited them at the institution's grand entry. The valet held the rear door open, allowing the party to slip inside. In the cloistered quiet of the Bentley's spacious back seat, Husher began making plans with Jane and the band regarding the next stages of their debut. They'd be in the recording studio, of course, and naturally, there were more events and press junkets.

"That being said," Husher reassured them in an indulgent tone, "we could all do with a respite, so let's get our feet back under us before we make a go of it."

"And what about Frankie, mate?" Alkestis said. "You planning to replace her or what?"

"I've interviewed several drummers, but none have felt quite right. We'll have something sorted before our next show, I'm sure."

"What about Perilous?" Tommy said.

"Couldn't she just take over, boss?"

"Definitely not," Perilous answered quickly. "I've already got a job, sis. Thanks all the same."

Husher examined her thoughtfully for a moment, "Well, now, Miss Faretheewell. You would be a perfect fit—bold, beautiful, talented—"

"C'mon, Peril! Who doesn't want to be a rock 'n' roll superstar?" Sparks said, nudging her.

Perilous glared at her colleague. It didn't even make the top one hundred on her current to do list.

"It's us! Here we are, mate!" Alkestis shouted, waving at the driver, who'd already begun to slow down.

The Bentley idled in a crowded market street while Alkestis and Tommy climbed out. Alkestis leaned into the car and said, looking squarely at Sparks, "Tomorrow, then? It's off to the races, yeah? A little what-have-you and why-you-shouldn't-have."

"Jane? Tommy? Perilous?" Sparks said, arching an eyebrow. "Can we pencil you in for mischief tomorrow?"

"I'm up for mischief anytime," Jane replied.

"I need a rest," Tommy said, heaving a sigh. "I'm out. I don't know how you lot keep on at this rate."

“Alright that’s three up, one down. How’s about it, Peril?”

Perilous hoped to have time alone with Madam Wenling the next day. The woman had made an enduring impression during their brief encounter years earlier. She’d treated Perilous’ mother Isis with the utmost respect—as an esteemed scholar, which was more rare than it should have been.

“I might steal your mother, Jane. If it’s all the same.”

“Yeah, sure. She’ll be delighted.”

Once Alkestis and Tommy said their farewells, the Bentley left the busy street behind and headed towards the Hill District, where the affluent citizens of the island metropolis lived. The car climbed a narrow, curving road lined with slash pines and banyans and palms. Occasionally, the greenery would open up to reveal a glimpse of a large white plantation house or a view of the turquoise sea far below. They turned into a narrower approach towards the top and slipped through the jungle for a kilometer or so before the trees opened onto a lush tropical garden with a pink bungalow nestled at its center.

The sight thrilled Perilous. It was exactly the home she might have imagined for the illustrious soprano. The chauffeur helped them out of the car,

and they were met at the front door by a butler in full livery.

"Where's mother?" Jane asked, clearly surprised that Wenling hadn't met them.

"Madam Wenling has a guest—Comrade Sheng," the elderly man said cautiously.

"Sheng," Jane spat the name and shot Perilous and Sparks a meaningful glance.

She stormed into the bungalow's airy foyer, and Perilous and Sparks followed in her wake. Perilous noted that Husher stayed behind, walking with the butler back to the car to make arrangements for their luggage. Perilous wondered if the two men knew each other. Alkestis had hinted that Joan and Husher were more than colleagues, while Jane had insinuated that Joan and Sheng had been close in their youth. Both were family friends. It seemed likely they would have crossed paths.

They heard Sheng before they saw him, and Perilous had her answer.

"How could you trust that foreign devil with your youngest daughter? He's already destroyed one of your children. Can't you see what he's turning Jane into?"

"What, Sheng? What is he turning me into?" Jane strode into her mother's salon with the arrogance of an heir. Her chin was held high and

her eyebrow arched. Her feet were anchored, and her hands were firmly on her hips. "Say it to my face, you panting lapdog!"

In his military attire, Comrade Sheng looked very young. He was tall and lean with high cheekbones and a scornful expression. His dark hair was slicked back beneath a Red Star Liberation Cap, and a red and gold Mao Zedong badge featured prominently on his lapel.

"A worn shoe," he said, jutting his own chin out.

In three long steps, Jane had crossed the room and slapped him, leaving a scarlet imprint across his cheek to match his badge.

"How dare you! How dare you insult me. Or Silas. I know what you've done. I know it was you who took her," she hissed, pulling the incriminating hearing aid from the travel bag slung over her shoulder. She thrust it towards Sheng.

He stood awkwardly for a moment, clearly puzzled and stinging from the slap. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I see that my advice isn't appreciated here. You've always been bourgeois, Madam Wenling. You mingle with guai lo. You look down on everyone from your mountaintop. I have to return to my post. I came to warn you out of some misplaced sense of nostalgia. The revolution

has already come to Hong Kong. What more must you lose before you recognize it?"

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. For a moment, it seemed he had taken all the air with him, but then Madam Wenling rose from her silk settee and held her arms out. "Oh, dear Janie! Come here to me! I've missed you."

She was dressed conservatively in a pale robin's egg suit, and her jet black hair was swept back into a simple chignon. Her expression was doting, and her embrace conveyed a strength that belied her tiny figure. Finally, Wenling let Janie go and chuckled.

"Poor Sheng. You unmanned him, child. For shame. You don't believe for a minute he would harm Joan, do you? Come now. But my! I haven't seen a slap that compelling since Doris Day, darling! Zuò dé hǎo!"

Janie grinned and said, "She taught me, mama. On a movie set last year. The secret is in your footing, believe it or not. And yes. I do believe he would hurt Joan—" and then, hesitantly, she added, "Well, maybe. But, mama, my friends that I've told you about. Come meet them."

"We've met before," Perilous said, crossing the room with Sparks behind her. "My mother is Isis Faretheewell—"

“Yes! I’d recognize you anywhere—young Perilous Faretheewell! Come here, darling.”

Madam Wenling enveloped her in a warm hug. She wore the same aromatic blend of sandalwood and rose that she’d worn when Perilous first met her. When she released Perilous, Madam Wenling held her at arm’s length and studied her intently for a moment.

“You look even more like your mother now than you did as a child. I recognized your name as soon as Jane mentioned you. Dear,” she said, taking Perilous’ hand in her own. “I was so sorry to hear about your brother Arthur.”

“Thank you, Madam Wenling.”

“Your mother—is she well?”

“She is,” Perilous assured her. Madam Wenling was exactly as she remembered her.

At that moment, another set of footsteps entered the room. It was Husher back from the car. From his expression, it was clear that he’d had a run in with Sheng.

“Ah! Silas, dear. Welcome and thank you for returning my daughter safely to me,” Madam Wenling said. “Oh! I’d nearly forgotten. You knew Perilous’ brother, didn’t you? Wasn’t it you who told me what happened?”

He stopped in his tracks and flushed slightly.

“Why—why yes. Yes. We knew each other—somewhat. We work in the same industry,” he said, and then corrected himself. “Worked.”

Perilous wasn't sure what to say. Why wouldn't Husher have mentioned that he knew her brother? He'd had ample opportunity. Blessedly, Sparks chose that moment to introduce herself.

“Madam Wenling, I'm Madero Spartakanova, but my friends call my Sparks. I hope you will, too. We've never met, but I think your daughter is the bee's knees, and I would love nothing so much at this moment as to step out onto that terrace and look down on everyone from your mountaintop. If it's all the same to you.”

“Charming child!” Madam Wenling said, batting her eyelashes. “Follow me.”

6

After giving Perilous and Sparks a tour of her bungalow and its gardens, Madam Wenling set the girls up in a spacious bedroom with a terrace of their own. They were exhausted from their full day of travel and fell into the room's sumptuous daybeds long before dinnertime.

The next morning, they woke early, rang for coffee, and sat out on the terrace, admiring the sweeping vista of Hong Kong Island that rolled out beneath them several kilometers to the east. It was the first real opportunity they'd had to speak privately in days.

"So what've we got here, Peril?" Sparks said, the events of the preceding week parading through her mind.

"Well, let's see. We've got a missing acoustician, for one."

“A missing acoustician who happens to be deaf,” Sparks added.

“You said a clever person could study sound just by looking at waves.”

“Yes, but it’s still an odd career choice. Don’t you think?”

“Not necessarily. Don’t we all value most what we have least access to? Anyway, if she’s a genius maybe she believed she could find a way to restore her hearing.”

“Huh,” Sparks said. “I guess you’re right. If she did—find a way to restore hearing to the deaf, I mean—would someone kidnap her for that?”

“Seems unlikely,” Perilous said, topping off their delicate porcelain coffee cups from the silver service the butler had delivered. “Seems more likely that someone might kidnap her for trade secrets—whatever it was she was doing to make Fixé’s sound recordings so desirable.”

“But even that seems farfetched, doesn’t it? Couldn’t you just send in an intern to spy and steal the secrets? Why kidnap her?” Sparks propped her slippered feet on the weathered marble balustrade of the terrace.

“I agree. It seems unlikely. But then if she was kidnapped for money, as Jane suggested, they’d have had a ransom demand by now.”

“Okay. So what about Sheng? Could he have kidnapped her?” Sparks said.

Frankly, it didn't feel right to her. He hadn't seemed to recognize the hearing aid, and he appeared genuinely injured by the suggestion that he was behind Joan's disappearance. There was also his clear mistrust for Husher, a mistrust that Sparks had begun to share. Sheng held Husher responsible for whatever happened to Joan.

“But why? Why would he?” Perilous asked, clearly harboring similar thoughts. “What would the Communists want with an acoustician? Unless—”

“What?” Sparks said, putting her feet back on the ground and leaning towards Perilous.

“Well, what if Joan had figured out a way to use sound to influence people. What if the reason Fixé's records flew off the shelves wasn't because of superior sound but because people couldn't help buying them?”

“You're thinking of your mom's infectious rhythms?”

“Or something like it. Is that possible?” Perilous bit her lip and cast an enquiring look at Sparks.

“It's not impossible,” Sparks said. “Different frequencies can affect behavior. Just think about dog whistles or the way a movie score can cause

your heart to beat a little faster in anticipation of whatever comes next. You could be on to something, Peril. What if she'd discovered a frequency that could induce certain behaviors—or found a way to inject subliminal messages into the record tracks. Sure. That's something Mao would find handy."

"If that's the case, how much does Husher know about her discoveries?"

"Oh, c'mon, Peril. He'd know everything, wouldn't he? Why hire Joan to produce your sound recordings in the first place? Why Joan, in particular, when there are hundreds of sound engineers to choose from. She can't hear the music, even if she can read the waves. Wouldn't that be important for someone producing pop albums? Unless she was focused on something other than the quality of the musical stylings."

Sparks stood and began to pace the terrace. She paused and looked out over the vista. The dense tropical jungle tumbled down nearly 500 meters, losing steam as it went. Hong Kong proper promptly picked up where The Peak left off—a sprawling concrete and metal jungle of modern high-rises thrusting their antennas and vine-like wires into older, shabbier districts of multi-use tenement buildings called tong lau. The city gave way to Victoria Harbor, which Sparks could just make out,

and on the other side lay Kowloon. The sun had climbed over the mountain peaks of the peninsula, and it had begun to paint the cluttered rooftops on the far side of the harbor with a white light filtered through morning mists.

Sparks was eager to have a moment to sketch out the scene in her notebook, but that would have to wait. She began to pace again.

"There's also the matter of Bette," she said. "And her attempt to make off with Jane."

"It's an odd choice, isn't it? Sloppy even. If she'd been playing with the band for months, why wait until the night of their first public performance to kidnap her? She could've done it any time beforehand. Why that night? For that matter, why at all? If she's still working for Omega, what could they want with a pop starlet? And is it connected with Joan's disappearance?"

They were both silent for some time, pondering Perilous' questions.

"Let's take it one question at a time," Sparks said finally. "Is Bette still working for Omega?"

She sat on the balustrade and stared down through the canopy of trees. It was hard to say with Bette. She was a wild card, but Sparks knew for certain that Bette was mercenary. She'd work for

the highest bidder, and that would be Omega.

“Let’s say she is for now, and let’s say you’re right about Joan’s more dubious discoveries. Omega would want that technology, too, right? It’s properly nefarious. Right up their diamond-paved boulevard. And like you said, we value what we have least access to. If they think Joan has defected to the Maoists, kidnapping Jane would give them leverage to bring her to their side.”

“It’s a good theory,” Perilous said. “But why such a public attempt? Why that night? Also, I’m wondering if Husher is somehow mixed up with Omega. He’s definitely the type.”

“If he was, there’d be no need to kidnap Joan or Jane,” Sparks reasoned. “They’d have access to both via Husher. I feel like that rules him out, which isn’t to say he’s the Dude from Dullsville he pretends to be. As to why that night—what if something happened that night that raised the stakes, made the matter more urgent?”

“Like what?” Perilous said.

Sparks shrugged and then grinned. “Like us, maybe. We were right up front. She looks out and sees the pair of us. Her cover’s blown, isn’t it?”

Perilous smiled and nodded. “You’re right.”

Sparks stood up again and stretched. “Now, we’re getting somewhere.”

"I think we've gotten as far as we can go without more insight. We need to dig up exactly what Joan was working on. Her laboratory, as Jane called it, you think it's part of the recording studio at Fixé HQ?"

"Seems likely as not," Sparks said. "If I could snoop around a bit without Husher in tow—"

"How's today for you?" Perilous said with a sideways grin. "He asked me to lunch yesterday before he left. I think he wants to explain how he knew Arthur, and frankly, I'd like to hear what he has to say. I could keep him occupied this afternoon. Maybe you can get Jane to—"

There was a knock at the door.

"It's me!" Jane called out.

"Speak of the devil," Sparks said to Perilous. "Come in!"

Jane closed the door softly behind her, joining the girls on the terrace. She was wearing loose-fitting linen slacks, a silk tunic in crimson, and cotton kung fu slippers. Her long, black hair was corralled in a braid that swung down her back. Sparks liked the outfit. It looked comfortable, the ideal uniform for an active girl. She might have to make a visit to Jane's haberdashery before they headed back stateside.

"You see what I meant about Comrade

Sheng, eh?" Jane said, her lip snarling around the name.

"Well, and good morning to you, too," Sparks replied.

"Yes. Yes. Good morning. Fine. But Sheng. He's as rotten as an old fish, crooked as a bobby pin, dirty as a—"

"Got it. He's bad news. Seems that way to me," Sparks said, telling Jane what she was eager to hear. "Perilous?"

"Good a lead as any."

"So what do we do, then?" Jane asked.

"What's say we take a look at her studio today?" Sparks suggested.

"You still think she was kidnapped because of her work, then?" Jane said, her expression dubious.

"I'd just like to know more about what she was doing before she disappeared, and it sounds like she was committed to her work. Perilous has a date with Husher today—"

Jane's eyes widened.

"Not a date," Perilous said and then repeated firmly, "Not a date, Jane. He wants to explain about my brother."

Jane nodded. "Okay. I can get you into the studio, Sparks. No problem. Shall we go now?"

She was painfully eager to begin the search for her sister. That much was clear to Sparks. She'd been sitting on her hands for months, and now that she had a little wind in her sails and some help, she was ready to launch a full scale investigation into the puzzle of Joan's disappearance.

"How's about something to eat first? This engine doesn't purr without fuel."

