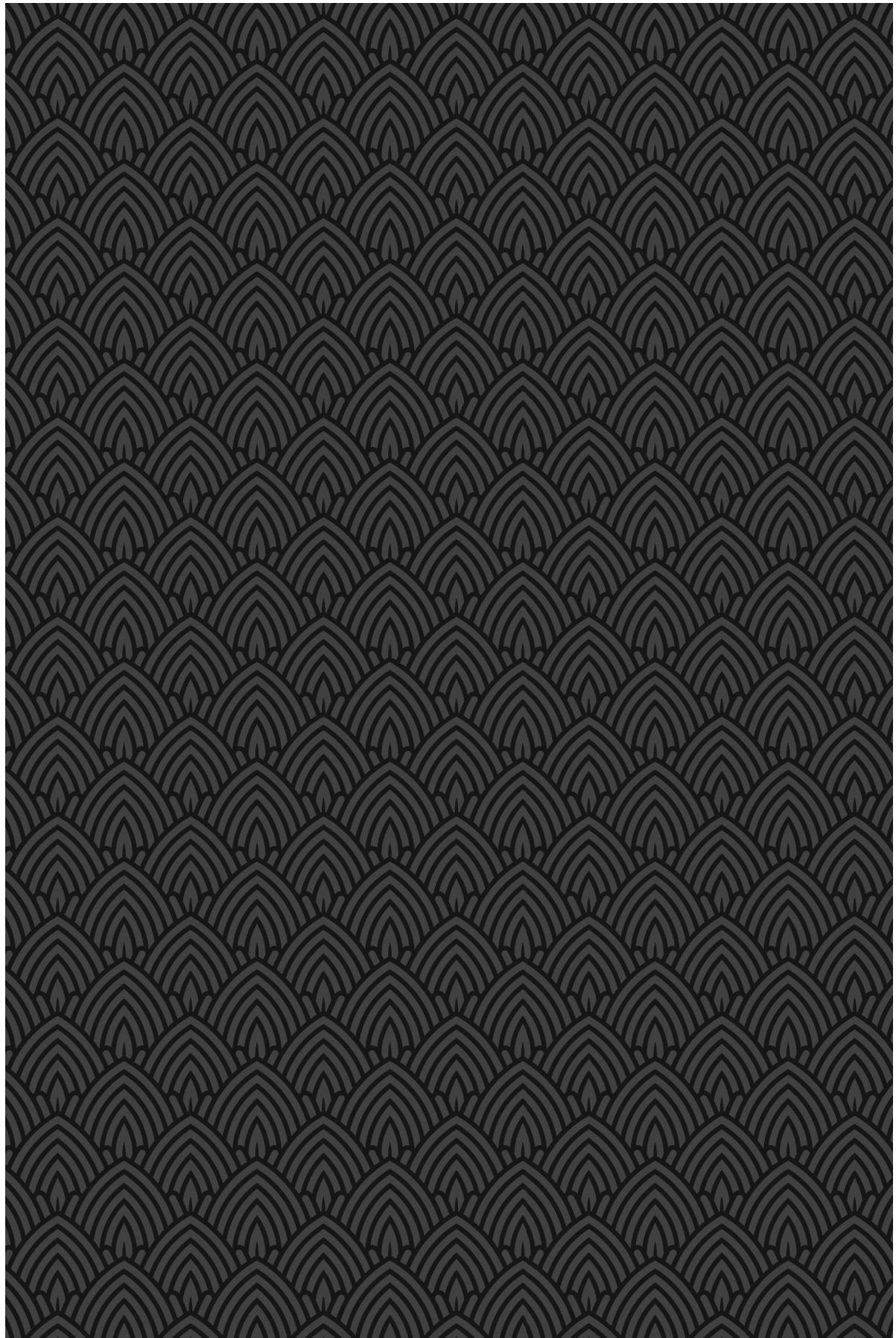


THESE  
VIOLENT  
DELIGHTS



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CHLOE GONG

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DEAREST READER

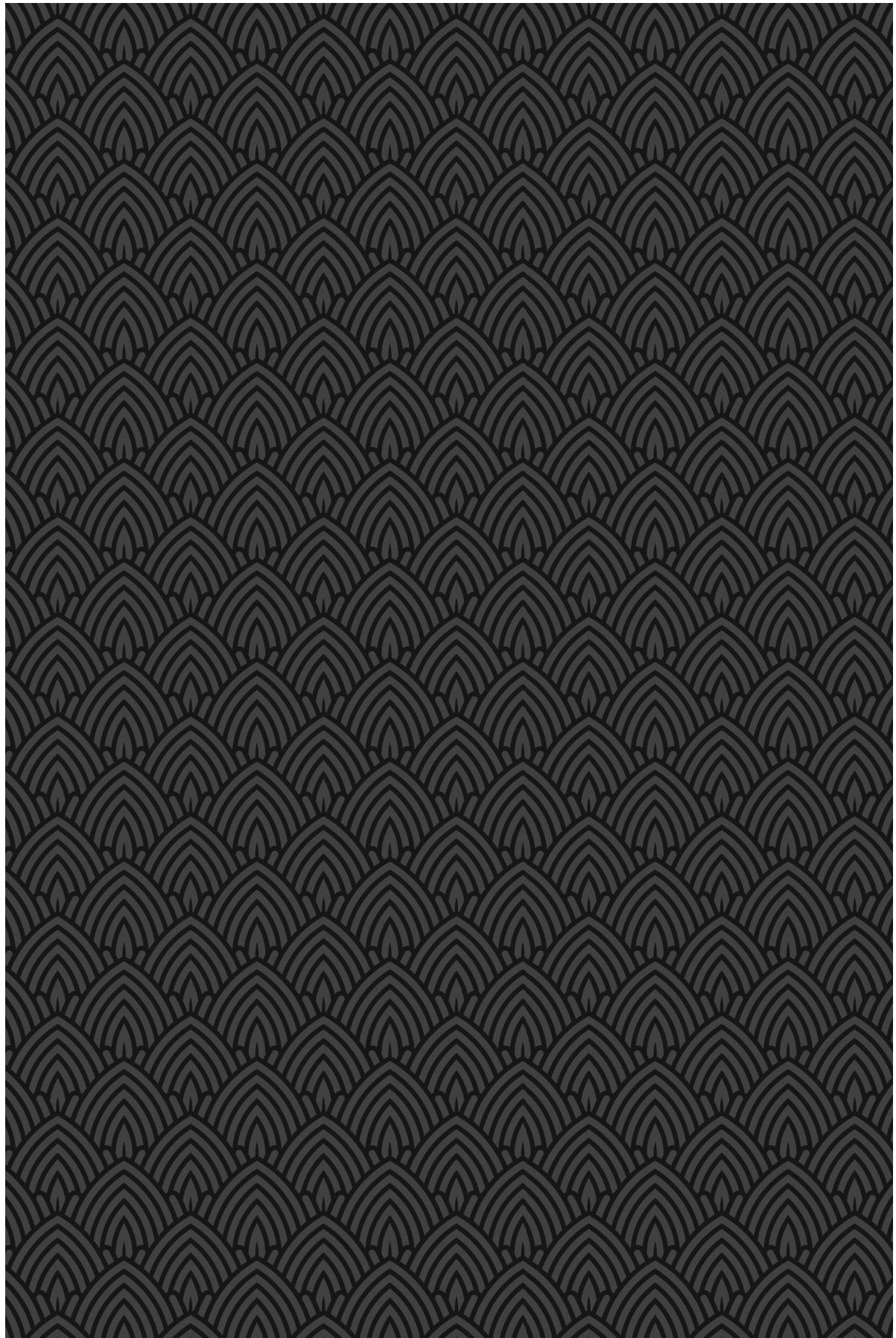


*These violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,  
Which, as they kiss, consume.*

—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*



THESE  
VIOLENT  
DELIGHTS



# P r o l o g u e

## 1

In glittering Shanghai, a monster awakens.

