

OUR
VIOLENT
ENDS

CHLOE GONG

New York Times bestselling author of *These Violent Delights*

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BOOK TWO IN THE THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS DUET

OUR
VIOLENT
ENDS

CHLOE GONG

MARGARET K. McELDERRY BOOKS
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

FOR MY PARENTS, WHO TOLD THE STORIES I NEEDED TO
WRITE THIS BOOK

Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace! and, lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death!

—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

One

JANUARY 1927

The New Year in Shanghai passed with such fanfare that a sense of party still permeated the city a week later. It was the way the people moved about—the extra bounce in their toes and the twinkle in their eye as they leaned over the seats of the Grand Theatre to whisper to their companion. It was loud jazz music audible from the cabaret across the street, the cool air of handheld bamboo fans waving about in rapid color, the smell of something fried smuggled into the viewing room despite Screen One's strict rules. Marking the first day of the Gregorian calendar as a time for celebration was a Western matter, but the West had long stuck its roots into this city.

The madness in Shanghai was gone. The streets had been lulled back into uproarious decadence and nights that went on and on—like this one, where theatergoers could watch a picture and then saunter along the Huangpu River until sunrise. After all, there was no monster lurking in the waters anymore. It had been four months since the monster of Shanghai died, shot to death and left to rot on a wharf by the Bund. Now the only thing civilians needed to worry about were gangsters... and the increasing number of bullet-hole-ridden corpses showing up on the streets.

Juliette Cai peered over the railing, squinting down at the ground level of Screen One. From her vantage point, she could see almost everything below, could pick out every minuscule detail among the chaos broiling under the golden light fixtures. Unfortunately, it would have been more useful if she were actually down there herself, mingling with the merchant she had been sent here for, rather than staring at him from high above. Their seats tonight were the best that she could do; the assignment had been given far too last minute for Juliette to finagle something good in the thick of the socializing sphere.

“Are you going to be pulling that face all night?”

Juliette swiveled around, narrowing her eyes at her cousin. Kathleen Lang was trailing close, her mouth set in a grimace while the people around them searched for their seats before the picture started.

“Yes,” Juliette grumbled. “I have so many better things to be doing right now.”

Kathleen rolled her eyes, then wordlessly pointed ahead, having spotted the seats marked on their tickets. The stubs in her hands were ripped poorly after the uniformed ticket boy at the door got his top hat knocked into his eyes by the crowd surging into the portico. He had hardly a moment to recover before more tickets were waved in his face, foreigners and rich Chinese alike sniffing their noses at the slow speed. In places like these, better service was expected. Ticket prices were sky-high to make the Grand Theatre an *experience*, what with its arched ceiling beams and wrought-iron railings, its Italian marble and delicate doorway lettering—only in English, no Chinese to be found.

“What could possibly be more important than this?” Kathleen asked. They took their seats: the front-most row by the second-level railing, a perfect view of both the screen and all the people beneath. “Staring angrily at your bedroom wall, as you have been doing these few months?”

Juliette frowned. “I have *not* been doing merely that.”

“Oh, pardon me. How could I forget screaming at politicians?”

Huffing, Juliette leaned back into her seat. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest, the beads along her sleeves clinking loudly against the beads dangling from her front. Grating as the sound was, it contributed only a small fraction to the general bedlam of the theater.

“Bàba is already giving me enough grief for upsetting that Nationalist,” Juliette grumbled. She started to take inventory of the crowd below, mentally assigning names to faces and keeping track of who might notice that she was here. “Don’t you get on my case too.”

Kathleen tutted, setting her elbow onto the armrest between them. “I’m only concerned, biǎomèi.”

“Concerned about what? I’m always screaming at people.”

“Lord Cai doesn’t reprimand you often. I think that might be an indicator of—”

Juliette lurched forward. Out of sheer instinct, a gasp rose in her throat, but she refused to let it out, and instead the sound lodged itself tightly in place, an ice-cold

sensation pressed up against the back of her tongue. Kathleen immediately jerked to attention too, searching the floor below for whatever it was that had drained Juliette's face utterly of blood.

"What?" Kathleen demanded. "What is it? Do I call for backup?"

"No," Juliette whispered, swallowing hard. The theater dimmed. Taking their cue, the ticket boys started to walk the aisles, forcing the crowd to settle for the picture. "It is only a small hiccup."