"Sure," Jane said, a little crestfallen. "Come on then."

Madam Wenling had breakfast spread out on a long teak table on the main terrace. The girls filled up on sugary golden pineapple buns, fresh fruits, and more coffee before Sparks and Jane made their excuses.

"We'll take the Vespas, mama," Jane said.

"Drive recklessly and with wild abandon, daughter," Madam Wenling replied, with a wink at Perilous. "She always does the opposite of what I tell her."

"Sure thing, mama. C'mon, Sparks," she said, rushing Sparks out of the house.

"See ya, Peril! Have fun!" Sparks called over her shoulder as the door shut behind her.

They lugged the two scooters out of a tidy storage shed just off the approach. One was chrome; the other glossy red. Jane took the red one for

herself. "You know how to drive one of these?" she asked.

"Do I ever. Let's hit it. I'm following you, sis."

They cruised back down through the hills they'd ascended the day before, taking the hairpin curves at exhilarating speeds. It was a beautiful fall day, and she was spending it with Jane Bond on the trail of a mystery. What could be better? Sparks couldn't think of a thing.

7

The main terrace was shaded by a trellis overgrown with wisteria. The pendulous clusters of mauve blossoms must have weighted the vines down in the summer, but they'd faded, leaving golden leaves and exposed, gnarled limbs in their place. The air carried the faint perfume of agar wood emanating from incense trees hidden in the jungle below. The butler cleared away the remains of breakfast and left Perilous and her hostess to enjoy the slow, steady progress of the morning sun.

After a period of comfortable silence, Madam Wenling said, "Tell me, Perilous, how did your mother ever learn to live again after the loss of her child?"

Perilous studied the woman's face, which was turned towards the rising sun. She was still beautiful though her features had grown softer with

time. There were signs of worry and sadness that hadn't been there when Perilous first met her.

"I think mother lives more for Arthur now than ever before—in defiance of her loss. You've met her," she said as if that should explain everything.

Wenling turned and smiled. "Yes. I suppose that sounds right. Your mother is a spirited woman. And I apologize. What a dreary topic of conversation. It's just—you remind me of my Joan. You have the same quiet intelligence that made her so remarkable. And also such a mystery. Even to me."

"I take that as a compliment, Madam Wenling."

"Oh, please, dear. Just Wenling. I stand on no ceremonies here despite Sheng's proclamations about my bourgeois lifestyle. And we're old friends, after all."

"You needn't apologize, Wenling," Perilous said, acclimating herself to the informality. "To be honest, I've been thinking of Joan and Arthur, both. Jane spoke with me about what happened, and I couldn't help connect her loss—your loss—with my own. They were both so young. They both had so much potential. But why speak of Joan in the past tense? There's no reason to believe she's come

to harm. She's only—not here. She could turn up, couldn't she?"

"You think she may have disappeared of her own free will?" Wenling said. "I've held on to the same hope though I'm not sure how much comfort there is in it. What would make her do such a thing—cause such suffering?"

Perilous shook her head. "I don't know, but there's hope in it, isn't there? I wish—" she stopped herself from saying out loud what was in her mind. She wished she had the option of hope, but Arthur wasn't missing. He was long gone. There was no coming back for him.

"I know, dear," Wenling said and placed her hand over Perilous' hand. "I know. Let's speak of other things, shall we? You've followed in your mother's footsteps, I believe—as a writer for Simone Eris' PR agency. That must be exciting work. Isis must be proud."

"Well," Perilous said with a laugh. "She's proud that I'm a writer, yes. I'm not sure how she feels about the PR part. I think she rather associates it with the Devil's work. She'd prefer I was doing something more academic, but she doesn't say so. And yes. It's very exciting. I get to travel and meet interesting people, like your daughter and Sir Silas."

“With whom you will be dining this afternoon, I’m to understand,” Wenling said with a sly smile.

“That’s right.”

“So he can explain about his relationship with your brother.” She arched a thin eyebrow. “Or so he says.”

“What other motives would he have?”

“I can think of several,” the older woman said mischievously. “There’s business of course. He might intend to bore you with that. Then, there’s also the matter of your natural charms. You’re a beautiful, intelligent young woman, Perilous. That would be motive enough for many men, and I’m sure those qualities that remind me of Joan haven’t been lost on Silas. He was very much in love with her—at one time.”

“Ah,” Perilous said. “He has a type.”

“Don’t we all?”

Perilous wasn’t sure. She’d never been moved by romantic fantasies. She could think of dozens of more interesting ways for a girl to spend her time. The idea of a type only backed up her beliefs. There were only so many ways to fall in love, but living? Living came in an infinite array of possibilities.

“You said, ‘At one time,’” Perilous prodded.

“Was their relationship already over when Joan went missing?”

“Oh, dear, yes. It had been over for more than a year. In fact, I suspect the relationship was short-lived in the scheme of things, but they were both so involved in Fixé that neither had time for a rebound relationship. Whether or not they were in love, they were bound up together in their work.”

“So the breakup was amicable?”

Wenling didn't answer straight away. She took a sip of her coffee and contemplated the distant peninsula of Kowloon instead, considering the question. Or so it seemed to Perilous.

At last, she said, “It wasn't cruel. There was no weeping, no gnashing of teeth. But—”

“What is it?” Perilous asked, intrigued by Wenling's reticence on the matter. She'd been so forthcoming up until then.

Wenling looked at her thoughtfully. “I wish I could put my finger on it, dear. Relationships are so complex, especially when they tangle up different pieces of a person's life. I suppose it was the amicability of the breakup that seemed strange to me. Both had appeared very much in love for as long as it lasted. Then, suddenly, it was over—as if it had never happened. They were both so—possessed, so level-headed.

“Of course, I’ve spent decades steeped in the amorous plots and intrigues of the opera, dear, and I myself have always been a passionate woman in love. My expectations are certainly flawed. Joan is very different from me, not at all a romantic. I suppose Silas must have been different from what I had imagined as well. He hadn’t initially seemed the stoic—on the contrary, he had a reputation as a Casanova. Perhaps she broke him,” Wenling said with a laugh and a shrug. “But, dear, look at the time. Silas will be here before long. Don’t let me keep you. Go get ready for your afternoon. I have to go to the opera house soon anyway. A diva’s work is never done.”

Perilous thanked Wenling for breakfast and excused herself. She was looking forward to a hot bath in the guest room’s sunken tub. She had plenty of time to soak before her lunch with Silas, and she had many new thoughts to sit with.

While the water was running, she checked in with Truman back at The Eris Agency. He gave her two new pieces of information to contemplate. First, he confirmed her suspicion that Silas was a member of The Omega Foundation, if a low man on the totem pole. In other words, it was altogether possible that he believed he was part of a charitable social club that just happened to be composed

entirely of the elite. He may have absolutely no knowledge of the group's more iniquitous machinations, Perilous told herself. She'd gauge that during her time with him today.

The second detail gave her more food for thought. After a thorough search, The Eris Agency had found absolutely no evidence of The Exalted Daughters of Guanyin. If Jane's mysterious organization in fact existed, they had mastered the one trick that no other secret society had managed. They'd actually kept their secrets.

8

The narrow passage through the foothills dumped Sparks and Jane out into urban sprawl. They negotiated the Vespas through congested streets where cars and double-decker busses competed with rickshaws drawn by blue-clad laborers for every inch of asphalt.

At last, they broke through the city's confines onto the broad belt of Connaught Road, which offered an expansive view of the harbor. The promenade's port side bristled with rickety, weather-worn piers protruding haphazardly into the murky waters. Dockworkers in loose, indigo jackets and trousers unloaded sacks filled with rice from the mainland and heaped them along the wharf as gulls helped themselves to scraps of anything edible they could swoop down on. Jane steered toward the North Point Ferry Pier, and they eased the Vespas

among the queue of cars waiting to be loaded into the underbelly of one of the cumbersome, green and white vessels.

“We’re leaving the island, then?” Sparks said, glancing around at the throng of pedestrians milling through turnstiles. They made up every aspect of Hong Kong life. Stout, scowling fishermen and nursing mothers mingled with slick call girls and sightseers in Hong Kong for the Full Moon Festival.

“Yeah,” Jane said, raising her voice so that Sparks could hear her over the noisy throng. “The studio’s on the peninsula.”

Once they were aboard the ferry, the girls left their Vespas and maneuvered through the press of passengers to a spot at the front of the vessel. Sparks leaned out over the railing to get a better view of the bay. Graceful junks with sails full of wind shouldered their way around holiday cruise ships laden with vacationers. Large steamers hauled cargo from nearby factories, and Sparks spotted a small fleet of Royal Navy ships moored off the distant Kowloon coast.

“Do you mind?” Sparks asked, pulling her sketchpad and a charcoal pencil out of her canvas messenger bag.

Jane smiled and shook her head. “I’d love to

see it from your perspective. Go ahead.”

Sparks occupied herself with quickly sketching the passengers and the shifting landscape as they made their slow passage across the harbor. Jane watched, occasionally pointing to draw Sparks' attention to some novel sight she might miss in her absorption. As they neared the sleek Star Ferry Pier, Sparks roughed out the building's contours, which imitated the trim curves of an ocean liner.

The ferry docked alongside the three-story pier, and Sparks and Jane made their way back to their scooters. The motley assemblage of passengers poured out, and when their turn came, Sparks and Jane followed suit. They steered their Vespas out of the dark interior and into the bright, late morning sunlight of Kowloon.

Sparks followed closely behind Jane as she turned onto Nathan Road. Along that lively corridor, opulent hotels rubbed elbows with gray, minimalistic tong lau. The gaudy storefronts of the latter were a pandemonium of pawn shops and curry houses, grocers and small medical offices whose facades were camouflaged by neon shop signs and fading cigarette ads. To the west of the boulevard, the precarious Walled City of Kowloon lumbered, threatening to slump across the thoroughfare at the slightest provocation.

After dozens of blocks of urban pandemonium, Jane swung right, and the frenetic architecture of the city center began to give way to a more suburban scene. She followed a circuitous path through smaller, tree-lined side streets where tidy, European-style homes with small yards replaced the tong lau, tenements, and skyscrapers. At last, she pulled her Vespa into a narrow alleyway between two residences. Sparks pulled in behind her and climbed off her scooter, stretching as she did.

Jane nodded at a two-story building that occupied the opposite corner. "That's Fixé. The bottom floor is the studio. The top is Silas' apartment."

Sparks leaned against the alley wall, cooling off in its shade. She studied the structure and its surroundings. It was built like a squat bell tower in the Mission-style at the very heart of the spacious property. It was spare and angular with stucco walls and terra cotta tiles on the roof. Squared off shrubbery lined the outer perimeter of the grounds, and within, Sparks could make out bottle brush trees and palms. The driveway was conveniently empty.

"Looks like he's already headed out for the day. Perfect timing."

They crossed the street, and Jane entered

the numerical passcode for the wrought-iron gate, which promptly swung open. On the other side of the hedge, the green lawn was trim and a flagstone footpath led from the driveway to the main entry. Jane unlocked the door, and Sparks followed her into a cool foyer with a floor of Spanish tile. It reminded her of the Burbank apartment complex where she'd lived when she was a kid.

"The studio's over here," Jane said, pointing to the left side of the vestibule. Then, pointing to an oak door on the other side, "Joan's lab is over here."

They started with the recording studio, but there wasn't much to see. The live room, where most of the recording took place, was flanked by three isolation booths on one side and a control room on the other. The space was orderly and antiseptic with nothing to indicate it had ever been used.

Joan's laboratory consisted of a control room flanked by two reverberation chambers and an anechoic chamber. Sparks stuck her head in one reverb chamber and then the next. The walls were built at odd angles to jostle sound waves, and angled panels further enhanced the effect. Strange as the room looked, there was nothing that struck Sparks as out of place.

“Come in here,” Sparks said, pushing the door of the second reverb room wide so Jane could enter. “Have you ever seen this work?”

Jane shook her head. “Joan didn’t like to be bothered when she was working.”

Sparks closed the door behind them, flipping a switch next to the heavy, steel slab door. When she did, the room was filled with a static reverberation that caused her eardrums to buzz. She motioned for Jane to stand in the center of the room, and standing just a few feet from her, she said loudly, “I wish we’d stopped for lunch. I’m starving.”

The two sentences were swept up into the static as soon as they left her mouth. They were reflected off the various surfaces and dissolved into the hum, losing all of their meaning as they stammered around the room in a jumble of echoing incoherence. She grinned at Jane, who shouted an equally unintelligible reply and laughed at the ensuing uproar. Sparks opened the door and ushered her out.

“There are at least two ways to render sound unintelligible,” Sparks said. “A whole lot of reflection or none at all. It’s kind of like thinking. Y’know, how you might overthink something—let it bounce all around your brain until the meaning

becomes a garbled mess? Or you might not reflect on anything at all, which is equally pointless. There's a sweet spot: reflection without complete absorption.

"Sound works the same. Too many reflective surfaces for it to bounce around on, too much interference like the static in there, and you get too many waves hitting your ears at once. Your brain can't process the information. On the other hand, in a room where the sound waves are completely absorbed, noises disappear for all means and purposes. That room," Sparks said, pointing at the anechoic chamber, "swallows up sound waves."

"So you can't hear anything in there?" Jane asked, peering at the closed door.

"Sure. You can hear your bones creaking and your blood pumping through your veins, but not much more."

Jane grimaced.

"Apparently, it's enough to make the average person go bonkers. Do we dare?" Sparks said playfully, walking across to the chamber door and swinging it open. Inside, the walls were lined with black, rubberized foam pyramids, giving it an ominous vibe, like a torture chamber designed by Salvador Dali. Jane looked doubtful. "Oh, c'mon. We'll only be in for a few seconds. Not nearly long

enough to lose our minds.”

Jane stepped into the room, and Sparks closed the hefty, spiked door behind them. Instantly, she could feel the difference.

“Close your eyes,” she said, her lips close to Jane’s ear to ensure the sound would carry.

Sparks closed her own eyes, and she understood why a room like this might lead to a breakdown. The complete absence of sound created a sense of anxious anticipation. To the brain, sounds indicate surfaces, and surfaces indicate solidity. Without those waves bouncing around, space became an infinite vacuum, a disconcerting experience for anyone. When you look into the abyss, it may look back, as they say, but it doesn’t make a sound.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jane said, so close that Sparks could feel her warm breath tickling her earlobe.

They abandoned the dead space and returned to their exploration of the control room. The walls were lined with large computers, recorders, and cabinets that yielded nothing of particular interest. There were various tools of the trade—meters and sensors, transmitters and receivers, but no personal effect had made its way into the cupboards. The recordings and computer printouts would mean little to anyone other than Joan or an equally adept

acoustician, which Sparks was certainly not. Joan's tidy, gunmetal gray desk was in the center of the room. The surface was clear, and the drawers contained only office supplies.

"Husher must have cleared everything out when Joan went missing," Sparks said, running her hands along the inner walls of the desk drawers, hoping for some clue about Joan's disappearance that may have missed the purge.

Jane shook her head and paced from one set of cabinets to another, randomly opening doors they'd already opened and closed. "Joan doesn't like stuff. She doesn't like clutter. She says it's a distraction."

"But no photographs, no mementos—"

"She has a photographic memory. She says she can remember everything she wants and more without creating a 'chaos of rubbish.' Her words."