Its eyes snap open in the belly of the Huangpu River, jaws unhinging at once to taste the foul blood seeping into the waters. Lines of red slither through this ancient city's modern streets: lines that draw webs in the cobblestones like a network of veins, and drip by drip these veins surge into the waters, pouring the city's life essence into the mouth of another.

As the night grows dark, the monster pushes itself up, eventually emerging from the waves with the leisure of a forgotten god. When it turns its head up, all that can be seen is the low-hanging, plump moon.

*It breathes in. It slinks closer.*

Its first breath transforms into a cold breeze, hurtling into the streets and brushing the ankles of those unfortunate enough to be stumbling home during the devil's hour. This place hums to the tune of debauchery. This city is filthy and deep in the thrall of unending sin, so saturated with the kiss of decadence that the sky threatens to buckle and crush all those living vivaciously beneath it in punishment.

But no punishment comes—not yet. The decade is loose and the morals are looser. As the West throws its arms up in unending party, as the rest of the Middle Kingdom remains splintered among aging warlords and the remnants of imperial rule, Shanghai sits in its own

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little bubble of power: *the Paris of the East, the New York of the West.*

Despite the toxin trickling from every dead-ended alleyway, this place is so, so very *alive*. And the monster, too, is birthed anew.

Unknowingly, the people of this divided city carry on. Two men stumble out from their favorite brothel's open doors, their laughter piercing and loud. The silence of the late hour stands in sudden contrast to the roaring activity they have emerged from, and their ears struggle to adjust, ringing loudly with the transition.

One is short and stout, as if he could lie on the ground and begin rolling down the sidewalk in the manner of a marble; the other is tall and gawky, his limbs drawn in right angles. With their arms swung around each other's shoulders, they stumble toward the waterfront, toward the river that runs in from the sea where merchants arrive with commodities—day in, day out.

The two men are familiar with these ports; after all, when they're not frequenting jazz clubs or downing the newest shipments of wine from some foreign country, they run messages here, guard merchants here, haul stock back and forth here—all for the Scarlet Gang. They know this boardwalk like the back of their hands, even when it is presently quiet of the usual thousand different languages hollered under a thousand different flags.

At this hour, there is only the muffled music from nearby bars and the large shop banners overhead ruffling with every gust of wind.

And the five White Flowers talking animatedly in Russian.

It is the fault of the two Scarlet men for not hearing the racket sooner, but their brains are clogged with alcohol and their senses are buzzing pleasantly. By the time the White Flowers are in sight, by the time the men see their rivals standing around one of the ports, passing a bottle, shoving shoulders with uproarious laughter, neither party can back away without losing face.

The White Flowers straighten up, heads tilting into the wind.

“We should continue walking,” the short Scarlet man whispers to

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his companion. “You know what Lord Cai said about getting into another fight with the White Flowers.”

The gawkier one only bites down on the inside of his cheeks, sucking his face in until he looks like a smug, drunk ghoul.

“He said we shouldn’t initiate anything. He never said we *couldn’t* get into a fight.”

The Scarlet men speak in the dialect of their city, their tongues laid flat and their sounds pressed tight. Even as they raise their voices with the confidence of being on home turf, they are uneasy, because it is rare now for a White Flower to not know the language—sometimes their accents are indistinguishable from a Shanghai native.

A fact that proves correct when one of the White Flowers, grinning, bellows, “Well, are you trying to pick a fight?”

The taller Scarlet man makes a low sound at the base of his throat and aims a wad of spit at the White Flowers. It lands by the shoe of the nearest.

In a blink: guns upon guns, each arm raised and steady and trigger-happy, ready to pull. This is a scene that no soul bats an eye toward any longer; this is a scene that is more commonplace in heady Shanghai than the smoke of opium wafting from a thick pipe.

“Hey! Hey!”

A whistle blows into the terse silence. The policeman who runs on site only expresses annoyance at the standstill before him. He has seen this exact scene three times already within the week. He has forced rivals into jail cells and called for cleanup when the members left one another dead and pierced with bullets instead. Weary with the day, all he wants to do is go home, soak his feet in hot water, and eat the meal his wife would have left cold on the table. His hand is already itching for his baton, itching to beat some sense into these men, itching to remind these people that they have no personal grudge against the other. All that fuels them is reckless, baseless loyalty to the Cais and the Montagovs, and it would be their ruin.

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“Do we want to break this up and go home?” the policeman asks. “Or do we want to come with me and—”

He stops abruptly.

A *growl* is echoing from the waters.

The warning that radiates from such a sound is not a deniable sensation. It is not the sort of paranoia one feels when they think they are being followed down an abandoned junction; nor is it the sort of panic that ensues when a floorboard creaks in a house thought empty. It is solid, tangible—it almost exudes a moisture into the air, a weight pressing down on bare skin. It is a threat as obvious as a gun to the face, and yet there is a moment of inaction, a moment of hesitation. The short and stout Scarlet man wavers first, his eyes darting to the edge of the boardwalk. He ducks his head, peering into the murky depths, squinting to follow the choppy, rolling motions of the water’s small ripples.

He is just at the right height for his companion to scream and knock him down with a brutal elbow to the temple when something bursts from the river.

*Little black specks.*

As the short man falls to the ground and slams down hard, the world is raining down on him in dots—strange things he cannot quite see as his vision spins and his throat gags in nausea. He can only feel pinpricks landing on him, itching his arms, his legs, his neck; he hears his companion screaming, the White Flowers roaring at one another in indecipherable Russian, then finally, the policeman shrieking in English, “Get it off! Get them off!”

The man on the ground has a thudding, thunderous heartbeat. With his forehead pressed to the boardwalk, unwilling to behold whatever is causing these terrible howls, his own pulse consumes him. It overtakes every one of his senses, and only when something thick and wet splashes against his leg does he scramble upright in horror, flailing so extremely that he kicks free a shoe and doesn’t bother to fetch it.

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He doesn't look back as he runs. He scrubs himself free of the debris that had rained down on him, hiccuping in his desperation to breathe in, breathe in, breathe in.

He doesn't look back to check what had been lurking in the waters. He doesn't look back to see if his companion needs help, and he certainly doesn't look back to determine what had landed on his leg with a viscous, sticky sensation. The man only runs and runs, past the neon delight of the theaters as the last of their lights wink off, past the whispers crawling under the front doors of brothels, past the sweet dreams of merchants who sleep with piles of money underneath their mattresses.

And he is long gone by the time there are only dead men lying along the ports of Shanghai, their throats torn out and their eyes staring up at the night sky, glassy with the reflection of the moon.



# One

SEPTEMBER 1926

1

In the heart of Scarlet Gang territory, a burlesque club was the place to be.