"She sounds charming," Sparks said, but in truth, she thought she'd have felt as much kinship to Joan as to one of the metal filing cabinets.

From all appearances, Joan's life was so orderly and impersonal, she was so completely absorbed in her work, that it was almost as if she'd never existed at all. She'd been a continuous timeline of activity with no accumulation of assets, waves with no reflective surfaces. She lived an

anechoic chamber of an existence.

Just as she was about to give up her exploration of the desk's cracks and crevices, she felt something stuck to the bottom of the second drawer. It was a small scrap of paper wedged in the track. It must have been shuffled out of the drawer at some point, escaping Joan's notice.

Sparks tugged at it gently and pulled it loose. Before she had a chance to study it though, the door to the control room swung open. Both girls jumped in surprise, and Sparks shoved the paper into her pocket and leaned against the drawer to close it.

"Afternoon, m'ladies! I've come to whisk you off on an adventure."

"Al, you scared the beans out of me!" Jane said, laughing.

"What are you lot doing in here anyways?" Alkestis said, scanning the room with her sharp eyes. "Your mum said you might be showing Sparks here the recording studio, but I said, 'No. That couldn't be. They'd never do something so boring when we've agreed to a day of reckless horsing about.'"

"I wanted to take a peek at the sound lab while we were here. I've never seen one," Sparks lied.

"Well, alright, sweetheart, you've seen it,

and we can all agree there's not a mote of fun to be had here. I, on the other hand, come bearing tidings of good cheer and devilish mischief."

"Do tell."

"Have you ever seen a dragon boat, Sparks? Because I have, and that is truly not a thing to be missed."

Sparks laughed. "I have not, as a matter of fact. Sounds like something I'd enjoy though. But maybe we could get a bite to eat first? I'm famished."

9

Husher picked Perilous up in a polished, white roadster with sleek fins and a leather droptop. They followed a similar route as Sparks and Jane, but their path diverged at Saigon Street. Husher left the roadster with the valet of an upscale British hotel, which looked entirely out of place in the rough and tumble neighborhood. After a few blocks on foot, he led her into a restaurant that nearly disappeared in the chaos of overcrowded emporiums and business fronts shuttered for the three day holiday. She hadn't even noticed a sign.

Within, it was dark, cool, and quiet. Unlike the teeming congee and noodle shops they'd passed, this place was deserted. Perilous cast an inquisitive glance at her host.

"I made reservations," he said.

"For the whole restaurant?"

He grinned. "No point being rich and powerful if you're not going to use it to your advantage, Miss Faretheewell. Trust me. It's worth it. Heart's Delight Teahouse has the most divine dim sum in Hong Kong. Perhaps even all of China. This time of year, with all of the guai lo in town for the Full Moon Festival and all of the locals celebrating, we'd never be able to hear one another over the din."

Perilous laughed at the incongruity of Husher's proper Oxford articulation of the Cantonese slur for foreigners—guai lo. It took on a very different flavor than when Sheng had hurled it the day before. Not nearly so biting.

The restaurant's manager greeted them with a deep bow. He was an unctuous, middle-aged Hong Konger with slicked back hair and a trim, black suit, clearly eager to impress his honored guest.

"Sir Silas, please follow me," he said. "Mademoiselle, please, this way. I have your table prepared. Very elegant. Very intimate. This way, please."

It was, as he promised, an elegant space. The walls of the teahouse were covered with crimson silk, and the floors were a dark, gleaming hardwood marked by decades of worn footpaths. The owner seated them in an intricately carved alcove built

into the back wall.

When he clapped his hands, a waiter wheeled a tiered, enamel cart to their table. Each shelf was crowded with bamboo steam baskets and fragrant delicacies served on small, porcelain dishes. There were dumplings, of course, and spring rolls. Perilous noted more of the pineapple buns that she'd enjoyed at breakfast as well as turnip cakes that had been caramelized in a pan. There were lotus leaves plump with rice and mushrooms and pork, and of course, the ubiquitous golden moon cakes that she'd seen everywhere since their arrival in Hong Kong. She even spied phoenix claws resting on a nest of charred scallions.

The owner dismissed the waiter. He poured a steaming, floral tea into their ceramic cups and parceled out the platters and bowls and baskets so that the table seemed to groan under their weight. Once he'd found a place for every dish, he bowed again and left them alone.

"Let's throw good manners to the wind, shall we?" Husher said. "Take whatever you like. If you want more of anything, say the word."

Perilous hesitated, but only for a moment. She was hungry, and the savory aromas were making her mouth water. She began to deftly pluck morsels from the plates with her chopsticks, and Husher

followed suit. They ate in silence for a few minutes, savoring the delicacies. While she was thoroughly enjoying the food, the overwhelming quiet of the space was making her anxious. Hong Kong was such a raucous city, and even Wenling's bungalow echoed with the crooning of larks and doves hidden among the trees in her garden. The restaurant bristled with silence.

"You were right," Perilous said. "I've never had anything so delicious."

"I told you."

She cleared her throat and made eye contact. "You said you wanted to talk with me about Arthur—how you knew him."

Husher looked down at his dish for a moment before wiping his lips and returning her gaze. "Yes. That's right. I hadn't said anything before because—oh, I don't know why. It's—it's bloody awkward, isn't it? The truth is I knew before we ever met. When Simone first said your name, I knew you must be Arthur's sister. Perilous Faretheewell. Of course. Who else could it be? If I'm to be honest, I was curious to meet you. Perhaps, also I wanted to be of service if I could. I thought it might be an opportunity for you, one that you might not otherwise have a crack at. It seemed the least I could do."

Perilous nodded and then asked, "Why is that, Sir Silas? What do you mean it's the least you could do?"

He smiled, but it was a stiff, forced smile. He'd expected her to drop it, and Perilous could see her probing was making him uncomfortable. "He was a good friend to me when I was first getting Fixé off the ground. He kept me honest."

Perilous could have let up. Perhaps she should have given he was a new client. Instead, she asked, "In what way?"

He sighed and leaned into the plush cushions at his back. "I was back and forth between London and Hong Kong at the time. He was just out of law school, establishing his firm in Chelsea. I was looking for new talent—something original—and he was looking for a home for his first clients. But he wasn't satisfied with getting his foot in the door. He wasn't a profiteer, your brother—or a mere opportunist. He believed there was more to law—even in the frivolous entertainment industry—than money. He saw the unequal treatment of performers by the recording industry, and he wanted to be a champion for fair dealings. And he was."

His expression was embarrassed, and for a moment, he seemed to resist going on, but at last he did. "He was a fierce crusader against injustice,

Arthur was. Wherever he saw it. He wasn't afraid to raise hackles. Maybe he wasn't afraid of anything. I can see the family resemblance in that area. I don't think I've mentioned it before, but your performance at The Status Quo was bloody brilliant. I can't imagine many people would have had the mettle to do what you did. It could've blown up in your face."

Perilous smiled, but noted the change of subject. "Thank you, Sir Silas. Coming from someone with your reputation, that's quite a compliment. And, yes. You're right about Arthur. That's how I remember him, too. Fearless."

"He should've stayed in entertainment—in Europe," he said abruptly. "He didn't understand what he was going up against when he went back home."

"You're wrong there," Perilous said. "He understood."

"I suppose he did."

Arthur had abandoned entertainment law to work with the civil rights movement in Mississippi and then later Louisiana. During his last visit with his family, he'd hinted at the danger he'd placed himself in by pitting himself against some of the more notorious politicians and businessmen in the south. Their father had attempted to dissuade him

from returning, but their mother had stilled him saying, "You can't raise a child on tales of knights and nobility and then tell him to sit at home when he's called on a quest, Michael."

The owner returned, refilled their tea cups, and cleared away the empty plates. Perilous was tired of the conversation, and Silas certainly was. They pulled more dishes from the cart and picked at the morsels, both lost in their own thoughts.

At last, Husher said, "So tell me about your work with The Eris Agency. Simone has a good deal in common with Arthur, I think, despite their differences. I've never seen a business with so many young women taking the lead on projects. It's an unconventional approach, to be sure, but she seems to have a great deal of success with it."

"Absolutely," Perilous said, glad of the change of subject this time. "She's brilliant. Her campaigns speak for themselves."

"Yes," he said, taking an egg custard from the cart. "Her campaigns. They're quite renowned. Disruptive even."

Perilous nodded, sensing he was going somewhere with his comments.

He laughed and shook his head. "To tell the truth, there are rumors about her. And about the agency."

“Yes?” Perilous said, revealing nothing in her expression. “Do tell.”

“It’s absurd, really. But there are those who say she’s a—an anarchist, a provocatrix of sorts. That her PR firm is a cover for something more nefarious,” he said in a melodramatic whisper, “—a secret organization of mercenaries and assassins bent on overthrowing governments and robbing the rich to give to the poor or some such nonsense.”

Perilous burst into genuine laughter. “First I’ve heard of it.”

Husher grinned and shrugged. “I suppose it was too good to be true.”

“Clearly.”

Perilous helped herself to a sliver of thousand layer cake and contemplated Husher’s narrative. It wasn’t entirely false. Nor was it completely true. What interested Perilous most was the perspective. It’s often impossible to tell who the bad guys are from any given point of view.

10

Alkestis had a scooter of her own, so the girls took off west towards the Yau Ma Tei typhoon shelter, where they were promised a memorable dining experience and dragon boats. When they arrived, the stone wharf was abuzz with people milling among the shabby, street level shops. They were picking up last minute ingredients for dinner and bottles of osmanthus wine for late night indulgences. In the upper floor terraces of the tong lau, men smoked cigarettes and looked out over the busy scene. Women pulled clothes down from lines, and children sat with their legs swinging out over the street below. Colorful paper lanterns shaped like fish and rabbits and roosters and dragons were hung all about in celebration of the Full Moon Festival.

They left their scooters in the care of a gang of young girls eating moon cakes and giggling about

the boys trying to catch their eyes. Alkestis led Sparks and Jane through the crushing crowd towards the waterfront teeming with wooden sampans. Sparks couldn't make out an inch of water. The only hint of it was the rocking and bobbing of the boats on the surface. Red-sailed junks were moored out in the deeper waters beyond the small fishing vessels, and there, in the midst of the chaos was a sight that caused Sparks to burst into laughter. Alkestis smiled, pleased with herself.

Among the traditional boats and the dark clad fishermen, their destination buzzed with electric exhibitionism. It was a floating restaurant that made Coney Island look like an Amish tent revival. A sign set atop the tiled roof identified the establishment in Han characters that had been masterfully recreated in Day-Glo neon brushstrokes. Should the humming rainbow of logograms fail to catch the eye, flickering bulbs flashed around it for a more hypnotic effect. It was a radiant testament to the artificial light industry, and Sparks was mesmerized.

"What does it say?" she asked, pointing to the scintillating sign.

"The Luminous Palace of the Queen of the Sea," Jane replied.

The Palace was built atop a barge, Alkestis said, but no hint of its blue-collar origins remained

visible. It was as if a Hollywood set designer had been asked to recreate the Forbidden City after dropping a hit of acid. Every surface had been touched with the tip of a freshly dipped paintbrush, and gold symbols covered the crimson pillars and tiers. They glinted in the late afternoon sun. Each side of the structure was guarded by a grotesque, gargantuan statue that Jane called door gods.

“According to legend,” she explained, “the two demons Qianliyan and Shunfeng'er fell in love with the sea goddess Tin Hau. She offered to marry whichever could defeat her in battle. Of course, she was a skilled martial artist and overcame them both, but made them her generals as a consolation prize.”

“Brilliant,” Alkestis said with heartfelt appreciation. “It’s good to be queen.”

“She wasn’t always a queen,” Jane said. This was clearly a tale she’d heard many times, one she relished. “She started off as a normal girl. Well, mostly normal. Her mother had given birth to five girls before her, and she prayed to Guanyin for a son. Guanyin sent her another daughter anyway, but Tin Hau was a genius, like Joan. She’d mastered all of the sutras before she was twelve, and she became a shamaness who could send her spirit out of her body to see distant lands. She could exorcise demons and control the weather. Eventually, she became so

enlightened that she just flew up into the sky and became a goddess with power over the heavens and the seas.”

“I dig it,” Sparks said.

A young man with a mouthful of gold teeth shuttled them through the cluster of sampans in a small rowboat. After the third or fourth stratum of vessels had been penetrated, the shelter opened up offering a less obstructed path to the Palace. When he deposited them on the restaurant’s wrap-around dock, they were greeted by an obsequious maître d’. He shepherded them past loud crowds of day-trippers to a dining room on the restaurant’s uppermost deck.

Within minutes of being seated at a balcony table, three waiters appeared bearing a veritable feast to the table. Coral red crabs and fresh green scallions that had been sautéed in garlic and chili were heaped in a precarious pyramid atop a porcelain platter. A roasted duck, its skin crisp and golden, grinned up at them from another dish. Half a dozen smaller platters and bowls piled with relishes and vegetables and sticky rice were wedged into any empty spaces. The girls dug in and devoured everything that had been set before them as well as a bottle of plum wine. When they were done, Sparks leaned back in her chair and groaned.

“Oh, Al,” she said, emotionally. “You know the way to my heart, sis.”

Alkestis grinned. “You never know which meal might be your last, love.”

Jane laughed. “I needed this. Thanks, girls.”

“But the fun has only just begun, Jane, sweetheart,” Alkestis said, mischief in her voice.

“Right, the dragon boats.”

“Indeed, up close and personal-like. I’ve arranged a little excitement for the evening.”

Sparks leaned forward, putting her elbows on the tabletop. “I’m all ears.”

“I thought you would be,” Alkestis said. “What say you to a little friendly competition? I believe you mentioned that racing numbered among your pastimes, yeah?”

“Go on.”

Jane giggled and finished the wine in her glass. Alkestis winked at her.

“Ever ridden a dragon, love? Happens I have a mate crewing one of the boats in the race tonight. I persuaded him to reserve spots for a couple of foreign devils.”

Alkestis pointed out the row of dragon boats tied to a long finger pier jutting out from the wharf. Their fierce profiles were carved from teakwood and painted in bright colors. It was an

opportunity Sparks couldn't resist, and Jane was game as well.

They had nearly an hour before they were to meet up with Alkestis' friend Wei, and they used the time to let their meals settle and admire the view. Buoyant lanterns containing flickering candles were beginning to litter the open spaces between the small fishing boats and the larger junks. Nearby, a makeshift floating stage had been boarded by an orchestra of stringed instruments that Sparks couldn't name.

The musicians performed several folk songs, and as the sun began its slow descent, more lanterns were cast upon the darkening waters where they danced and dipped in the wakes of small row boats. Finally, five young boys in white costumes began to pound out a driving rhythm on drums twice their size.

"It's time, love," Alkestis said. "Let's blow this floating fire hazard, shall we?"

Sparks and Jane jumped up, ready for the adventure. Another water taxi carried them to the finger pier, where the short, muscular Wei awaited them. There were five dragon boats in all, each with a crew of twenty rowers in coordinating colors. Like the rest of his rowing crew, Wei wore a bright yellow headband and tunic. The girls were given

getups to match their designated boats. Jane and Alkestis had yellow to match Wei's team; Sparks' was a vivid lime green.

"Jane's going with you, then?" Sparks asked, feeling a little put out.

"The only way I could get us these seats was to promise Wei the chance to spend time with Jane Bond. You understand, love, yeah?"

"Sure. It's just I hate to humiliate a local screen hero so publicly."

Jane scoffed. "We'll see about that!"

Each drummer took his place at the bow of a boat, and their rhythmic pounding became more aggressive and much louder. A steersman occupied a bench at the stern, and the rowers all took their seats on wooden benches along the dragon's spine. Sparks could feel her heartbeat matching her drummer's pace as she settled into her seat. Jane waved playfully from her own boat, and Alkestis grinned and stuck her tongue out.

A burst of fireworks was launched into the twilight sky, and promptly, the dragons shot forward. They sliced through the murky waters, capsizing lanterns in their wakes. The crowds were shouting encouragement from shore and from the bows and sterns of their own vessels. Their cries and whistles were frenzied with excitement.

For a moment, the boats were neck and neck, but then the boat carrying Alkestis and Jane pushed ahead of the pack. The rowers were all bent hard into their task, attacking the water with ferocity to propel their painted beasts forward faster and faster.

Sparks leaned her athletic frame into each stroke, pulling at her oar with all of her strength. The friction of her grip on the wooden handle burned her fingers, but the discomfort didn't curb her energy. Her crew's boat began to build steam, and then they were sweeping ahead of Alkestis and Jane. She could just make out Jane laughing and raising a fist as they overtook her.

Before Sparks had time to revel in her coup, however, a mechanical roar overwhelmed the clamor of the crowds and the thunderous slap of the synchronized oars on the surface. Jane's boat flashed past, catapulted forward by a hidden motor on the stern.

Alkestis looked back as the boat shot ahead and waved at Sparks, an arch smile on her face. Jane, on the other hand, looked surprised. Sparks didn't have time to process the meaning before she was in the water, knocked out of her own vessel by the rower behind her. That boat, too, took off, leaving Sparks behind in its wake to gasp and bob

among the floating lanterns and trailing gas fumes.

11

By the time Perilous and Husher had laid waste to two carts of dim sum, it was late afternoon. When they stepped out of the dark interior of the Heart's Delight Teahouse, the daylight was dazzling. Perilous pulled her sunglasses out of her purse and perched them on the bridge of her nose.

"What now?" she asked, looking up the busy avenue. A steady stream of people flowed past them, headed in the direction of the next cross street, which was strung with festive red lanterns.

"The Temple Street Market. Plenty to see there unless you have other plans for the evening."

They followed the crowds, and at the intersection, Husher directed her to make a right. "You haven't seen the Tin Hau temple complex, I presume?"

"No, but I know the legend. She's the sea

goddess, right?"

"Very good. I forget your pedigree. Given your parents, I'm sure there isn't a legend that you don't know. Arthur was the same. He knew the Knights of the Round Table more intimately than a good many of my fellow Brits, I'd wager."

"You'd win that wager," Perilous said. Despite the initial awkwardness, it was nice to spend time with someone who knew her brother and appreciated him the way she had.

Temple Street was a flurry of activity. Vendors cried out to the wandering crowds from booths set up along both sides of the street. They touted the beauty of their ivory and jade combs and the sweet aroma of their baskets of incense harvested from nearby forests. Tables bowed under the weight of woven silks heaped into precarious piles, and silver anchovies pulled fresh from the South China Sea still writhed in large buckets. Shoppers haggled with the vendors for the best price, and children ran in feral packs through the street, hauling lanterns in their wake. Perilous and Husher meandered up Temple Street, stopping often to examine the wares on display. When they finally reached the boundary of the market and the temple complex, the sun had begun its descent.

A crimson, three-tiered paifang with sweeping

eaves led into the temple's broad, brick-paved courtyard. Through the gate, old men were playing board games in the shade of ancient banyan trees. Along the perimeter of the courtyard were more tents housing fortune tellers and herbalists. They passed between the stone lions that guarded the temples and the door gods Qianliyan and Shunfeng'er in order to admire the temple's eponymous goddess Tin Hua. Her statue was exquisitely carved, and a flowing silk robe was draped over her shoulders. Smoke from hanging coils of incense curled around her temples, and the glow of candlelight was reflected in her dark eyes.

A smaller statue of Guanyin to the right of Tin Hua caught Perilous' attention. She bent to study a placard at the goddess' feet. Perilous hadn't given any thought to the literal meaning of the name Guanyin before, but there it was: She Who Hears the Sounds of the World. She thought of Joan, the deaf scientist who had dedicated her life to the study of sound and of the mysterious Daughters of Guanyin. Joan had promised Jane the sisterhood would protect them in their time of need. But the Daughters of Guanyin hadn't heard Joan when she called out in her time of need, had they? Where had they been when Bette came after Jane?

"Have you ever heard of The Exalted

Daughters of Guanyin?" Perilous asked Husher.

"Where did you hear that name?"

"Jane."

Husher laughed. "There's as much truth in Jane's stories about the Daughters of Guanyin as there are in the rumors about The Eris Agency."

"Just more wishful thinking, then, I suppose," Perilous said.

Husher smiled. "I suppose."

If the Daughters of Guanyin were an invention of Joan's imagination, that would explain why Truman hadn't found any information on them. But Jane didn't believe her sister was putting her on. According to her, Joan wasn't one for whimsy and make believe. If she had concocted the sisterhood, she had a reason for it. Perilous was sure of that.

They wandered back out into the courtyard and perused the stalls. At one, an elderly woman was telling fortunes by way of a sparrow and a deck of tarot cards. Perilous couldn't resist. She'd studied a variety of divinatory traditions while traveling with her mother, and she knew better than most the revelatory power of symbols. Something was flickering at the edges of her mind. A suspicion she couldn't quite name. Sometimes a single image can crack open your intuition and offer

otherwise inaccessible insights.

She paid the woman and whispered her question to the bird as instructed. The sparrow cocked its head to study her with its beady black eye for a moment. Then, it delicately plucked three cards from the deck with its beak, laying each in front of Perilous with as much care as a bird can muster. The first card depicted an alchemist with his magical tools laid out before him. The second was a thief stealing swords from an enemy's encampment. The final card showed two naked human figures bound to a cloven-hoofed devil by chains and manacles.

"Oh dear," Husher said with a frown. "What on earth did you ask the little buggler to get a fortune like that?"

Perilous laughed. "That's between me and the bird. We'll never tell, will we, friend?"

The sparrow chirruped and hopped back into its bamboo cage. All of the imagery spread before her called to mind trickery and deceit, but why would Joan deceive the younger sister who adored her? And could that deception have led to her disappearance? Who was the magician in the story—who was behind the curtain? And who was the devil—who was pulling the strings?

"Do you hear that?" Husher said, pulling

Perilous from her reverie.

A woman's voice had begun to penetrate the buzz of the crowds. She was singing a song that Perilous recognized from a traditional Cantonese opera.

"Lovely!" she cried.

"Opera is an acquired taste. I have to admit I'd never have learned to appreciate it if it wasn't for Wenling."

Perilous seized the opportunity to segue into a few innocent questions as they wandered towards the singer's corner of the courtyard. "It's terrible about Jane's sister, isn't it? It's strange though. Wenling is obviously broken hearted. Jane is devastated. But no one wants to talk about it. I've been hesitant to pry, but—"

"You'd like to pry now?" he said, his eyebrow raised. "You have to understand, being this close to mainland China means that one becomes accustomed to unexplained disappearances."

"You think the PRC kidnapped her?"

He shrugged. "We've heard nothing at all regarding Joan since her disappearance, but it would be the logical conclusion. The Dee family has a long history, great wealth, and a prominent matriarch. They would be an obvious target of the Red Chinese."

“And Joan was a genius, Jane says. A scientist of her caliber might be useful to Mao, I suppose.”

“I owe all of Fixé’s success to Joan’s genius, but I’m not sure how Mao would benefit from platinum albums.”

“Jane said she may have been experimenting with sound in other ways,” Perilous said, baiting him, “ways the PRC may have found advantageous.”

Jane had said nothing of the kind, but Perilous wanted to see Husher’s response to the line of enquiry.

He assessed her thoughtfully for a moment. When he finally replied, he said only, “Possibly. She was secretive about her independent research.”

“She was using your equipment, your financing. You weren’t curious?” Perilous said, not letting go of the line of questioning.

“Of course I was curious,” he said, a hint of irritability creeping into his voice, “but I knew better than to push Joan when she didn’t want to be pushed.”

“Why? What might have happened if you’d pushed her?” Perilous said, wondering what would happen if she pushed Silas Husher when he didn’t want to be.

His face flushed.

"I'm sorry," Perilous said though she wasn't at all sorry. "Forget I asked."

"No. It's only—it's hard to say. She might've abandoned our work, abandoned Fixé, me. She isn't the sort of person you can compel to do anything. She has her own mind."

"What do you think happened to her, Sir Silas? Where do you think she is?"

"It's possible that someone on the mainland did understand her value," he said, backpedaling.

"But who?"

He looked at her and frowned. "Why are you so interested in what happened to Joan?"

Perilous looked down at her Mary Janes. Perhaps she'd gone too far after all.

She looked back at Husher, and in an attempt to diminish the damage, she said, "Because I know what it's like to have someone you love vanish from your life without explanation. I know the hole it leaves, the anger and the fear and the sadness."

"Arthur."

Perilous nodded, and Husher sighed.

"Sheng," he said. "Joan's childhood sweetheart. She was still close to him. If she was working on something—something advantageous to the PRC, she might have confided in him."

“What could she have been up to?” Perilous said as much to herself as to Husher. “I wonder.”

His glance slid away from her. “I can’t say. I’m not a Communist, am I? And as I said, I wasn’t privy to her private research, whatever it was.”

Perilous contemplated Husher’s statement. He certainly wasn’t a Communist, but he was Omega. If Joan had found ways to use sound to manipulate human behavior, it might start off innocently enough as a means to sell more records. But it wouldn’t take long for the worst sorts of characters to find more nefarious uses for her discoveries. That line of thinking brought her right back to the crux of the matter: which characters? Omega or the Maoists or some altogether different cabal?

“Do you think she’d go willingly, then—to the PRC, I mean?”

“I don’t know. I only know that she’s gone missing, and—” he stopped abruptly and frowned. “Speak of the devil.”

The devil indeed, Perilous thought. Sheng was approaching flanked by two other members of the People’s Republic in Red Army uniforms. The crowd parted to let them through, and Perilous could feel Husher tense at her side. Sheng stopped directly in front of them and scowled. The two

soldiers put their hands to the pistols tucked into their holsters. Perilous felt her pulse quicken.

12

A small, red go-fast boat zipped to Sparks' side and a hand reached out to her. It was Bette Noire.

"Allons-y, Sparks! Let's go!"

Sparks didn't bother to assess her predicament or consider Bette's stake in it. It wouldn't have helped. Instead, she took Bette's hand and pulled herself out of the water. Bette bulleted forward, following the wake of wobbling lanterns left by the two dragon boats. Even with such a small, sleek craft, it was a difficult passage. The three remaining dragon boats had stalled in the aftermath of the interruption, creating an obstacle course for Bette to navigate.

Once she'd cleared that roadblock, they were thwarted by fishing vessels and revelers in rowboats who were quickly filling in the space behind the dragon boats. The makeshift lanes among the vessels

were thick with paper lanterns and debris. Bette darted between the haphazard barriers, her eyes fixed on the stern of the receding dragon boats. They already had a significant head start, and they were quickly disappearing into the darkening dusk.

Sparks strained forward, barely feeling the chill wind against her soaked clothes. The dragon boats veered west out of the typhoon shelter and disappeared among a convoy of cargo ships arrayed out in the open waters. Bette followed suit, but the ships formed a labyrinth of rusted, creaking steel. It was no use. When they finally made their way through, the dragon boats were nowhere to be seen.

“Merde!” Bette shouted, slamming her fists onto the steering wheel.

Sparks leaned back into the leather bucket seat and exhaled. The chill had caught up to her, and her muscles were aching from the race. She needed a change of clothes, but first, she needed to know what Bette was up to and who was behind this dragon boat fiasco. In her mind’s eye, Sparks saw Alkestis’ teasing wave once more and shook her head in disbelief. Did Al arrange the kidnapping or was she an unsuspecting pawn? If she was behind it, who the hell was she working for? And how had Bette arrived on the scene so quickly? She started with the question she’d have the most luck getting

an answer to, though she wasn't sure whether the answer would be truthful.

"To what do I owe this timely rescue, Mademoiselle Noire?"

"Obviously, I've been following you. Well, not you—" she said pointedly, "Jane."

"For Omega? You were going to make another attempt at nabbing her?"

"Bien sûr. I was waiting for the right moment."

"Speaking of—The Status Quo—that certainly wasn't the right moment. Was it because of us?"

Bette nodded. "I knew my cover would be blown, but also—" she paused and bit her lip.

"What?"

"You won't believe me."

"Probably not, but you may as well spit it out."

"I wanted to warn you, to put you on alert, so to speak."

Sparks thought back to Bette's parting words: Don't believe everything you hear. Unfortunately, they only made the current account of her actions suspect.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"I didn't pretend I would. Anyway, you'd be

disappointed in me if I did. What now?"

Bette looked at her. "What do you mean, what now? We've lost her."

"But to whom?" Sparks said, looking out over the seascape. Ahead of them, Lantau Island rose out of the water, bathed in the light of the full moon. The air was thick with the scent of salt water and diesel, and the faint spice of sandalwood and patchouli trickled out of dimly-lit incense workshops back on shore.

"Not Omega. At least, I can't claim credit. I suppose it's possible they employed a second agent to make sure the job got done right this time. They weren't at all pleased about 'The Status Quo shocker,'" she said, using the Telegraph's title with clear distaste.

"Husher is Omega," Sparks said. Perilous had relayed the news earlier via Sparks' wristwatch transmitter.

"Oui," Bette said. "Ce n'est pas un choc."

"Well," Sparks said, throwing off the yellow tunic and pouring water out of her canvas sneakers. "Husher hired Alkestis, same as he hired you. So maybe she was the second agent. The race was her idea."

"C'est possible," Bette said and then, for the first time, seemed to notice Sparks' waterlogged

condition. "Let's get you back ashore. We can pick up something dry at one of the shops, oui? And then figure out what next."

She turned the boat back into the shelter, where the festivities had regained their momentum. Laughter and music floated over the surface of the water.

"Doesn't it seem strange?" Sparks said as they docked and slipped into the crowd on the wharf.

"Quoi?"

"It's as if no one even registered the disappearance of two rather large dragon boats. It didn't faze a soul. No police arrived. Nothing."

Bette threw back her head and laughed. "C'est Hong Kong. Nothing is out of place here. Nothing is surprising. People here, they practice daily the suspension of disbelief. And anyway, what police? Do you see where we are? These are your huddled masses, Sparks. Things disappear here all the time, but the people are too poor, and their concerns are not the concerns of the police."

They located an emporium that was still open, and Sparks purchased a pair of comfortable, loose-fitting slacks and a matching tunic in a homespun gray cotton. She switched out of her soaked clothes in a storage room at the back that

the owner had opened for her. When she was transferring her belongings from the pocket of her wet trousers, she remembered the slip of paper she'd retrieved from Joan's office earlier in the day. She examined it in the light of the single flickering bulb that lit the room, relieved to see that it hadn't been utterly ruined by her extempore baptism.