The calendar was rolling closer and closer to the end of the season, the pages of each date ripping free and blowing away quicker than the browning tree leaves. Time was both hurried and unhurried at once, the days becoming scarce yet dragging on for far too long. Workers were always hurrying somewhere, never mind whether they truly had a destination to pursue. There was always a whistle blowing in the background; there was always the constant chugging noise of trams dragging themselves along the worn tracks grooved into the streets; there was always the stench of resentment stinking up the neighborhoods and burrowing deep into the laundry that waved with the wind, like shop banners outside cramped apartment windows.

Today was an exception.

The clock had paused on the Mid-Autumn Festival—the twenty-second of the month, according to Western methods of day-keeping this year. Once, it was customary to light lanterns and whisper tales of tragedy, to worship what the ancestors revered with moonlight cupped in their palms. Now it was a new age—one that thought itself above its ancestors. Regardless of which territory they stood upon, the people of Shanghai had been bustling about with the spirit of modern celebration since sunrise, and at present,

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with the bells ringing nine times for the hour, the festivities were only getting started.

Juliette Cai was surveying the club, her eyes searching for the first signs of trouble. It was dimly lit despite the abundance of twinkling chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, the atmosphere dark and murky and wet. There was also a strange, sodden smell wafting under Juliette's nose in waves, but the poor renovations seemed not to bother the mood of those seated at various round tables scattered throughout the club. The people here would hardly take notice of a small leak in the corner when constant activity consumed their attention instead. Couples were whispering over decks of tarot cards, men were shaking one another with vigor, women were inclining their heads to gasp and shriek in recollection of whatever story was being told over the flickering gaslight.

"You look rather woeful."

Juliette didn't immediately turn in haste to identify the voice. She didn't have to. There were very few people who would approach her speaking English to begin with, never mind English with the flat tones of a Chinese mother tongue and the accent of a French upbringing.

"I am. I am perpetually filled with woe." Only then did she crane her head, her lips curling up and her eyes narrowing at her cousin. "Aren't you supposed to be onstage next?"

Rosalind Lang shrugged and crossed her arms, the jade bangles on her slender brown wrists clinking together.

"They cannot begin the show without me," Rosalind scoffed, "so I am not worried."

Juliette scanned the crowd again, this time with a target in mind. She found Kathleen, Rosalind's fraternal twin, near a table at the back of the club. Her other cousin was patiently balancing a tray full of plates, staring at a British merchant while he tried to order a drink with exaggerated gesticulations. Rosalind was under contract here to

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dance; Kathleen showed up to wait tables when she got bored, and took a measly wage for the fun of it.

Sighing, Juliette dug out a lighter to keep her hands occupied, releasing the flame, then quenching it to the rhythm of the music gliding around the room. She waved the small silver rectangle under her cousin's nose. "Want?"

Rosalind responded by pulling out a cigarette tucked within the folds of her clothing.

"You don't even smoke," she said as Juliette angled the lighter down. "Why do you carry that thing around?"

Straight-faced, Juliette replied, "You know me. Running around. Living life. Committing arson."

Rosalind inhaled her first puff of smoke, then rolled her eyes. "Right."

A better mystery would have been where Juliette even kept the lighter. Most girls in the burlesque club—dancer or patron alike—were dressed as Rosalind was: in the fashionable qipao sweeping through Shanghai like a wildfire. With the outrageous slit down the side revealing ankle to thigh and the high collar acting like a choke hold, the design was a blend of Western flamboyance with Eastern roots, and in a city of divided worlds, the women were walking metaphors. But Juliette—Juliette had been transformed through and through, the little beads of her pocketless flapper dress swishing with every movement. She stood out here, that much was certain. She was a bright, burning star, a symbolic figurehead for the vitality of the Scarlet Gang.

Juliette and Rosalind both quietly turned their attention to the stage, where a woman was crooning a song in a language that neither were familiar with. The singer's voice was lovely, her dress shimmering against dark skin, but this was not the sort of show that this sort of cabaret was known for, and so no one save the two girls at the back was listening.

"You didn't tell me you would be here tonight," Rosalind said after

a while, smoke escaping her mouth in a quick stream. There was betrayal in her voice, like the omission of information was out of character. The Juliette who had returned last week was not the same Juliette that her cousins had waved goodbye to four years ago, but the changes were mutual. Upon Juliette's return, before she had even set foot back into the house, she had heard talk of Rosalind's honey-coated tongue and effortless class. After four years away, Juliette's memories of the people she had left behind no longer aligned with who they had become. Nothing of her memory had withstood the test of time. This city had reshaped itself and everyone in it had continued moving forward without her, especially Rosalind.

"It was very last minute." Over at the back of the club, the British merchant had started pantomiming to Kathleen. Juliette gestured toward the scene with her chin. "Bàba is getting tired of some merchant called Walter Dexter pushing for a meeting, so I'm to hear what he wants."

"Sounds boring," Rosalind intoned. Her cousin always had a bite to her words, even when speaking with the driest intonation. A small smile perked at Juliette's lips. At the very least, even if Rosalind felt like a stranger—albeit a familiar one—she would always sound the same. Juliette could close her eyes and pretend they were children again, sniping at each other about the most offensive topics.

She sniffed haughtily, feigning offense. "We can't all be Parisian-trained dancers."

"Tell you what, you take over my routine and *I'll* be the heir to this city's underground empire."

A laugh burst from Juliette, short and loud in her amusement. Her cousin was different. Everything was different. But Juliette was a fast learner.

With a soft sigh, she pushed away from the wall she was leaning upon. "All right," she said, her gaze latched on Kathleen. "Duty calls. I'll see you at home."

Rosalind let her leave with a wave, dropping the cigarette to the

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ground and crushing it under her high-heeled shoe. Juliette really ought to have admonished her for doing so, but the floor couldn't have gotten any dirtier than its current state, so what was the point? From the moment she stepped into this place, five different sorts of opium had probably smeared into her soles. All she could do was push through the club as gingerly as possible, hoping the maids wouldn't damage the leather of her shoes when they scrubbed them clean later tonight.

“I'll take it from here.”

Kathleen's chin jerked up in surprise, the jade pendant at her throat gleaming under the light. Rosalind used to tell her that someone was going to snatch such a precious stone if she wore it so obviously, but Kathleen liked it there. If people were to stare her throat, she always said she would rather it be because of the pendant than the bump of her Adam's apple underneath.

Her startled expression quickly smoothed into a smile, realizing it was Juliette sliding into the seat opposite the British merchant.

“Let me know if I can get anything for you,” Kathleen said sweetly, in perfect, French-accented English.

As she walked away, Walter Dexter's jaw dropped slack. “She could understand me this whole time?”

“You'll learn, Mr. Dexter,” Juliette began, swiping the candle from the center of the table and taking a sniff of the scented wax, “that when you assume someone cannot speak English right off the bat, they tend to make fun of you.”

Walter blinked at her, then cocked his head. He took in her dress, her American accent, and her knowledge of his name.

“Juliette Cai,” he concluded. “I was expecting your father.”

The Scarlet Gang called itself a family business, but it did not stop there. The Cais were the pulsing heart, but the gang itself was a network of gangsters and smugglers and merchants and middlemen of all sorts, each and every single one of them answering to Lord Cai.

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Less-enthused foreigners would call the Scarlets a secret society.