It was a calling card. The only characters Sparks understood read Kowloon. There was no address, and from Sparks' understanding, the Walled City had no system of formal streets to offer help with navigation anyway. She flipped the card over. On the back was a Chinese symbol she'd seen earlier in the evening. It had been tattooed on the palm of the rower who'd pushed her out of the dragon boat. Though she suspected it was the mark of some local organization of ne'er-do-wells, it meant nothing to her. She knew who could offer her insight though.

"Perilous, come in," she said, pressing a small button on the side of her gold wristwatch. "Perilous."

The receiver emitted only static. She thought for a moment the water may have damaged the watch, but Madam Simone had seen to it that the girls in Product Development had thoroughly waterproofed it after her dip in the Seine in August.

To double-check, she buzzed Truman.

“What is it, Spartakanova?” he said, his voice edged with annoyance as usual. She wondered what time it was in New York. If she was lucky, she’d woken him up.

“I was just checking to make sure this thing is still working. I can’t get ahold of Perilous.”

“It’s working. Give me a minute. I’ll see if I can locate her for you.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Truman said, “I’m showing she’s somewhere on the Kowloon peninsula, but her signal is spotty. I can’t pin her down. Could be in the thick of interference. Probably off gallivanting in some swank club with that Husher fellow.”

“That Husher fellow’s Omega. Doesn’t that concern you?”

“Low level nobody in the big scheme of it. I’m more concerned about this mysterious Sisterhood if it exists. I’ve never seen a secret society so bloody buttoned up. But while we’re on the subject of Omega—any word from your friend Bette?”

“Nope,” Sparks said. She knew Truman would never go for an alliance with the mercenary French woman, but Sparks was beginning to feel like her options were limited.

“No more attempts on Jane, then?”

There was a loud knock at the door, and the owner shouted something in Cantonese that Sparks didn't understand. She was pretty sure it meant her time was up though, and frankly, she was regretting the call already. "Sorry, Truman! Gotta run! I'll be back in touch soon."

Sparks shut off the transmitter and exited the dressing room. She bowed deeply before the owner, who scolded her and rushed her out of the store. Bette was waiting outside.

"*Quel charme!*" she cried seeing Sparks in the traditional Chinese attire. "Something about you, Sparks. You could make a burlap sack look dashing!"

"No need to butter me up," Sparks said. "I'm going to let you help me find Jane."

"*Pour de vrai?* You're going to let me?" Bette said with a laugh. "*Comme c'est gentil.* But why should I help you? You've got no more idea where she's been taken than I have."

"*Au contraire,*" Sparks said, and held the calling card just out of Bette's reach. "But I need you to play nice. I need you to be on my side tonight. I need to know I can trust you."

Bette shrugged. "I'll play as nice as I can. I cannot promise more, and so now you can trust me because that is an honest answer."

A. Ware

Sparks sighed. It would have to do.

13

“Comrade,” Husher said with the expression of someone who’s just bitten into something rotten.

“Sir Silas,” Sheng replied with equal disdain.

“We haven’t been introduced,” Perilous said, holding out her hand. “Perilous Faretheewell. I’m a friend of—”

“I know whose friend you are, Miss Faretheewell, and I’ve come as a friend to speak with you,” he replied though he refused her hand.

Perilous let it drop to her side. She looked at Husher, but his expression was empty and his eyes were fixed on the opera singer. It was as if he was oblivious to Sheng’s presence, as if he’d checked out entirely. Perilous had known people who were gifted at the cold shoulder, but Husher was taking it to another level.

“I always welcome the prospect of new

friendships, Comrade Sheng. What would you like to speak with me about?"

"Your inquisitive disposition."

"My—" Perilous began, but Sheng cut her off.

"You've been plying the gentleman from London with many questions, and I wonder why that is."

Perilous looked from Sheng to Husher, confused. "I don't understand," she said. "How—"

"Of course you don't, Miss Faretheewell. This is very much over your head. Allow me to clarify," he said, taking a step towards her. His two lackeys followed suit, closing the space between them.

Perilous didn't like where this was going. "Silas?"

It was as if a spell had been broken. He gripped her arm and said, "Run."

Perilous didn't need to be told twice. She turned and bolted through the crowded temple courtyard with Husher by her side and the three soldiers close on their heels. She pushed through a throng of tourists and toppled a beer vendor's cart, sending cans rolling in all directions. When she looked back over her shoulder, she saw one of the soldiers had lost his footing. He was up again

quickly.

She fled the complex, diving under the crimson paifang and into the traffic on Kansu Street. Cars slammed on brakes, and a rickshaw driver nearly overturned his fare. He shouted in her wake, but Perilous was already barging back into the bustling crowds of Temple Street where she hoped they'd be able to lose their pursuers. She pushed her way up the swift current of singing, laughing revelers, darting in and out of the knots of shoppers. Night was settling over the city, and people were flocking out in droves to celebrate the festival, providing both a barrier and a cover for Perilous and Husher.

She darted down another busy street. Her heart was pounding and her legs were burning, but she was flying, putting distance between herself and the PRC thugs. She knew just enough about Mao's army to know she didn't want to find herself in their care. Husher steered her into a kitchenware store cluttered with woks and pots and stacks of porcelain soup bowls.

"Through the back!" he shouted.

Perilous hurtled down the main aisle and through a door at the back of the store. She emerged in a narrow alley and veered to the right, tripping over a pile of garbage and sprawling.

Husher grabbed her hand and pulled her up and further down the alley into a labyrinth of gritty passages running in all directions. They twisted and turned until Perilous was entirely disoriented. But they'd lost Sheng.

Her ears strained for the sound of boots on the street, but all she could hear was the loud whistle and clap of firecrackers being set off from distant rooftops. Their sharp popping bursts rang out and echoed in the confined space. She leaned against the grimy alley wall and caught her breath.

"Follow me," Husher said, "I know a place."

After they'd negotiated several more dark corners and crossroads, he guided Perilous toward a flight of wooden stairs that led into subterranean darkness.

"Down here."

The scent of mildew and spilled wine was overpowering, but the decay was a facade obscuring something more vibrant just underneath. Perilous could feel the throbbing pulse of a live band on the other side of the stairwell's damp walls.

"What is this place?"

"The Golden Lotus," he said, knocking on a heavy teak door at the bottom of the stairwell.

"Do you know every dark alley in Hong Kong?"

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. Quite possibly.”

“How did Sheng know I was asking questions?” Perilous said. “How did he find us? What did he want?”

He didn't have time to answer her barrage of questions. A kohl-rimmed eye had appeared in the door's brass security grille.

“Sir Husher!” cried a female voice from the other side. The door swung open, revealing an attractive young Hong Konger in a black leather cheongsam that gripped her voluptuous curves like a wanton vice.

“Daiyu! You look stunning as usual. Listen, Daiyu, bit of a sticky wicket we find ourselves in,” he said, looking back over his shoulder. “It's possible we've got the Red Army on our tail believe it or not.”

“I've heard stranger things,” she said, with a slight bow. “Come in! Pay your respects to She Who Listens, and She Who Listens will protect you and your friend.”

“You've got to be kidding,” Perilous said.

Daiyu stepped back and waved them into a small antechamber dominated by a neon pink sculpture of Guanyin, her lithe arms undulating seductively through the magic of electronic programming. Spirals of incense hung from the tile

ceiling, filling the small space with the sweet, watery notes of lotus flower. Husher led her past the garish effigy into the club's main room. The place was packed wall to wall. Perilous' head was throbbing from the mad dash through the streets, and the stifling atmosphere of The Golden Lotus wasn't helping.

A boisterous all-girl band was holding court from a raised dais up front. Their fans, a motley mix of mods and freaks, were wildly swaying to the hypnotic howling of the lead singer. All of the band members' costumes were reminiscent of the Chinese opera—richly beaded, embroidered, and accented with flowing waterfall sleeves. Despite the nod to aristocratic custom, they'd forgone traditional modesty. Their skirts were of the miniature variety, and they wore fishnet stockings and black military boots that rose up to their knees.

They launched into another spirited number, and the crowd grew frenzied in their excitement. The lead singer, her face framed by a theatrical crown of gold shooting stars, dominated the stage like a high priestess at her altar. She stirred the passions of the exuberant dancers on the floor, and Perilous could understand their delirium despite her pounding headache. The singer's voice was enthralling. The band's rhythms were irresistible.

“I hear the world weeping,” the priestess crooned, her red-stained lips caressing each syllable. “I know the secrets you’re keeping.”

Her voice had an intimate tenor that made Perilous feel as though she was the only person in the teeming room. The scent of incense mingled with cologne and perfume and the aroma of a hundred writhing bodies. Perilous began to feel warm and light-headed. Perspiration dotted her brow, and the skin of her neck tingled.

“Sheng,” she said, trying to bring her focus back on the matter at hand. “What was that about?”

“In a minute,” Husher replied, steering her along the perimeter of the room towards a bar in the back. “I need a drink after that. Don’t you?”

She knew she shouldn’t. Her intuition was firing off warnings. Something was off. But her throat was so parched, and the club was so stifling. The bar was tended by a stout man in a black robe. His face was masked in thick red and black oil paint to resemble a demon, and he wore a heavy black robe, like one of the door god statues Perilous had seen in the temple earlier. The libation he mixed for her was strong and tangy. She drained the contents of the cup in defiance of the loud protests of her inner alarm system.

“Let me whisper in your ear,” the singer purred. Perilous touched her earring. The voice was so close. “Make your path clear, my dear.”

The guitars pulsed and the drums reverberated from every corner of the room as the witch’s brew concocted by the demonic bartender took its effect.

“Follow me, we’ll right the world. Take my hand, we’ll right the world—”

The room became a blur. Perilous felt disembodied. Then, she disappeared altogether.

“Follow me, child, follow me—”

14

“Could you tell me where to find this place?” Sparks said to the girls still conscientiously watching over the Vespas. She held out the calling card for them to see.

They stared back blankly, not understanding. Sparks’ command of Cantonese consisted almost entirely of phrases for ordering off noodle shop menus. She looked at Bette, who rolled her eyes.

“Zhè shì nǎlǐ?” she said, and the girls began to nod.

One of them, the smallest of the lot, reached out her hand. Sparks let her take the card, and the clique crowded around to study it more closely. The petite girl, clearly the head honcho, began to speak hurriedly to Bette.

“What’s she saying?”

Bette held up her finger to shush Sparks. At

last, the girl fell silent, and it was clear that she was awaiting a response.

"She says it's a clinic. A free clinic in Kowloon. She can take us close—for a price, of course, but not all the way. It's haunted, and she doesn't want to be eaten by the ghosts," Bette said, pointing at the symbol on the back of the card, "This symbol guǐ, it means—eh—you might say a devilish spirit, but also a sinister plot or a dirty trick. It's the trademark of a dangerous and très secret Kowloon gang, ami."

"I assumed as much," Sparks said and told Bette about the tattooed assailant from the dragon boat.

"Intéressant," Bette said. "So now we have an international cabal and a local coterie vying for Jane."

"Seems a bit unbalanced. Could this gang—these Guǐ—be working for Omega?"

Bette squinted, contemplating the question. "C'est possible. But I think not."

"What about the Communists? Could they be using the gang as a street army?"

"Peut-être. Yes. It could be. It would make more sense. Except—"

"Except what?"

"Well, Omega was after Jane in order to

have leverage. They believed Joan had gone over to the Communists and that she might be persuaded to bring her knowledge to them if they had something she wanted. If she has gone over to the Red Army, why would the Communists come after her sister? And what other reason would they have to kidnap Jane? She is charming, oui, but not of any inherent value to these organizations.”

“Yeah. I see what you mean,” Sparks said. “Say, I don’t suppose you might be able to clue me in about what Joan knows that makes her such a sought after young lady.”

Bette cocked her head. “What do you think, ami? You’ve been to her lab. You must have some ideas.”

“Call me paranoid, but I think maybe she was experimenting with ways to weaponize sound.”

Bette put her finger to her nose and winked. “Allons-y! Let’s see what we can turn up at this clinic, oui? I’m curious what Joan was doing there. It seems she herself might have had ties with the Guǐ. If that’s the case—”

Sparks nodded. It raised more questions than it answered, but it also suggested an intriguing new possibility. Sheng had seemed sure Husher was behind Joan’s disappearance. Omega, on the other hand, believed Joan was working with the

Communists. What if Joan wasn't kidnapped at all? What if she'd staged her own disappearance?

But to what end?

They negotiated a fee with the young girl, who'd given her name as Ying Yue. Then, the urchin clambered onto the Vespa, taking her seat behind Bette. She pointed forward and shouted directions over the loud drone of the engine and the clamor of the celebrating crowds. Bette took off, and Sparks stuck close behind her. In a matter of minutes, they were at one of the western entryways that penetrated the Walled City. It would be imperceptible to the casual observer, a narrow shadow in the chaos of the towering monstrosity.

Sparks stepped back in an attempt to get a more complete view of the shambling, makeshift structure. It rose up fourteen disorderly stories. Unlike buildings in regulated districts, Kowloon was built entirely piecemeal by shrewd squatters who built up instead of out. Each had claimed a bare rooftop upon which to construct their home or business, and over time, the haphazard nature of the swelling construction created an anarchic blockhouse citadel unlike anything else on earth. It was dodgy, dangerous, and in its own way, exquisite. Sparks took a last look at the facade, lit up by thousands of shop signs, before she ducked into the dark, damp

alleyway.

Ying Yue walked quickly, turning right and then left, scrambling up a rickety iron staircase and then diving again into yet another dripping tunnel in the concrete and corrugated metal warren. The mold-blackened walls echoed with the shouts of hawkers hidden within dingy shops. They passed half a dozen cramped workrooms where gray-faced women were painting the black pips of gaffed dice or folding silk fans or sewing painstaking stitches into linen dresses. Children scurried past, and ragged cats stared from behind crates and bins.

They turned another corner, and the passageway grew darker still. The musty scent of stale air thickened. Ying Yue stopped in front of a teahouse wedged into the shadows. Within, Sparks could hear chattering voices and the clatter of cups and saucers. It felt as if the tiny teahouse might be the final vestige of human fellowship teetering on the event horizon of a black hole. The grim galaxy of dingy shops and eateries and accommodations seemed to have petered out here, and Sparks could feel the vacuum on the other side. Her ears had begun to strain, and her head throbbed rhythmically.

Ying Yue addressed Bette.

“She says she goes no farther,” Bette translated. “The ghosts live here.”

"I believe her," Sparks replied.

"She says she thinks the place we're looking for—it's just a little farther in—forward and then two more rights."

"Tell her thanks. Ask if she'll wait for us. I'm afraid we'll never get out of here otherwise."

Bette spoke with the girl, who nodded and told them she'd wait at the teahouse if they would be so kind as to supply her with a little more cash. Sparks gave her enough to keep her occupied for an hour, and Ying Yue disappeared through the teahouse door without looking back.

"Well," Sparks said, peering into the darkness that lay ahead.

"Oui," Bette replied.

"Here goes nothing."

Sparks took a step forward and felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She could feel invisible eyes watching her. A palpable sense of dread overwhelmed her. Her heart pounded. Her pulse raced. The skin on her arms felt electrified. The shadows moved, looming and leering like threats made manifest. A wave of vertigo swept over Sparks, and the walls seemed to close in around her. Something ran across her foot, causing her to step back and bump against Bette.

"Sorry. There was something—" she looked

around but saw no sign of life among the debris that littered the passage. She wasn't sure that the sensation hadn't been her imagination. "Do you feel it? There's something off here."

Bette nodded. "Oui. Very off."

Sparks took a deep breath, fighting back the urge to turn and run, to leave Kowloon as quickly as possible and never return. The space had triggered something altogether unfamiliar to her—primal fear—and she knew it wasn't an accident or a coincidence. This place was purposely protected from prying eyes, and she had her suspicions about how it was accomplished. Even so, Sparks was fighting against her evolutionary wiring. Knowing and feeling were two entirely different things, and she knew that well as a propagandist.

She shoved aside the forces acting on her imagination. She called up all of her powers of logic, all of her will. They plunged into the gloom, following the directions given by Ying Yue. Each step drew them deeper into the dismal snarl of shuttered shops and abandoned quarters. The space was a swamp of silence, an abyss devoid of life. Sparks' shoulders were tense and her senses were straining. She was on high alert, taking in every detail, yet she started when her eyes fell on the gray countenance of an old woman. Her gaping grin

revealed toothless gums. Her hair was long and straggling. She was sitting in front of an otherwise empty chamber. Somehow she had avoided Sparks' detection. It was as though she had materialized from nothing.

The crone seemed to be singing, but Sparks couldn't hear the words until they were directly aligned with her. She'd never heard the song, but there was something familiar about it. The ancient voice was brittle, barely capable of threading its way through the dense air to pierce Sparks' hearing.

"Let me whisper in your ear. I'll make your path clear, my dear."

The old woman threw her head back and crowed. Bette grabbed Sparks by the arm, forcing her forward. The raspy cackle disappeared, but when Sparks looked back, the woman's mouth was still split in laughter. The sound simply couldn't penetrate the desolate space.

A door opened ahead of them and a pale, young girl stepped into the alley. She squatted among the refuse and dust and watched their progress, her lips moving in unison with the older woman's. When they were beside her, Sparks could hear the words barely permeating the rank air. They fell flat as soon as they were expelled. They carpeted the passage with foreboding.

“I hear the world weeping,” her childish voice trilled. “I know the secrets you’re keeping.”

She made no move towards them as they hurried past, but she curled her lips back and snapped her teeth at Sparks like a caught fox. When Sparks looked back, the mouths of the alley’s two inhabitants were still moving, but the sounds of their voices couldn’t travel far enough to reach her. The silence was complete by the time they reached the door of the clinic.

“What the—” she began, but then felt the difference in her own voice. Like the anechoic chamber in Joan’s lab, the space was dead. Her voice didn’t carry.

Bette nodded but didn’t bother responding. She reached past Sparks and pushed the clinic door open. There was no need for locks here, Sparks thought. No one in her right mind would come this far.

After a moment of fumbling, Bette found the light switch and revealed a small waiting room with several plastic chairs. Unlike the grimy storefronts they’d passed on their way, the walls of the clinic were spotless, bare, and antiseptic.

Sparks crossed the room to open the door on the back wall. It led to an operating theater. A chrome clinical bed was at the center of the space

with two large lights hanging over it. At the head of the bed was an anesthesia machine and a gleaming cart holding a tidy line of gleaming surgical instruments. It was all antiseptic save a speck of blood that had congealed on the edge of the cart and been missed during the cleanup. Several monitors and machines were pushed against one wall.

While Bette pored through folders in a metal filing cabinet next to a small desk in the corner of the room, Sparks began to explore the wall of cupboards. They were stocked with more surgical instruments and medical equipment, including a stainless steel box containing circuit boards as thin and small as a newborn's fingernail. Sparks had never seen electronic components so delicate. She couldn't conceive of how they would work or what their purpose was, but she wanted to know. She wrapped several in a latex glove she found and stuck them in her pocket to carry back to Product Development at the agency.

The quality of the air changed—its texture or vibration. Sparks couldn't have explained the sensation exactly, but she felt the room's new occupants before she saw them. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, and her skin crawled. She spun on her heel and found herself

face to face with a man whose eyes were as cold as a cobra's. He was backed by two thugs wielding thick, rusted chains.

15

Perilous tried to focus her eyes, but all of the lights had been extinguished. The music had ended abruptly, replaced by a stern silence. It wasn't Perilous who had disappeared. It was everyone else. She realized with a start that she was no longer in the club. She was stretched out on a narrow bed. The room was pitch black, and the silence was a void.

A piercing pain shot through her skull. She touched her temple gingerly and recoiled when she felt a warm, damp abrasion. There was blood on her fingertips. She must have been attacked. She was in a hospital. Sheng must have found them. She ran her hands down the length of her body, feeling for any other evidence of foul play, but the damage seemed to be limited to the small laceration on the side of her head.

Her heart pounded, and her eyes strained in the dark. She didn't have her clutch anymore. No infrared glasses. No tranquilizer darts. She twisted her earring. No transmission. A wave of nausea and fear swept over Perilous. She put her feet over the side of the bed and breathed deeply—once, twice, three times—until her heartbeat slowed and the nausea dissipated.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

Her voice sounded ragged and strained to her ears. No one answered. She tried to stand, but vertigo swept over her. She slumped back onto the bed.

“Silas?” she called out.

Still no reply, but she thought she detected a flicker of movement swallowed up in an even deeper darkness just beyond the hospital room. A hallway. Carefully, she tried to stand again, propping herself up using the bed frame. The vertigo was receding, but the space beyond her room filled her with apprehension. It was full of ghosts. Perilous felt them lurking in the shadows, watching.

“Follow me, we'll right the world. Take my hand, we'll right the world—”

Perilous heard the singer's voice, but it was disembodied, spontaneously manifesting, repeating, and disappearing. She stumbled and steadied herself

again, straining her ears to locate the direction of the sounds that swirled around her, but they moved too quickly, causing her head to spin.

“Who’s there?” she whispered into the stale night air. “Silas?”

“Who’s there? Silas?” her own voice called out, echoing out of time and ringing in her ears.

Perilous inched from the bed to the nearest wall. She crept along its perimeter until she’d come to a doorway leading into the darkened space beyond the room.

“Why is that, Sir Silas? What do you mean it’s the least you could do?”

Perilous pressed herself against the wall, attempting to burrow into the shadows. The sudden burst of sound had startled her. Not only because it appeared to come from nowhere, not only because it was her own voice, but because it meant someone had been listening in on her conversation with Husher earlier in the day, recording her even.

Someone’s playing tricks, she told herself. That’s all.

She took another deep breath and left the room, creeping into the hallway. After a few seconds, her eyes had adjusted to the darkness.

“To tell the truth, there are rumors about her. And about the agency.”

It was Silas's voice coming from somewhere just behind her, but when she turned, she was still alone. She knew suddenly what she was looking for, who she was looking for.

"Joan?" she said into the emptiness, and the name repeated back to her. "Joan."

Perilous listened to the ravenous nothing that swallowed up the name, leaving a vacuum that caused her ears to pop. A feeble pendant lamp flickered on, revealing a door just down the hall. Perilous strode towards it, mustering her courage. She pushed the door open and peered into a modern laboratory bathed in the red glow of night lighting.

Husher was seated in a metal folding chair against the wall to her right. On his far side, in an identical chair, sat Sheng. Both stared vacantly, as if they'd been turned off, their skin scarlet in the weird light. Alkestis was slouching in a black leather love seat against the far wall, her arm slung around Jane. Jane's eyes were wide. She looked at Perilous with an expression that was a combination of terror and pity and sorrow.

A young woman in a white lab coat stood in the center of the room. She looked like a first-year university student who'd spent one too many late nights in the library. Her dark hair hung in a limp bob just under her chin, and she wore large, black-

rimmed glasses that accentuated her dour expression.

“Joan,” Perilous felt her mouth make the word, but nothing came out.

“That’s right. The long-lost sister. The prodigal daughter.”

Her lips never moved, but the words were perfectly clear in Perilous’ mind. Perfectly clear and in Perilous’ own voice.

“What have you done, Joan? What have you done to Silas? To Sheng?” Perilous said, but she was beginning to formulate an answer to her question even as she thought it.

Joan tapped her temple and smiled. Perilous mirrored her movement, feeling once more the sting of the abrasion there. Her heart began to pound. She tried to clear her mind, but it was useless. Joan had taken up space there, and Perilous couldn’t push her out.

“The auditory system is terribly inefficient, you see.” Joan’s words came from inside Perilous’ head. “Once a vibration strikes your tympanic membrane, it goes through a virtual Rube Goldberg machine before it’s finally converted into the brain waves that you perceive as sound. It’s such a messy process. I knew there must be a way to bypass it, and so I began toying with the idea of a neural network. If I could access another person’s brain

waves, I theorized, there'd be no need for the auditory system at all. I could simply siphon off the sounds that someone else's brain created."

"You're using other people as your ears."

"That's right. My ambition was small at first. I didn't hope to hear more than the cries of vendors at the Temple Street night market as you did this evening. It's not so much to wish for oneself, is it?"

Perilous knew that Joan was being sincere. She felt it. She understood why Joan had to do what she did, and she sympathized—against her will.

"I developed a microscopic device to transmit select brain waves to a receiver on my end. In theory, it would pick up only those waves that match the length of sounds—and it worked. Not perfectly at first. There was static, of course, and unique sounds were difficult to discern. It was quite a cacophony if I'm to be honest. But over time, I was able to refine the technology, to control it, and finally, I could hear the sounds the world makes. And some sounds that were not part of the world, as it turns out," Joan said with a mischievous grin.

"Their thoughts, you mean."

"It hadn't been my intention to infringe on anyone's privacy. But young science is unrefined. I began to pick up the sounds that their minds made

independently, the sounds of their desires and their fears," she said and laughed. "Oh, their fears. You wouldn't believe what men are afraid of, Perilous. Such silly stuff. They're building weapons of mass destruction, but that doesn't frighten them at all. Do you know what scares them most? Us."

She sneered in disgust at the two unresponsive men, and Perilous was overwhelmed by outrage. She could feel Joan's disdain as if it was her own.

"When Silas and I first fell in love, I believed he was much more intelligent than I. How could it be otherwise? How could someone with so much confidence and power be my inferior? But then I got into that thick head of his and learned the truth. He was no different than my classmates, who simply couldn't wrap their petty minds around the idea that a woman could be their equal. A deaf woman. A foreigner. It was too much. I was too much. Even Sheng, my oldest, dearest friend, even Sheng couldn't bear the idea that I might be more clever, more talented, better. He had begged to marry me, but only if I would pinch myself in to fit his idea of what a wife should be. No science. No. No education. I could satisfy myself with bearing children and wiping the sweat from his brow."

Perilous felt Joan's frustration and rage

transmitted to her. She remembered the noiseless vacuum of the hallway, the prickly silence of the restaurant. Joan's entire childhood had been enveloped in that soundless solitude. Rather than relieve her isolation, her genius had set her further apart from others. She'd spent her life believing she was an imposter, treated like a pretender by men who had only come into their power through inheritance and appropriation. They hadn't struggled the way Joan had. They hadn't needed to work. They hadn't had to prove themselves. The world belonged to them because they took it, and it wasn't fair.

Joan's eyes were soft and luminous in the laboratory's dim lights. She nodded gratefully, listening in as Perilous grasped what her life had felt like.

"Silas believed he was more intelligent, naturally. Of course he did. But he also feared he might be wrong. The more I dug, the more I realized: I am better. I am smarter. I should have the power he has. And so I took it. It was the same with Sheng. With all of them. They all assumed they were my superiors, and I proved them all wrong."

"All of them?" Perilous said. The vein in her temple was throbbing, and she was finding it hard to concentrate, hard to remember why she'd come

here. She felt as if she was disappearing, being forced out of her own mind by Joan's voice.

"That's right. I used Silas' resources to set up this lab. I developed an infrasound barrier to keep trespassers out. You experienced it yourself—the sensation of being watched, the shadowy figure in the corner of your eye, the voices, the ghosts—all illusions produced by frequencies undetectable to the human ear. It deterred any would-be adventurers without need of a security system. Most people with any sense avoid the Walled City anyway—too many criminals. But that suited my purposes. More test subjects. The worst of humanity makes the very best test subjects."

Joan glanced over Perilous' shoulder and smiled.

"Dàjiā hǎo. Have you met my friends, Perilous?"

Perilous turned to follow Joan's gaze. Behind her, four young men in black suits had appeared without disrupting the silence.

"These boys were once terrible rogues. Murderers. Rapists. Thieves," she paused and a flicker of horror crossed her face. Perilous could only imagine what she'd heard probing those minds. She could almost hear it herself—a clamor of other people's thoughts. It was enough to push anyone

over the edge.

“But look at them now,” Joan said with a smile. “Pliable as kittens.”

She crossed the gleaming tiles to inspect her stealthy sentry.

“They’ll do whatever I tell them. Would you like to see?”

Perilous shook her head, ignoring the pain it caused. She was struggling to take back the space that Joan had occupied there. “Not really. I prize free will a little too highly.”

“Free will? What is it anyway? Who has free will? Was I free to choose my biological makeup? Every day, my freedoms are limited by my gender, my abilities, my government. What is free will? The only men who have it use it to keep others in chains.”

Joan was growing visibly agitated. Her eyes flared with rage and frustration. Perilous heard Joan’s thoughts in her own voice—filled with a fury that she hadn’t felt in years, not since her brother’s death. She felt it now, fresh and visceral. “Look at these reprobates. What did they do with their free will but deny life and freedom and happiness to others? No. They do not deserve free will. They do not deserve to live. They should die on the spot.”

The men dropped to the floor in a disjointed line of bodies.

Joan sighed.

“Forgive me. I forget myself sometimes.”

A chill ran through Perilous, and her temple pulsed. She glanced at Jane, whose face was streaked with tears. Alkestis kept a firm grip on her shoulder.

16

The Cobra swung his meaty fist, but Sparks ducked. The blow slammed into the cupboard behind her, and the tray of tiny circuitboards flipped under the impact. They skittered across the floor soundlessly. Sparks lunged forward into his steely abdomen, shoving him into the surgical table and knocking over his two goon companions like dominos. He grabbed a knife from the cart and swung at Sparks. The sharp blade tore into the gray cotton of her sleeve as she blocked him. She grabbed his wrist and twisted, throwing her knee into his groin. He dropped the knife as the pain seared through him, but he was up again instantly. His elbow made contact with Sparks' jaw this time, and she lurched backward, slipping on a circuitboard.

His companions had righted themselves. Bette swung the metal desk chair at the thug nearest her.

The leg of the chair caught the back of his head, and he slumped to the linoleum floor, blood pouring out of the gash she'd left there. The other goon hurtled towards her, swinging the rusty chain in a wide circle over his head. Bette pulled a small gun from her pocket and aimed. He dropped to the floor.

The Cobra leapt towards Sparks as she scrambled to her feet. She met him with a roundhouse kick that sent him hurtling backwards. Sparks pursued, charging with a left hook that sent him sprawling on the floor. He made a move to get back up, but Bette finished him off with a sharp boot to his temple.

The operating room was in shambles. The surgical table was on its side, and the floor was slick with blood and detritus. The three men lay prone and silent. Bette took Sparks face in her hands, wiping a trickle of blood away from her mouth. She pointed at the desk.

"Come see," she said. The words barely penetrated the thick air.