“My father has no time for merchants with no credible history,” Juliette replied. “If it’s important, I will pass along the message.”

Unfortunately, it appeared that Walter Dexter was far more interested in small talk than actual business.

“Last I heard, you had moved to become a New Yorker.”

Juliette dropped the candle back onto the table. The flame flickered, casting eerie shadows over the middle-aged merchant. The lighting only deepened the wrinkles in his perpetually scrunched forehead.

“I was only sent to the West for education, regrettably,” Juliette said, leaning back into the curved couch seat. “Now I’m old enough to start contributing to the family business and whatnot, so they dragged me back kicking and screaming.”

The merchant didn’t laugh along to her joke, as Juliette had intended. Instead, he tapped his temple, ruffling his silver-patched hair.

“Hadn’t you also returned for a brief period of time a few years ago?”

Juliette stiffened, her grin faltering. Behind her, a table of patrons erupted with uproarious laughter, collapsing in mirth over some comment made among themselves. The sound prickled at her neck, sweeping a hot sweat over her skin. She waited for the noise to die down, using the interruption to think fast and scramble hard.

“Just once,” Juliette replied carefully. “New York City wasn’t too safe during the Great War. My family was worried.”

The merchant still didn’t drop the subject. He made a noise of consideration. “The war ended eight years ago. You were here a mere four previous.”

Juliette’s smile dropped entirely. She pushed her bobbed hair back.

“Mr. Dexter, are we here to discuss your extensive knowledge of my personal life, or did this meeting actually have a purpose?”

Walter blanched. “I apologize, Miss Cai. My son, he’s your age, so I happened to know—”

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He cut himself off upon noting Juliette's glare. He cleared his throat.

"I requested to meet with your father regarding a new *product*."

Immediately, despite the vague word choice, it was quite clear what Walter Dexter was referring to. The Scarlet Gang was, first and foremost, a network of gangsters, and there was seldom a time when gangsters weren't heavily involved with the black market. If the Scarlets dominated Shanghai, it was hardly surprising that they dominated the black market, too—decided the comings and goings, decided the men who were allowed to thrive and the men who needed to drop dead. In the parts of the city that still belonged to the Chinese, the Scarlet Gang was not simply above the law; they *were* the law. Without the gangsters, the merchants were unprotected. Without the merchants, the gangsters would have little purpose or work. It was an ideal partnership—and one being threatened continually by the growing power of the White Flowers, the one other gang in Shanghai that actually had a chance at defeating the Scarlets in black market monopoly. After all, they had been working at it for generations.

"A product, hmm?" Juliette repeated. Her eyes swiveled up absently. The performers had switched, the spotlight dimming as the first opening notes from a saxophone played. Adorned in a brilliant new costume, Rosalind sashayed into view. "Remember what happened the last time the British wanted to introduce a *new product* into Shanghai?"

Walter frowned. "Are you referring to the Opium Wars?"

Juliette examined her fingernails. "Am I?"

"You cannot possibly blame me for something that was the fault of my country."

"Oh, that's not how it works?"

It was Walter's turn to look unimpressed. He folded his hands together as skirts swished and skin flashed on the stage behind him.

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“Nevertheless, I require the help of the Scarlet Gang. I have bulk amounts of *lernicrom* to be rid of, and it is certain to be the next most desired opiate on the market.” Walter cleared his throat. “I believe you are seeking an upper hand right now.”

Juliette leaned forward. In that sudden motion, the beads on her dress clinked together frantically, clashing with the jazz in the background. “And do you really think *you* can give us an upper hand?”

The constant grappling between the Scarlet Gang and the White Flowers wasn’t a secret. Far from it, in fact, because the blood feud was not something that raged only between those with Cai and Montagov to their name. It was a cause that ordinary members loyal to either faction took on personally, with a fervor that could almost be supernatural. Foreigners arriving in Shanghai to do business for the first time received one warning before learning of anything else: pick a side and pick it fast. If they traded once with the Scarlet Gang, they were a Scarlet through and through. They would be embraced in Scarlet territory and killed if they wandered into the areas where the White Flowers reigned.

“I think,” Walter said softly, “that the Scarlet Gang is losing control of its own city.”

Juliette sat back. Underneath the table, her fists tightened until the skin over her knuckles became bloodless. Four years ago, she had looked at Shanghai with glitter in her eyes, blinking at the Scarlet Gang with hope. She hadn’t understood that Shanghai was a foreign city in its own country. Now she did. The British ruled a chunk. The French ruled a chunk. The Russian White Flowers were taking over the only parts that technically remained under Chinese governance. This loss of control was a long time coming—but Juliette would rather bite off her own tongue than admit it freely to a merchant who understood nothing.

“We will get back to you regarding your product, Mr. Dexter,” she said after a long moment, flashing an easy smile. She let out her exhale

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imperceptibly, releasing the tension that had tightened her stomach to the point of pain. “Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

The entire club fell into a hush, and suddenly Juliette was speaking too loudly. Walter’s eyes bugged, latching on to a sight over Juliette’s shoulder.

“I’ll be,” he remarked. “If it isn’t one of the Bolshies.”

At the merchant’s words, Juliette felt herself go ice-cold. Slowly, ever so slowly, she turned around to seek Walter Dexter’s line of sight, searching through the smoke and shadows dancing at the entranceway of the burlesque club.

*Please, don’t let it be, she pleaded. Anyone but—*

Her vision turned hazy. For a terrifying second, the world was tilting on its axis and Juliette was barely clinging to its edge, moments away from taking a tumble. Then the floor righted itself and Juliette could breathe again. She stood and cleared her throat, concentrating all her might on sounding as bored as possible when she stated, “The Montagovs emigrated far before the Bolshevik Revolution, Mr. Dexter.”

Before anybody could take note of her, Juliette slinked into the shadows, where the dark walls dimmed the sparkling of her dress and the soggy floorboards muffled the clicking of her heels. Her precautions were unnecessary. Everyone’s gaze was firmly latched on Roma Montagov as he wound his way through the club. For once Rosalind was carrying out a performance that not a soul was paying attention to.

At first glance it could have seemed like the shock emanating from the round tables was because a foreigner had walked in. But this club had many foreigners scattered throughout the crowd, and Roma, with his dark hair, dark eyes, and pale skin could have blended in among the Chinese as naturally as a white rose painted red amid poppies. It wasn’t because Roma Montagov was a foreigner. It was because the heir of the White Flowers was wholly recognizable as an enemy

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on Scarlet Gang territory. From the corner of her eye, Juliette was already catching sight of movement: guns pulled from pockets and knives pointed outward, bodies stirring with animosity.

Juliette stepped out of the shadows and lifted a hand to the closest table. The motion was simple: *wait*.

The gangsters stilled, each group watching those nearby in example. They waited, pretending to go on with their conversations while Roma Montagov passed table after table, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

Juliette started to creep closer. She pressed a hand to her throat and forced the lump there down, forced her breath to become even until she wasn't on the verge of panic, until she could wipe on a dazzling smile. Once, Roma would have been able to see right through her. But four years had gone by now. He had changed. So had she.

Juliette reached out and touched the back of his suit jacket. "Hello, stranger."

Roma turned around. For a moment it seemed as if he hadn't registered the sight before him. He stared, his gaze as blank as clear glass, utterly uncomprehending.

Then the sight of the Scarlet heiress washed over him like a bucket of ice. Roma's lips parted with a small puff of air.