She stepped daintily over the bodies to get back to the desk and pushed forward a folder that contained a patient worksheet with data added in precise Chinese characters. Sparks looked it over. It was recent. No more than an hour ago according to

the time stamp. Sparks couldn't decipher most of the writing, but she recognized some of the data. There was a number she believed was a frequency identification next to the patient's name, and the patient's name was written in English: Perilous Faretheewell.

"What does it say? What does the rest of it say?" Sparks shouted, cutting through the deafening silence.

"It—it's shorthand. Coded. I think—a—eh—an injection? Or infusion?"

"We've got to find her," Sparks said. "We've got to find Perilous. She couldn't be too far off, could she? This wasn't even an hour ago. They've got to be nearby."

She looked around the room, her mind racing. Her glance landed on the circuitboards on the floor.

"It's an implant. One of these."

She held up one of the minuscule devices for Bette to see.

Sparks pressed the button on the side of her wristwatch. "Perilous!"

There was no response. She adjusted the transmitter. "Truman!"

Still nothing. Joan had rigged the place so no transmissions could get in or out. It was a

Faraday cage. That explained why neither she nor Truman had been able to reach Perilous earlier. But Sparks had an idea. If her premonition was correct, if Joan was using these circuitboards to somehow interface with other minds, Sparks could use the frequency of Perilous' implant to triangulate her location. She grabbed the folder with Perilous' information and pulled Bette out of the clinic. They dashed back down the alleyway, now empty of its silent chorus, and to the relative normalcy beyond the dead zone.

Outside the teahouse, Sparks explained her theory to Bette.

"We need three points," she said.

"Four," Bette corrected her. "This place is fourteen stories. You'll need a fourth point to find what level she's at."

"Okay, then. Four. I'm one," she said, pointing to her wristwatch. "You've got a transceiver on you."

"Naturalment."

"I can get Truman to transmit. We just need one more point."

"Omega has a listening station in Guangzhou. That's your fourth."

"Omega? No way. We'll be made. Omega will get their hands on the technology."

Bette shrugged. "Okay. I guess Perilous is a sonic zombie then. Your call, ami."

"Dammit," Sparks said. "Fine. Do it. But give me a head start. I want to get her out of there before any Omega agents come stomping in."

"Trust me," Bette said.

"Said the alligator to the monkey. I'm going up to the rooftop. I should be able to transmit to HQ there to lock onto Perilous' frequency. She's got to be somewhere within the vicinity of that dead zone. If I go up, I should be able to get back down to her quickly. You get out of here and do your thing."

They synchronized their transceivers, and Bette assured Sparks she would contact her as soon as she had the two measurements. Bette pulled Yeng Yue out of the teahouse, and the two ran off in the direction they'd come. Sparks took a deep breath and plunged back into the dead zone in search of a stairwell. She found one down a narrow alleyway, but before she had a foot on the stairs, she felt a vibration on the rusted metal grating that made up the floor. She turned to find the Cobra moving toward her with a steadfast step. His nose was bent at a painful angle, and blood caked the side of his face.

He sprung at Sparks, and she blocked him

with a backward kick. Her leg and torso extended in a fluid line. The Cobra swept her stable leg, and Sparks crashed to the floor. He lunged at her, but Sparks was back on her feet in a flash. She attacked him with a rapid series of jabs. The Cobra crouched into a defensive posture. Sparks circled him, aiming at his broken nose. She was fast and forceful, but her mind wasn't in the fight. She needed to get to the roof. She backed herself into a corner. Seizing the advantage, the Cobra caught her wrist, and threw her down, knocking the breath out of her. He kicked her in the ribs, sending a searing pain through her torso. Sparks grabbed his ankle and yanked him down. She rolled on top of him and delivered a sharp strike to his jugular, followed by another to his temple. He was down. This time it was for good.

Sparks ran up the stairs as quickly as she could, but she was winded from the fight, and it wasn't a straight shot. The landings were disjointed, and the climb to the top of Kowloon was a zig zagging labyrinth of balcony ladders and rickety wooden stairs. The dead zone extended all the way up, and the passage was untended—the treads were uneven and in some places long gone. Sparks leapt and maneuvered, her ears straining against the unnatural silence, her eyes straining against the

dark.

Finally, she reached a trapdoor that opened up onto the rooftop and climbed through. A plane had just lifted off from the nearby airport. It was flying directly overhead, almost close enough for Sparks to touch. Its engines roared, and the sound was a welcome respite after the silence of the dead zone. Firecrackers were popping and fizzing on nearby rooftops, and an elaborate fireworks display was lighting up the nearby harbor.

The rooftop over the dead zone was still by comparison, which proved to be an advantage as Sparks tried to communicate with Truman. She explained the situation to him, including her need to pull in Bette and the Omega listening station. He was none too pleased, but within minutes, he had a spotty read on Perilous' frequency. He transmitted his measurements to Sparks, who was likewise using her transceiver to detect Perilous' signal. It was much stronger as she was closer.

Now, she only had to wait for Bette to transmit the measurements of the signal's direction from her device and from the Omega listening station. Sparks' pulse raced. Perilous was somewhere nearby in danger, and there was nothing she could do but wait.

17

Jane wrestled herself from Alkestis' grip and ran to her sister. She was screaming at Joan, but the sound was a muffled reverberation. Joan ignored her, but Sheng seemed suddenly to come back alive. He stood, walked to Jane, and caught her up in his arms. She struggled in his vice-like grip, but he was impassive and unyielding. Perilous could see Jane's mouth moving. She was talking to her, yelling at her, but she couldn't make out the words. She was already struggling to hear her own thoughts. She didn't have the capacity to read lips too. She couldn't help Jane. She was powerless.

“What gives you the right? What right do you have to force your own voice into someone else's mind?”

Joan's serene smile mirrored the beatific expression on the statue of Tin Hua that Perilous

had admired earlier in the evening.

“Would you prefer it be Omega’s voice? Because that was their plan before I intervened. They would bend the masses to their bidding more easily. Ham-fisted propaganda would be a thing of the past, no offense.”

Perilous grimaced, the pain in her head becoming more pronounced with every word Joan planted there.

“Why should men like Silas Husher and his cronies at Omega dictate the greater good? Why should they be allowed to do as they please at the expense of everyone else? I’ve done what needs to be done,” Joan said. “The world is a dark place, Perilous. It’s full of evil men who use their power to subjugate and oppress. I have great admiration for the work Madam Simone has done with her agency, but I’ve often wondered where her true loyalty lies. She is, after all, married to Omega. She is, after all, a woman of exceeding wealth and privilege in a land built on the backs of the suffering poor. Confucius said, ‘To be wealthy and honored in an unjust society is a disgrace.’ Madam Simone, then, despite her most noble intentions, is as much a disgrace as Silas. Even if she’s well-intended, even if she’s on the right track, her methods are messy and her motives are dubious. She relies on

turmoil and chaos to disrupt the status quo, but disruption isn't nearly enough. The problem is much larger. A fundamental rewiring of human behavior is in order."

Perilous' mind was teeming with conflicting emotions and ideas and questions. She grabbed at one.

"What do you know about The Eris Agency? How?"

"My mother, of course. Didn't yours tell you? Isis is such a masterful storyteller. I've read all of her books. Her work on infectious rhythms was an inspiration to me."

"My mother? What do you mean?"

Joan laughed. "Our mothers were once the shining stars of Simone's little outfit of anarchists. That's how they knew one another. My mother used to tell us such tales. Of course, she pretended that she'd made them up, that they were merely products of her vivid imagination. She even gave the agency a new name to protect her former employer: The Exalted Sisterhood of Guanyin. Sounds like it was ripped out of the script of a stuffy old opera, doesn't it?"

Perilous' mind was reeling. Her mother had been an agent of Eris? Why hadn't she told her? She shook her head to clear out the fog. Once more,

the scrape on her temple seared.

“When I began to develop my own plans, I knew I’d need help. People I could rely on. People who shared my desire for a better world, a more equitable, happier world. It doesn’t have to be this way, Perilous. That’s why I brought you here. Together, we can create something much better—a world built on equality and justice. We can tear down Omega and all their ilk and build a utopia. When I heard how you saved Jane from The Omega Foundation, when I spoke with you through Silas, I knew you and your colleague would be perfect recruits for my new world order.”

“Never,” Perilous said, struggling against the new voice in her mind and the new feelings that accompanied it. She wanted to help Joan. She wanted to put an end to all of the injustices. She knew that men like Husher and Sheng, like Mao and the moguls at Omega, should be put down. They were evil, and they deserved the worst possible ends. But she also knew those weren’t her feelings. She didn’t believe you could solve problems with the same tactics that created them. She knew that the oppressor was always lurking, in every mind. She didn’t want that power.

“That’s why you would be perfect,” Joan said, reading her mind. “Because you don’t want the

power. Look at him. Look at Silas. He's not really a bad guy, Perilous, but left to his own devices, he's not really a good guy either. I'd say his moral compass is off by a few meters, and do you know why? Because he wants power."

"But isn't that what you want?"

"No. I want what your brother wanted. Justice. Equality. Freedom. That's what your brother was working for when he came to Silas, begging for his help. Did you know that?"

"My brother? What are you talking about? What do you mean?"

"He's very sorry about what happened to your brother," Joan said, ignoring the question.

Perilous' stomach twisted. She looked to Husher, but he was still staring blankly at the wall. "What does he have to be sorry about?"

"Oh, that's right. He didn't tell you, did he? That shouldn't surprise anyone. I mentioned he's not really a good guy, didn't I? It's just, he almost certainly could've prevented your brother's death. To be fair, I believe he really wanted to. Just not badly enough to upset the old apple cart. But seeing you, Perilous, that's brought back some memories and stirred up some remorse and even, perhaps most shockingly, self-doubt. It's been a breath of fresh air, from my perspective. A powerful man's mind is

a dull place to be most days. Not much happens there.”

“What did he have to do with my brother’s death?”

“He was ever so desperate to climb the ladder to the top. It’s all he thinks about. Omega this. Omega that. Your brother provided him with the perfect opportunity to ingratiate himself with his superiors.”

“Arthur? Never.”

Joan smiled sadly, wisely.

“Perilous, friend, your brother Arthur discovered something valuable after he’d given up his career in Europe. An entrepreneur in your southern states with political ambitions—a man called Powers—was experimenting with waves to manipulate people’s emotions, to stir panic and fear and anxiety. Fearful people are the easiest to control. Mobs are always looking for a strong man to tell them what to think, what to do. You need look no further than the mainland and Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Or the Red Terror in your own country.

“This man, this Powers, he was also a member of Omega, and Omega was funding the research. Arthur came to Silas and told him about his precious boys’ club and their dirty dealings. He

told him that Omega wasn't a charitable organization but a machine of tyranny and war. That's why your brother died. Because he tried to warn Silas, and Silas betrayed him."

Tears sprung up in Perilous' eyes. Rage welled in her stomach. She felt an overwhelming desire to kill Husher herself right there with her bare hands. The muscles in her arms tensed. Her headed pounded like a war drum.

"Not yet," Joan said. "We still need him. He's an invaluable source of information."

A calm passed over Perilous. She could wait. She could wait a little while. She could kill him later, when he wasn't important to their plans. Their plans. Perilous heard the words in her own voice and felt conflicted. She wasn't sure which were her thoughts and which were Joan's.

"I helped him advance his position within Omega," Joan said. "He needed my genius for that, and I was happy to oblige. But on my own terms. I promised him I would develop a technology far more advanced than any dimwitted American hick. I would secure his spot in the hierarchy of Omega. All he had to do was lend me his ears. And he did. It was a fair trade. I gave him just enough data to help him cinch his position in Omega. I provided experimental prototypes that helped their cause. But

it was nothing compared to what I was developing for myself. By then, I'd gained full access to all of his thoughts. I'd implanted more people, and I could hear much farther. I knew everything Omega was plotting, and I knew they'd grown suspicious of me. Of course they had. That's when I went underground. To protect myself and my work."

It made sense to Perilous. It was logical. Moral even. The world was a dark place. It was controlled by men with no consciences. The people in it were so hopeless and ignorant and brainwashed they couldn't see it. Joan may have been deaf, but the world lacked vision. Joan would change everything, and Perilous felt a longing to be a part of the transformation.

18

“Sparks, I’ve got them. I’ve got the measurements you need,” Bette said. “You’ll have to act quickly because Omega is zeroing in on her location through several listening stations. I have no control over that. I had to give them her frequency to get the data you need.”

“I know,” Sparks said. “Tell me.”

Bette supplied Sparks with the final two measurements she needed to fix on Perilous’ coordinates. She entered the four measurements into her watch, and within seconds, she was rushing back down through the dark maze of Kowloon towards Joan’s hidden laboratory. There was no reason to work with stealth as the area was completely barren of sound. Sparks ignored the sensation of being spied on, the presence of shadowy phantoms lurking in the corners. It was all smoke and mirrors.

Joan had conjured a network of sound waves that carved out a safe space for her to do her dark work. She'd been implanting people with those lightweight circuit boards, creating an army to do her bidding. Sparks didn't know why, but it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was getting to Perilous before something terrible happened. She didn't know what damage Joan was capable of affecting with her devices. An electrical surge, even a small one, in the right area could scramble Perilous's brain forever, possibly kill her.

After plunging down stairwells and alleys, Sparks reached the dark hallway indicated by her transceiver. A door was ajar and a red glow emanated from it. Sparks bound towards the door, halting just outside to catch her breath and see what she could see. She peered around the corner. Joan stood in the center of the room, an expression of intense concentration on her face. Husher was seated against one wall. Sheng was standing with Jane trapped in his arms. She was squirming but unable to escape. Alkestis was seated against the back wall, watching the scene. Sparks didn't see Perilous, but she knew she was nearby.

The row of dead Guǐ henchmen confirmed Sparks' suspicion that Joan could do more than transmit and receive messages with her contraption.

She could kill. Sparks would have to be careful. Perilous was in a vulnerable state. But she would have to be fast. The Omega agents would be here soon.

Before Sparks could act, she felt an arm wrap around her throat, shutting of her air passage.

“Perilous! It’s me!” Sparks said, but Perilous maintained her grip.

“Good. You’re here at last,” she said, speaking directly into Sparks’ ear to overcome the sound barriers. Sparks knew it wasn’t Perilous speaking. It was Joan, speaking through her.

Perilous dragged Sparks into the room. Had it been anyone else in the world, Sparks would’ve taken them down to the ground, but it was Perilous. She didn’t want to hurt her, so she let herself be lugged before Joan.

“I was just telling your friend how we’ll all work together to change the world,” Perilous said, her lips touching Sparks’ earlobe. “Won’t that be nice?”

“I like the world okay,” Sparks grunted.

Jane was trying to say something to her, but Sparks couldn’t make it out. Her face was tear streaked and panicked. Alkestis, on the other hand, was a cool customer, watching with amusement from her spot on the sofa. Sparks wondered if Alkestis

was one of Joan's experiments too, or if she was just a psychopath.

"You'll feel differently when you see it through my eyes. Like your dear friend Perilous. You'll see why it's so important that we repair it. You'll see how ugly it is. How unfair."

"That's not much incentive to see things your way, sis," Sparks gasped, glaring at Joan.

Her eyes fell on a device in Joan's hand. It was small and sleek and covered in an array of buttons. A remote control, Sparks realized. She was using it to switch frequencies. Sparks needed to get her hands on it.

"Sorry, Perilous," she said.

Sparks jerked her shoulder up and spun, striking Perilous in the temple with her elbow. Perilous released her to grab her head, freeing Sparks to lunge at Joan, who wasn't prepared for the attack. She dropped the remote, sending it skidding across the floor towards a dark corner in the back of the room. Sparks threw Joan aside and went after the remote, but Alkestis was up and moving in the same direction. They clashed, and Alkestis slammed her head into Sparks' nose. She saw red as the blood began to flow, but Sparks wiped it on her sleeve and grabbed Alkestis from behind, throwing her on the ground. She'd managed

to grab the remote, and as Sparks reached for it, she smashed it on the ground, sending the pieces scattering in every direction.

“What now, love?” Alkestis said as she sprung up and threw a punch that landed against Sparks’ ear. Sparks fell on the ground, clutching her head. A ringing noise was reverberating through her skull. She could see Perilous coming towards her. She had murder in her eyes. Sparks was running out of time. She didn’t have a choice. She had to take a risk if she was going to get them out. She began jamming the button on her wrist watch over and over. Perilous’ frequency was programmed into the transceiver. Sparks hoped the rapid-fire transmission would overload her transceiver. She didn’t know what damage it might do, but she didn’t have time to come up with a more cautious strategy.

Perilous’ eyes flew open for a moment, and then she collapsed on the floor. Sparks leapt to her feet and threw a punch that sent Alkestis reeling backwards. She turned and grabbed Perilous’ limp body. Joan made a move towards her, but Sparks put a hand up.

“Omega is coming,” she said, mouthing the words to make sure she was understood. “Time’s up.”

Sparks could feel it, the rattling of the

footsteps, and Joan did too. She grabbed her sister by the wrist and made for a door at the back of the room with Alkestis hot on her heels. Sparks went in the opposite direction, back towards the roof.

In a matter of seconds, she burst into the open air. The roof was dark, but Sparks had scouted it out during her first foray, planning their escape route. She dashed across a metal catwalk nearby to clamber to a neighboring rooftop. For a moment, the flashing of fireworks lit up the night sky, revealing the silhouette of revelers enjoying their elevated view of the festival of lights. Sparks made her way forward and disappeared into the thick of the crowd.

19

Perilous woke days later in a comfortable bed in a well-lit hospital room. Outside her window was a view of the Kowloon skyline across the harbor. Sparks and Madam Simone were seated on one side of her. Her mother was on the other, skimming through a paperback.

“Mama?”

“Hey, baby,” Isis Faretheewell cooed, putting the book down and scooting her chair closer. “How’s my girl?”

Perilous touched her temple and felt a fine line of stitches. She listened intently, but the only thoughts running through her mind were her own. “Okay, I think. Joan—”

“She’s disappeared again,” Sparks said. “This time, she’s taken her sister with her.”

“We’ve got all of our informants on the

lookout for any sign of them. We'll know when Joan surfaces again. We know what to look for now."

"What to listen for more like it," Sparks said.

"Wenling?" she asked, turning back to her mother.

Isis frowned. "As you might expect. Afraid. Bewildered. In shock. Simone and I have visited with her, and she's been here to check on you. She's very fond of you. No surprises there," she said, brushing Perilous' cheek with her hand.

"What about Silas?"

"Our source says he didn't make it," Madam Simone replied. "Neither did Sheng. Joan didn't leave any loose ends."

Perilous felt a shiver run through her. It might have been her just as easily. Isis squeezed her hand.

"You're alright, sweet pea, thanks to Sparks," she said.

"Not just me. I couldn't have triangulated your coordinates without Bette and the Omega listening tower," Sparks protested with uncommon modesty, adding, "Of course, after we had your location, I did the rest. I was able to jam your frequency with a transmission overload. It shut

Joan out completely, but it was a risk. It could've just as easily scrambled your egghead—having both of us broadcasting on your airwaves. Maybe we should run some tests to make sure everything's still working. Quick! If a wave with a frequency of fifty Hertz travels at a speed of twenty-five meters per second, how far will it travel in ten minutes?"

"Sparks," Perilous said, laughing, "I'd need scratch paper for that before you scrambled my egghead."

"Really? And I was certain you were smarter than me all this time."

"I am," Perilous assured her. "In some ways. That's why we make a good team."

"You're right about that, Peril. Lucky for you I know a thing or two about waves besides how to surf 'em."

"Indeed," Madam Simone said, dabbing at the corner of her eye with a tissue. "And now, Sparks, let's give Perilous some time with her mother, shall we?"

Perilous could tell Sparks didn't want to leave. For all of her bravado, she'd been afraid too. Experiencing Joan's loneliness, her isolation, it was terrible, but it was also enlightening. Perilous was suddenly aware of how little she knew about other people's inner lives, even the people closest to her.

Sparks acted like a cool customer, but she wasn't immune to fear.

"Don't worry, sis," Perilous said. "We'll be back on the road again in no time."

"I know," Sparks replied. "I'm not worried."

Perilous rolled her eyes as the door closed behind her colleagues.

"She was worried," Isis said. "She hasn't left your side."

"I know," Perilous grinned. "Where's dad?"

"His plane hasn't arrived yet. I happened to be on the mainland for research."

"A new book?"

"That's right."

"Mama," Perilous said. "Why didn't you tell me you worked with the agency in the past?"

Isis leaned back into her chair and contemplated the question. "I didn't want to influence you one way or the other. I wanted you to make your own decisions about your future, and I didn't want them to hinge on my past."

"I thought you didn't want me to work for Madam Simone. I thought you wanted me writing something more respectable like you. Something academic."

Isis burst into laughter.

"Heaven forbid! If you were any more

respectable, I'd doubt whether you were mine," she said, and then grew serious. "I worry about you, Peril. I'm your mother. I can't help myself. But you're not in this world to be an extension of me. You're here to be something new, something completely your own."

Perilous looked out over the landscape beyond her window. Being herself suddenly carried more weight. She'd never imagined there was an alternative before Joan annexed her brain.

A faint, familiar tune played through her mind, and Perilous felt her heart begin to race. As quickly as it emerged, the song receded. It was just a memory, not an intrusion. But until they knew where Joan Dee was and what she was up to, Perilous couldn't be entirely confident in her intuition anymore.

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.**

OCTOBER 1966

KATHMANDU

A sharp elbow to her shoulder woke Sparks from a much-needed nap. The bus from Gorakhpur was bouncing across yet another dirt road, plunging headlong into yet another pothole and careening over yet another wilderness of small boulders. The driver clearly had no concern for the shocks. Likely, they'd ceased to exist in any operational state years earlier.

"How can you sleep through this?" Perilous said, readjusting her arm and once more jabbing Sparks.

"Do you mind?" Sparks said, pushing Perilous's arm away.

"There's no room in this seat," Perilous hissed.

"There's no room in this seat either," Sparks glowered, adding, "This is the worst sabbatical ever."

Perilous sunk into the thin, flattened cushion and moaned. Then, she pointed at the map. She'd been referencing it continuously since they left the bus depot. "I don't think this counts as the sabbatical. We've got to survive this to get to the sabbatical."

Survive was right, Sparks thought. First, there was the flight to Bombay. Then, the claptrap steam engine to Gorakhpur. Now, this blue ruination to Kathmandu. They'd been suffering through the final torturous leg of their journey for nearly nine hours, packed in like sardines with their compatriots. Every seat was full, and a few stalwart souls were sleeping in the aisle.

Locals from nearby villages were headed into the city to visit family for Divali, the Festival of Lights. A couple dozen beatniks and hippies from the U.S. and Europe were passing through Kathmandu on their way west along the Hippie Trail. They were presumably in search of enlightenment or at least good grass. The diverse fashion sensibilities of the riders—from fitted denim Western wear to loose, homespun Newar styles—were evenly distributed among the locals and the foreigners, as was dirt from the road and a general sense of ennui. It was hard to tell natives from foreigners after so many hours of shuddering and joggling, elbow to elbow. The bus had sifted them all down to their essence, and there wasn't much difference at the end of the day.

The scent of curry and sandalwood and cannabis permeated the air; Sparks could taste the tang of it. She took a swig from her water bottle and swashed

it around in her mouth.

She hadn't slept well. She'd been jerked around day and night as the bus swung around one hairpin curve after another ad nauseum.

Based on her mood, Perilous hadn't slept at all.

"One thing's for sure: we're not likely to run into trouble this far out," Sparks said.

That was the goal. They still didn't know where Joan Dee had made off with her sister Jane. Her knowledge about The Eris Agency made her a potential threat. Silas Husher's death hadn't been confirmed either, and he had connections with The Omega Foundation, the agency's biggest menace. Madam Simone thought it would be better if the girls lay low for a while.

Perilous' mother Isis recommended they go on sabbatical in the care of her close friend Kalamani. The famed dancing guru of Nepal was leading a group of pilgrims from Kathmandu to Baghdad. It was easy enough to add two more wayfarers to the register, and Sparks wouldn't mind a month or so of R and R. A little casual sightseeing could be just what the doctor ordered, and she and Perilous were already toying with the idea of an illustrated guidebook of the Hippie Trail. Still, at the moment, she was impatiently waiting for the pampered tourist part of the experience to begin. She was groggy and

cramped and feeling a little crabby.

At least the view wasn't bad. Outside the grimy windows, golden rice paddies passed, and distant, craggy mountains ringed the horizon. Groves of monkey puzzle and bodhi trees shaded a thick undergrowth of wild, green marijuana plants. The hippies on the bus perked up at the sight, but in a flash, the wilderness thinned to crumbs on the dirty hem of Kathmandu. Sparks heard a wistful sigh escape the young American across the aisle from her.

The bus shoved onward with the same tenacity that it had maintained throughout the journey. It took crowded corners without thought of life or limb and practically climbed in the backseat of an army jeep that wasn't proceeding at an amenable pace. It rumbled through alleys and along thoroughfares crowded with rickshaws and motorcycles and tiny European cars. At last, and not a moment too soon, the bus nosed its way daintily to the edge of the fray. It pulled to a lurching halt in front of a wide pavilion with a small pond at its center. At the center of the pond was a white temple like a lotus.

Sparks dashed out of the bus as soon as it was humanly possible and threw her knapsack over her shoulder. They'd packed light; they could piece together a wardrobe along the way. She stretched

her arms high overhead and inhaled the aroma of roasting meat and spiced onions. The festive atmosphere was already reenergizing her.

Perilous hailed a cab and gave the driver Kalamani's address. They passed back through the busy streets, hurtling past curry shops and tea houses and countless temples. At last, the driver brought them once more to the outskirts of Kathmandu and turned down a red dirt road into a forested area. After a few minutes, he stopped in front of a narrow dirt path that trekked further into the woods.

"Here," the driver said, extending his hand to take their payment. Once Sparks paid him, he pointed up the path.

"I guess we're walking, then," Sparks said, climbing out of the cab.

The driver turned the car around, crushing ferns and small shrubs, and headed back in the direction he'd come. The forest became still and silent but for the hum of insects and the occasional call of a bird in the canopy. Perilous and Sparks walked up the path. It curved westward before ending at a stone wall and a wooden door. It looked exactly like the door to another world.

Monkeys began to gibber wildly in a nearby tree, and hidden birds squawked and cried out. The girls

had disrupted the utopian setting, unbalanced the harmony.

The door swung open with a crash, and a fat rooster flew out, his black wings flapped violently. He kicked up a cloud of red dust as he fled the scene. A young girl with a tangle of dark curls bolted through the door in pursuit. She shouted ominously in a childish aping of Latin as if to exorcise the desperate yard bird.

Maybe Sparks and Perilous weren't responsible for unbalancing the harmony this time.

"Hey! That kid looks familiar, doesn't she, Peril?"

The little girl set out after the rooster like an avenging fury. The rooster, for his part, launched himself upon the mercy of the jungle. Sparks could still hear him cussing from deep within the thicket, but he seemed to have escaped his fate for the moment. The little girl stood at the edge of the red path and peered among the trees with a scowl. She had no intention of entering the forest on her own. Smart girl.

"Moonchild—you little devil!" a woman called after her.

Moonchild's mother ambled through the doorway, looking every inch the towering Amazon. Her linen sari draped over her curves with a sigh. In the dark

shade of her floppy hat, she looked much younger than her age, which Sparks knew to be 39, give or take a year. Sparks had met Kitty Capricorn on several studio lots as a child. That was back in Kitty's prime, when she was the poor man's Marilyn Monroe. Now, as an aging star, she'd become a poor man's Kitty Capricorn. She stayed in the spotlight primarily through bizarre antics and brazen sex appeal. Moonchild was the spawn—Kitty's words—of her affair with Antonin Thrall, an equally bizarre, slightly younger director.

Sparks thought Moonchild looked every inch the anti-Christ, and she was thoroughly thrilled the role went to a girl.

"Now, what am I gonna sacrifice, Kitty?" the little devil said, planting a hand on her hip and sizing up the fresh meat.

"Don't listen to her! She's just crying out for attention!" Kitty cried out. "Oh hell! Is that you Sparky?"

Sparks grinned, and Kitty swept her into a bear hug. For all of her platinum blonde and gossip rag shenanigans, she felt like a mom to Sparks. Moonchild sidled closer and scowled.

"It's good to see you, too, Miss Kitty. This is my friend Perilous. She's friends with Kalamani from way back. We're traveling with her to Kabul. What

about you?"

"Yeah! That's right. Me and Tony and the Moonchild here are on a spiritual pilgrimage."

"I'm not," Moonchild said, crossing her arms in front of her. "On a spiritual pilgrimage. I'm not. I'm here to get a rocket launcher. Daddy says you can just pick them up a dime a dozen on the Overland Passage."

Kitty rolled her eyes and mouthed, "She's all talk."

Daddy, that is to say, Antonin Thrall, entered like a ghoul who'd been summoned from a dust nap. Unlike Kitty, who took her fashion cue from local custom, Antonin wore a tailored suit all in black. His eyes were concealed by dark sunglasses, and his expression belied no particular feeling at all, except, perhaps, confidence bordering on conceit.

"Shut up, Moonchild," he said evenly. Then, gesturing towards Kitty, he said, "She's a ham, just like her mother."

"And a liar, just like her father," Kitty added.

"Sounds like she's got a lot going for her," Sparks said, and pressed on toward the door. "I guess we'll be seeing you at dinner, then. Come on, Peril."

"Small world," Perilous said under her breath.

Sparks stopped just on the other side of the

doorway and turned to face Perilous with a mischievous grin. "It's about to get smaller."

"Why if it isn't Missus Faretheewell and Missus Er—sorry, I don't recall your name," George Spiggot said, standing up to greet the two of them.

Simon Moon, his ever-present sidekick, rose as well, upsetting his tea cup.

"Clean that up, Simon," Spiggot said, and then returned his attention to Perilous and Sparks, but mostly Perilous. "You know, girls, we came all this way to enjoy a respite from the madding crowd, but it seems we've found ourselves thrown headlong into the social event of the season. Directors, aging starlets, dancing gurus, child psychopaths—I'm sure of that last one, by the way, be warned—and now the two of you. A month of enlightenment and entertainment. It's the best of both worlds if you think about it."

Sparks could tell by Perilous' expression that she was not of the same mind.

Learn more about PERILOUS & SPARKS and TWO
TO TANGIER at the website:

perilousandsparks.com

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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