The last time he'd seen her, they had been fifteen.

"Juliette," he exclaimed automatically, but they were no longer familiar enough to use each other's first names. They hadn't been for a long while.

Roma cleared his throat. "Miss Cai. When did you return to Shanghai?"

*I never left*, Juliette wanted to say, but that wasn't true. Her mind had remained here—her thoughts had constantly revolved around the chaos and the injustice and the burning fury that broiled in these streets—but her physical body had been shipped across the ocean a second time for safekeeping. She had hated it, hated being away so

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intensely that she felt the force of it burn into a fever each night when she left the parties and speakeasies. The weight of Shanghai was a steel crown nailed to her head. In another world, if she had been given a choice, perhaps she would have walked away, rejected herself as the heir to an empire of mobsters and merchants. But she never had a choice. This was her life, this was her city, these were her people, and because she loved them, she had sworn to herself a long time ago that she would do a damn good job of being who she was because she could be no one else.

*It's all your fault, she wanted to say. You're the reason I was forced away from my city. My people. My blood.*

"I returned a while ago," Juliette lied easily, checking her hip against the vacant table to her left. "Mr. Montagov, you'll have to forgive me for asking, but what are you doing *here*?"

She watched Roma move his hand ever so slightly and guessed that he was checking for the presence of his hidden weapons. She watched him take her in, slow to form words. Juliette had had time to brace herself—seven days and seven nights to enter this city and scrub her mind free of everything that had happened here between them. But whatever Roma had expected to find in this club when he walked in tonight, it certainly hadn't been *Juliette*.

"I need to speak to Lord Cai," Roma finally said, placing his hands behind his back. "It's important."

Juliette took a step closer. Her fingers had happened upon the lighter from within the folds of her dress again, thumbing the spark wheel while she hummed in thought. Roma said *Cai* like a foreign merchant, his mouth pulled wide. The Chinese and the Russians shared the same sound for Cai: *tsai*, like the sound of a match being struck. His butchering was intentional, an observation of the situation. She was fluent in Russian, he was fluent in Shanghai's unique dialect, and yet here they were, both speaking English with different accents like a couple of casual merchants. Switching to either of their

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native tongues would have been like taking a side, so they settled for a middle ground.

“I imagine it must be important, if you’ve come all the way here.” Juliette shrugged, letting go of the lighter. “Speak to me instead, and I’ll pass along the message. One heir to another, Mr. Montagov. You can trust me, can’t you?”

It was a laughable question. Her words said one thing, but her cold, flat stare said another—*One misstep while you’re in my territory, and I’ll kill you with my bare hands*. She was the last person he would trust, and the same went the other way.

But whatever it was that Roma needed, it must have been serious. He didn’t argue.

“Can we . . . ?”

He gestured to the side, into the shadows and the dim corners, where there would be less of an audience turned toward them like a second show, waiting for the moment Juliette walked away so they could pounce. Thinning her lips, Juliette pivoted and waved him along to the back of the club instead. He was fast to follow, his measured steps coming closely enough that the beads of Juliette’s dress clinked angrily in disturbance. She didn’t know why she was bothering. She should have thrown him to the Scarlets, let them deal with him.

*No, she decided. He is mine to deal with. He is mine to destroy.*

Juliette stopped. Now it was just her and Roma Montagov in the shadows, other sounds muffled and other sights dimmed. She rubbed her wrist, demanding her pulse slow down, as if that were within her control.

“Jump to it, then,” she said.

Roma looked around. He ducked his head before speaking, lowering his voice until Juliette had to strain to hear him. And indeed she strained—she refused to lean any closer to him than she had to.

“Last night, five White Flowers died at the ports. Their throats had been torn out.”

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Juliette blinked at him.

“And?”

She didn’t mean to be callous, but members of both their gangs killed each other on the weekly. Juliette herself had already added to the death toll. If he was going to put the blame on her Scarlets, then he was wasting his time.

“*And*,” Roma said tightly, clearly biting back *if you would let me finish*, “one of yours. As well as a municipal police officer. British.”

Now Juliette frowned a little, trying to recall if she had overheard anyone in the household last night muttering about a Scarlet death. It was strange for *both* gangs to have victims on scene, given that larger killings usually happened in ambushes, and stranger still for a police officer to have been pulled down too, but she wouldn’t go so far as to say it was bizarre. She only raised an eyebrow at Roma, disinterested.

Until, continuing onward, he said, “All their wounds were self-inflicted. This wasn’t a territory dispute.”

Juliette shook her head repeatedly to one side, making sure she hadn’t misheard him. When she was certain there was nothing jammed in her ear, she exclaimed, “Seven dead bodies with *self-inflicted* wounds?”

Roma nodded. He placed another look over his shoulder, as if merely keeping an eye on the gangsters around the tables would prevent them from attacking him. Or perhaps he didn’t care to keep an eye on them at all. Perhaps he was trying to avoid looking straight ahead at Juliette.

“I’m here to find an explanation. Does your father know anything of this?”

Juliette scoffed, the noise deep and resentful. Did he mean to tell her that five White Flowers, one Scarlet, and a police officer had met up at the ports, then torn out their own throats? It sounded like the setup of a terrible joke without a punch line.

“We cannot help you,” Juliette stated.

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“Any information could be crucial to discovering what happened, Miss Cai,” Roma persisted. A little notch between his eyebrows always appeared like a crescent moon whenever he was irritated. It was present now. There was more to these deaths than he was letting on; he wouldn’t get this worked up for an ordinary ambush. “One of the dead was yours—”

“We’re not going to cooperate with the White Flowers,” Juliette cut in. Any false humor on her face had long disappeared. “Let me make that clear before you proceed. Regardless of whether my father knows anything about last night’s deaths, we will not be sharing it with you and we will not be furthering any contact that could endanger our own business endeavors. Now, *good day*, sir.”

Roma had clearly been dismissed, and yet he remained where he stood, glaring at Juliette like there was a sour taste in his mouth. She had already turned on her heel, preparing to make her exit, when she heard Roma whisper viciously, “What *happened* to you?”

She could have said anything in response. She could have chosen her words with the deathly venom she had acquired in her years away and spat it all out. She could have reminded him of what he did four years ago, pushed the blade of guilt in until he was bleeding. But before she could open her mouth, a scream was piercing through the club, interrupting every other noise as if it operated on another frequency.

The dancers onstage froze; the music was brought to a halt.

“What’s going on?” Juliette muttered. Just as she moved to investigate, Roma hissed out sharply and caught her elbow.

“Juliette, don’t.”

His touch seared through her skin like a painful burn. Juliette jerked her arm away faster than if she had truly been set alight, her eyes blazing. He didn’t have the right. He had lost the right to pretend he had ever wanted to protect her.

Juliette marched toward the other end of the club, ignoring Roma

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as he followed after her. Rumbles of panic grew louder and louder, though she couldn't comprehend *what* was inciting such a reaction until she nudged aside the gathering crowd with an assertive push.

Then she saw the man thrashing on the ground, his own fingers clawing at his thick neck.

“What is he doing?” Juliette shrieked, lunging forward. “Somebody stop him!”

But most of his nails were already buried deep into muscle. The man was digging with an animal-like intensity—as if there was something *there*, something no one else could see crawling under his skin. Deeper, deeper, deeper, until his fingers were wholly buried and he was pulling free tendons and veins and arteries.

In the next second, the club had fallen silent completely. Nothing was audible save the labored breathing of the short and stout man who had collapsed on the floor, his throat torn into pieces and his hands dripping with blood.

## T W O

T

he silence turned to screams, the screams turned to chaos, and Juliette rolled up her shiny sleeves, her lips thinned and her brow furrowed.

“Mr. Montagov,” she said over the uproar, “you need to leave.”

Juliette marched forward, waving for two nearby Scarlet men to come close. They obliged, but not without a strange expression, which Juliette almost took offense at, until—two beats later—she blinked and looked over her shoulder to find Roma still standing there, very much not leaving. Instead, he surged past her, acting like he owned the place, then dropped to a crouch near the dying man, squinting at the man’s *shoes*, of all things.

“For crying out loud,” Juliette muttered under her breath. She pointed the two Scarlets at Roma. “Escort him out.”

It was what they had been waiting for. One of the Scarlets immediately pushed the heir of the White Flowers roughly, forcing Roma to spring to his feet with a hiss so he wouldn’t tumble onto the bloody floor.

“I said *escort* him,” Juliette snapped at the Scarlet. “It’s the Mid-Autumn Festival. Don’t be a *brute*.”

“But, Miss Cai—”

“Don’t you see?” Roma cut in coldly, pointing a finger at the dying man. He turned to face Juliette, his jaw tight, eyes level on her—only

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her. He acted like nobody else was present in his line of sight save for Juliette, like the two men weren't glaring daggers at him, like the whole club wasn't screaming in havoc, running in circles about the growing puddle of blood. "This is exactly what happened last night. It is not a one-off incident; it is *madness*—"

Juliette sighed, waving a floppy wrist. The two Scarlet men took a proper hold of Roma's shoulders, and Roma swallowed his words with an audible snap from his jaw. He wouldn't make a scene in Scarlet territory. He was already lucky to be leaving without a bullet hole in his back. He knew this. It was the only reason why he tolerated being manhandled by men he might have killed on the streets.

"Thank you for being so understanding," she simpered.

Roma said nothing as he was hauled from her sight. Juliette watched him, eyes narrowed, and only when she was certain he had been pushed out the door of the burlesque club did she focus on the mess in front of her, stepping forward with a sigh and kneeling gingerly beside the dying man.

There was no saving with a wound like this. It was still spurting blood, pulsating red puddles onto the floor. Blood was certainly seeping into the fabric of her dress, but Juliette hardly felt it. The man was trying to say something. Juliette couldn't hear what.

"You'd do well to put him out of his misery."

Walter Dexter had found his way near the scene and was now peering over Juliette's shoulder with an almost quizzical expression. He remained unmoving even when the waitresses started pushing the crowd back and cordoning the area off, yelling for the onlookers to scatter. Irritatingly, none of the Scarlet men bothered to haul Walter away—he had a look to him that made it seem like he needed to be here. Juliette had met plenty of men like him in America: men who assumed they had the right to go wherever they wished because the world had been built to favor their *civilized* etiquette. That sort of confidence knew no bounds.

“Hush,” Juliette snapped, leaning her ear closer to the dying man. If he had last words, he deserved to be heard—

“I’ve seen this before; it’s the lunacy of an addict. Perhaps meth-amphetamine or—”

“*Hush!*”

Juliette focused until she could hear the sounds coming from the dying man’s mouth, focused until the hysteria around her faded to background noise.

“Guài. Guài. Guài.”

*Guài?*

Head spinning, Juliette ran through every word that resembled what the man was chanting. The only one that made sense was—

“*Monster?*” she asked him, gripping his shoulder. “Is that what you mean to say?”

The man stilled. His gaze was startlingly clear for the briefest second. Then, in a fast garble, he said, “Huò bù dān xíng.” After that one breath, one exhale, one warning, his eyes glazed over.

Juliette reached out, numb, and brushed his eyelids closed. Before she could quite register the dead man’s words, Kathleen had already stepped forward to cover him with a tablecloth. Only his feet were sticking out, in those tattered shoes that Roma had been staring at.

*They’re mismatched*, Juliette noted suddenly. One shoe was sleek and shined, still glinting with its last polish; the other was far too small and a different color entirely, the fabric held together by a thin piece of string wrapped thrice around the toes.

*Strange.*

“What was that? What did he say?”

Walter was still lurking at her elbow. He didn’t seem to understand that this was his cue to remove himself. He didn’t seem to care that Juliette was staring forward in a state of stupefaction, wondering how Roma had timed his visit to coincide with this death.

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“Misfortunes tend to come all at once,” Juliette translated when she finally jolted back to the frenzy of the situation. Walter Dexter only looked at her blankly, trying to understand why a dying man would say something so convoluted. He didn’t understand the Chinese and their love for proverbs. His mouth was opening, likely to give another spiel about his extensive knowledge regarding the world of drugs, another plug about the dangers of purchasing products from those he deemed untrustworthy, but Juliette held up a finger to stop him. If she was certain of anything, it was that these weren’t the last words of a man who took too many drugs. This was the final warning of a man who had seen something he shouldn’t have.

“Let me correct myself. You British already have an appropriate translation,” she said. “When it rains, it pours.”

High above the leaky pipes and moldy carpeting of the White Flower house, Alisa Montagova was perched upon a wooden beam in the ceiling rafters, her chin pressed against the flat of her knees as she eavesdropped on the meeting below.

The Montagovs didn’t live in a big, flashy residence like their money bags could afford. They preferred to stay in the heart of it all, one and the same with the dirt-smeared faces picking up trash on the streets. From the outside, their living space looked identical to the row of apartments along this bustling city street. On the inside, they had transformed what used to be an apartment complex into one big jigsaw puzzle of rooms and offices and staircases, maintaining the place not with servants or maids but with hierarchy. It wasn’t just the Montagovs who lived here, but any White Flower who held some role in the gang, and among the assortment of people coming and going in this house, within the walls and outside them, there was an order. Lord Montagov reigned at the top and Roma—at least in name—stood second, but below, roles were constantly changing, determined by will rather than blood. Where

the Scarlet Gang depended on relationships—on which family went the farthest back before this country crumbled from its imperial throne—the White Flowers operated on chaos, on constant movement. But the climb to power was one of choice, and those who remained low within the gang did so by their own desire. The point of becoming a White Flower wasn’t power and riches. It was the knowing that they could walk at any point if they didn’t like the orders given by the Montagovs. It was a fist to the chest, a lock of eyes, a nod of understanding—like that, the Russian refugees filing into Shanghai would do anything to join the ranks of the White Flowers, anything to reunite with the sense of belonging they had left behind when the Bolsheviks came knocking.

*For the men, at least.* The Russian women unfortunate enough not to be born into the White Flowers picked up jobs as dancers and mistresses. Just last week, Alisa had overheard a British woman crying about a state of emergency in the International Settlement—of families being broken up by pretty faces from Siberia who had no fortune, only face and figure and a will to live. The refugees had to do what they must. Moral compasses meant nothing in the face of starvation.

Alisa jolted. The man she had been eavesdropping on had suddenly started whispering. The abrupt change in volume drew her attention back to the meeting below.

“The political factions have made one too many snide remarks,” a gruff voice muttered. “It is almost certain that the politicians are engineering the madness, but it’s hard to say at this point in time whether the Kuomintang or the Communists are responsible. Many sources say Zhang Gutai, though . . . well, *I* hesitate to believe it.”

Another voice added wryly, “Please, Zhang Gutai is so bad at being Secretary-General of the Communist Party that he printed the wrong date on one of their meeting posters.”

Alisa could see three men seated opposite her father through the thin mesh that lined the ceiling space. Without risking a fall from the

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rafters, she couldn't quite pick out their features, but the accented Russian gave away enough. They were Chinese spies.

"What do we know of their methods? How does this madness spread?"

That was her father now, his slow voice as distinctive as nails against a chalkboard. Lord Montagov spoke in such a commanding manner that it felt like a sin to deny him your full attention.

One of the Chinese men cleared his throat. He was wringing his hands on his shirt so aggressively that Alisa leaned forward into the rafters, squinting through the mesh to see if she was mistaking the motion.

"A monster."

Alisa almost toppled over. Her hands came down on the beam just in time to right herself, letting out a small exhale in relief.

"I beg your pardon?"

"We cannot confirm anything regarding the source of the madness except for one thing," the third and final man said. "It is linked to sightings of a monster. I saw it myself. I saw silver eyes in the Huangpu River, blinking in a way no man could—"

"Enough, enough," Lord Montagov interrupted. His tone was rough, impatient with the turn this information briefing had taken. "I have no interest in hearing nonsense on a monster. If that is all, I look forward to reconvening at our next meeting."

Frowning, Alisa scuttled along the beams, following the men as they left. She was already twelve years old, but she was tiny, always darting from shadow to shadow in the manner of a wild rodent. As the door shut below, she hopped from one ceiling beam to another until she was pressed flat directly above the men.

"He looked afraid," one remarked quietly.

The man in the middle hushed him, except the words had already been said and birthed into the world, becoming sharp arrows tearing through the room with no target in mind, only destruction. The men

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pulled their coats tightly around their bodies and left the broiling, chaotic mess of the Montagov house behind them. Alisa, however, remained in her little nook up in the ceiling.

*Fear.* That was something she didn't think her father knew how to feel anymore. Fear was a concept for the men without guns. Fear was reserved for people like Alisa, small and slight and always looking over her shoulder.

If Lord Montagov was afraid, the rules were changing.  
Alisa leaped from the ceiling and sprinted off.

## Three

The moment Juliette barreled into the hallway, shoving the last pin into her hair, she already knew she was too late. It was partly the maid's fault for not waking her when she was supposed to and partly Juliette's own fault for failing to get up with the sunrise, as she had been attempting since her arrival back in Shanghai. Those sparse moments just as the sky was brightening—and before the rest of the household rumbled to life—were the most peaceful few minutes one could get in this house. The days she started early enough to snatch a breath of cold air and a gulp of utter, complete silence on her balcony were her favorites. She could trail through the house with no one to bother her, skipping into the kitchen and snatching whatever she liked from the cooks, then taking whichever seat she pleased on the empty dining table. Depending on how fast she chewed, she might even have a while to spend in the living room, the windows thrown open to let in the tunes of early birdsong. The days when she failed to scramble out of her covers fast enough, on other the hand, meant grumpily sitting through the morning meals with the rest of the household.

Juliette stopped outside her father's office door now, cursing under her breath. Today hadn't only been a matter of avoiding her distant relatives. She had wanted to poke her nose into one of Lord Cai's meetings.

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The door opened swiftly. Juliette took a step back, trying to look natural. *Definitely too late.*

“Juliette.” Lord Cai peered at her, frowning. “It’s so early. Why are you awake?”

Juliette placed her hands under her chin, the picture of innocence. “I heard we had an esteemed visitor. I thought I’d come offer my greetings.”

The aforementioned visitor raised a wry brow. He was a Nationalist, but whether or not he was truly esteemed was hard to determine when he was dressed merely in a Western suit, void of the decorations his Kuomintang military uniform might bear on the collar. The Scarlet Gang had been friendly with the Nationalists—the Kuomintang—ever since the Kuomintang’s founding as a political party. Of late, relations had become even friendlier to combat the rise of their Communist “allies.” Juliette had been home for only a week, and she had already watched her father take at least five different meetings with the harried Nationalists who wanted gangster support. Each time she had been just too late to slip in without acting like an embarrassment, and settled for idling outside the door instead to catch whatever bits and pieces she could.

The Nationalists were afraid, that much she knew. The budding Communist Party of China was encouraging its members to join the Kuomintang in a show of cooperation with the Nationalists, only instead of demonstrating cooperation, the growing influence of Communist numbers within the Kuomintang was starting to threaten the Nationalists. Such scandal was the talk of the country, but especially in Shanghai, a lawless place where governments came both to be born and to die.

“That’s very kind of you, Juliette, but Mr. Qiao has another meeting to hurry to.”

Lord Cai gestured for a servant to lead the Nationalist out. Mr. Qiao politely tipped his hat, and Juliette smiled tightly, swallowing back her sigh.

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“It wouldn’t hurt to let me sit in on one meeting, Bāba,” she said as soon as Mr. Qiao was out of sight. “You’re supposed to be teaching me.”

“I can teach you slowly,” Lord Cai replied, shaking his head. “You don’t want to get involved in politics yet. It’s boring business.”

But it was relevant business, especially if the Scarlet Gang spent so much damn time entertaining these factions. Especially if Lord Cai had hardly blinked an eye last night when Juliette told him the heir of the White Flowers had pranced into their most central burlesque club, telling her that he had been made aware already and they would speak of it in the morning.

“Let’s go to the breakfast table, hmm?” her father said. He placed his hand on the back of Juliette’s neck, guiding her down the stairs as if she were at risk of running off. “We can talk about last night, too.”

“Breakfast would be delightful,” Juliette muttered. In truth, the clamor of morning meals gave her a headache. There was something about mornings in this household particularly that made Juliette uneasy. No matter what it was that her relatives discussed, no matter how mundane—like their speculation on the rising prices of rice—their words dripped with scheming and relentless wit. Everything they discussed seemed more fitting for the late night, when the maids retired to their rooms and the dark crawled in on the polished wood floors.

“Juliette, darling,” an aunt crowed the moment she and her father approached the table. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, Ā yí,” Juliette replied tightly, taking a seat. “I slept very well—”

“Did you cut your hair again? You must have. I don’t remember it being this short.”

As if her relatives weren’t vexing enough, there were also so many of them coming in and out of the Cai household for Juliette to *care* very much about any of them. Rosalind and Kathleen were dually her

closest cousins and only friends, and that was all she needed. Everybody else was merely a name and a relation she had to remember in case she needed something from them one day. This aunt jabbering in her ear now was far too distant to be useful at any point in the future, so distant that Juliette had to stop for a second to wonder why she was even at the breakfast table.

“Dà jiě, for God’s sake, let the kid breathe.”

Juliette’s head jerked up, grinning at the voice who had chimed in from the end of the table. On second thought, there was only one exception to her apathy: Mr. Li, her favorite uncle.

*Xiè xiè*, she mouthed.

Mr. Li merely raised his teacup to her thanks, a twinkle in his eye. Her aunt huffed, but she ceased talking. Juliette turned in her father’s direction.

“So, Bāba, last night,” she started. “If talk is to be believed, one of our men met up with five White Flowers at the ports, then ripped his own throat out. What do you make of it?”

Lord Cai made a thoughtful noise from the head of the long rectangular table, then rubbed the bridge of his nose, sighing deeply. Juliette wondered when her father had last gotten a full night’s sleep, uninterrupted by worrying and meetings. His exhaustion was invisible to the untrained eye, but Juliette knew. Juliette always knew.

Or maybe he was just tired of having to sit at the head of this table, hearing everyone’s gossip first thing in the morning. Before Juliette left, their dining table had been round, as Chinese tables rightfully should be. She suspected they had switched it up only to appeal to the Western visitors who came through the Cai house for meetings, but the result was messy: family members unable to talk to who they wished, as they could if everybody was seated around a circle.

“Bāba,” Juliette prompted, though she knew he was still thinking. It was only that her father was a man of few words and Juliette was a girl who couldn’t stand silence. Even while it was hectic all around

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them, with staff bustling in and out of the kitchen, a meal underway, and the table accommodating various conversations at oscillating volumes, she couldn't stand it when her father let her question draw out in lieu of answering immediately.

The matter was, even if he indulged her now, Lord Cai was only pretending to be concerned about an alleged madness. Juliette could tell—this was child's play atop the already monstrous list plaguing her father's attention. After all, who would care for rumors of strange *creatures* rising from the waters of this city when the Nationalists and Communists were rising too, guns poised and armies ready to march?

"And that was all Roma Montagov revealed?" Lord Cai finally asked.

Juliette flinched. She couldn't help it. She had spent four years recoiling at the mere thought of Roma that hearing his name aloud—spoken from her own father, no less—felt like something improper.

"Yes."

Her father tapped his fingers on the table slowly.

"I suspect he knows more," Juliette continued, "but he was careful."

Lord Cai fell into silence once again, allowing the noise around him to lull and pick up and fall. Juliette wondered whether his mind was elsewhere at this very moment. He had been terribly blasé at news of the White Flower heir on their territory, after all. Given how important the blood feud was to the Scarlet Gang, it only showed how much more consequential politics had become if Lord Cai was barely giving Roma Montagov's infraction any serious consideration.

Before her father had the chance to resume speaking, however, the swinging doors to the kitchen slammed open, the sound ricocheting so loudly that the aunt seated next to Juliette knocked her cup of tea over.

"If we suspect the White Flowers have more information than we do, what are we doing sitting around *discussing* it?"

Juliette gritted her teeth, mopping the tea from her dress. It was

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only Tyler Cai who entered, the most irritating among her first cousins. Despite their shared age, in her four years away, it was as if he hadn't grown up at all. He still made crude jokes and expected others to kneel before him. If he could, he would demand the globe turn in the other direction simply because he thought it was a more efficient way to turn, no matter how unrealistic.

"Do you make a habit out of eavesdropping at doors instead of coming in?" Juliette sneered, but her scathing remark went unappreciated. Their relatives jumped to their feet at the sight of Tyler, hurrying to fetch a chair, to fetch more tea, to fetch another plate—probably one engraved with gold and crusted with crystal. Despite Juliette's position as the heir to the Scarlet Gang, they would never simper after her in such a manner. She was a girl. In their eyes, no matter how legitimate, she would never be good enough.

"It seems simple to me," Tyler continued. He slid into a seat, leaning back like it was a throne. "It's about time we show the White Flowers who really holds the power in this city. Let's demand they hand over what they know."

"We have the numbers, the weaponry," an obscure uncle chimed in, nodding and stroking his beard.

"The politicians will side with us," the aunt beside Juliette added. "They have to. They cannot tolerate the White Flowers."

"A territory battle is not wise—"

*Finally, Juliette thought, turning toward the older second cousin who had spoken up, a sensible voice at this table.*

"—but with your expertise, Tyler, who knows how much farther we could advance our turf lines."

Juliette's fists tightened. *Never mind.*

"Here is what we shall do," Tyler started excitedly. Juliette cast a glance at her father, but he seemed content to merely consume his food. Since her return, Tyler had been finding every opportunity to upstage her, whether in conversation or through sidelong remarks.

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But each time, Lord Cai had stepped in to shut him down, to remind these aunts and uncles in as few words as possible to remember who the true heir was, to remember that this favoritism they were showing for Tyler would take them nowhere.

Only this time Lord Cai remained silent. Juliette didn't know if he was abstaining because he found his nephew's tactics to be laughable, or because he was actually taking Tyler seriously. Her stomach twisted, broiling with acid at the thought.

“—and it's not as if the foreign powers can complain,” Tyler was saying. “If these deaths have been self-inflicted, it is a matter that could affect anyone. It is a matter of *our* people, who require *our* help to defend them. If we do not act now and take back the city for their sake, then what good are we? Are we to suffer another century of humiliation?”

The voices at the table sounded their approval. Grunts of praise; wrinkled, scarred thumbs stuck into the air; claps of esteem against Tyler's shoulder. Only Mr. Li and her father were quiet, their faces held neutral, but that wasn't enough. Juliette threw her utensils down, shattering her fine porcelain chopsticks into four pieces.

“You want to deliver yourself into White Flower territory?” She stood up, smoothed down her dress. “Be my guest. I'll have a maid untangle your guts when they send them back in a box.”

With her relatives too shocked to protest, Juliette marched out of the kitchen. Her heart was thudding despite her calm demeanor, afraid that maybe this time she really had pushed it too far. As soon as she was in the hallway, she paused and glanced over her shoulder, watching the kitchen doors settle. The wood of those doors, imported from some distant nation, was carved with traditional Chinese calligraphy: poems that Juliette had memorized a long time ago. This house was a mirror of their city. It was a fusion of East and West, unable to let go of the old but desperate to mimic the new, and just like the city, the architecture of this house didn't quite meld well with itself.

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The beautiful but ill-fitted kitchen doors flew open again. Juliette barely flinched. She had expected this.

“Juliette. A word.”

It was only Tyler who had followed her out, a frown etched onto his face. He had the same pointed chin that Juliette had, the same single dimple at the lower-left corner of his lip that appeared in times of distress. How they looked so alike was beyond her. In every family portrait, Juliette and Tyler were always placed together, cooed at as if they were twins instead of cousins. But Juliette and Tyler had never gotten along. Not even in the cot, when they played with toy guns instead of real ones, and Tyler never missed a single wooden pellet aimed at Juliette’s head.

“What is it?”

Tyler stopped. He folded his arms. “What is your problem?”

Juliette rolled her eyes. “My problem?”

“Yes, *your* problem. It’s not amusing when you shut down my every idea—”

“You’re not stupid, Tyler, so stop acting like it,” Juliette interrupted. “I hate the Montagovs just as you do. We all hate them, so much that we bleed from it. But now is not the time to be waging a territory war. Not with our city already carved up by the foreigners.”

A beat passed.

“Stupid?”

Tyler had missed the point entirely, and yet he was offended. Her cousin was a boy with steel skin and a heart of glass. Ever since he lost both his parents too young, he had become this faux Scarlet anarchist, pretentious for the sake of it, wild within the gang for no reason, and because like called to like, his only friends were those who hung around hoping to shortcut a connection with the Cais. Everyone tiptoed around him, happy to throw choreographed punches and let him think himself powerful when each hit bounced off, but give him one sudden kick down his middle and he would shatter.