Her cousin's brows were furrowed, still searching. "What *is* it?" Kathleen repeated.

Juliette simply pointed. She watched as Kathleen followed the direction in which she was indicating, watched as the realization set in when they were both looking at one figure pushing his way through the crowd.

"It would appear we were not the only ones sent here for a task."

Because down on the ground level, looking like he had not a care in the world, Roma Montagov smiled and stopped in front of the merchant they were after, extending his hand for the merchant to shake.

Juliette curled her fists tightly into her lap.

She had not seen Roma since October, since the first protests in Nanshi shook the city and set the precedent for those that were to follow when winter swept into Shanghai. She had not seen his physical person, but she had felt his presence everywhere: in the corpses littered across the city with lily-white flowers clutched in their stiff hands; in the business partners disappearing out of the blue with nary a message or explanation; in the blood feud making its mark. Ever since the city caught wind of a confrontation between Roma Montagov and Tyler Cai, the blood feud had shot back into its most terrible heights. Neither gang needed to worry about their numbers being picked off by the madness anymore. Instead their thoughts circled retribution, and honor, and as different mouths ran different accounts of what had happened between the inner circles of the Scarlet Gang and the White Flowers that day, the only definitive truths that came out were this: in a tiny hospital along the edges of Shanghai, Roma Montagov had shot at Tyler Cai, and to protect her cousin, Juliette Cai had killed Marshall Seo in cold blood.

Now both sides were vengeful. Now the White Flowers were pressing down on the Scarlet Gang with a renewed urgency, and the Scarlet Gang were fighting back just as hard. They had to. No matter how carefully the Scarlets cooperated with the Nationalists,

every single person in this city could feel something shifting, could see the gatherings grow larger and larger each time the Communists attempted a strike. The political landscape was soon to change, soon to swallow up this way of lawlessness, and for both gangs currently ruling this city with an iron fist, it was either to be violent now and secure their holdings, or regret it later should a greater power swoop in when there was no way to win territory back.

“Juliette,” Kathleen said softly. Her cousin’s eyes shifted back and forth between her and Roma. “What happened between you two?”

Juliette didn’t have an answer to give, just as she hadn’t had an answer all the other times she was asked this question. Kathleen deserved a better explanation, deserved to know why the city was saying Juliette had shot Marshall Seo point-blank when she had once been so friendly with him, why Roma Montagov was dropping flowers everywhere he went in mockery of the feud’s victims when he had once been so gentle with Juliette. But one more person in on the secret was one more person dragged down into the mess. One more target for Tyler’s scrutiny—one more target for Tyler’s gun.

Better to speak none of it. Better to pretend and pretend until maybe, just maybe, there came some chance to salvage the fractured state this city had fallen into.

“The picture is starting,” Juliette said in lieu of a reply.

“*Juliette*,” Kathleen insisted.

Juliette gritted her teeth hard. She wondered if her tone still fooled anyone. In New York, she had been so good at lying, so good at playing pretend as an utterly different person. These last months had been wearing her down until there was nothing left of her but... her.

“He’s not doing anything. Look, he’s taking his seat.”

Indeed, Roma appeared to be walking away from the merchant after a mere greeting, settling into an end seat two rows behind. This did not have to be a big deal. They did not need to engage in a confrontation. Juliette could quietly keep an eye on him from where she sat and make sure she approached the merchant first when intermission came. It was a surprise that she had even been sent after a merchant. The Scarlet Gang rarely chased after new clientele; they waited for clientele to come to *them*. But this merchant did not dabble in drugs like the rest of them. He had sailed into Shanghai last week carrying British technology—heavens knew what kind; her parents had not been specific in their

briefing, save that it was some sort of weaponry and the Scarlet Gang wanted to acquire his inventory.

If the White Flowers were trying to get in on it too, then it had to be something big. Juliette made a note to ask for details as soon as she got home.

The lights went dark. Kathleen glanced over her shoulder, fingers twisting into the loose sleeves of her coat.

“Relax,” Juliette whispered. “What you’re about to watch came directly from its premiere in Manhattan. Quality entertainment.”

The picture started. Screen One was the largest viewing room in the whole Grand Theatre, its orchestral sound booming from all sides. Each seat was equipped with its own translation system, reading out the text that appeared alongside the silent film. The couple to Juliette’s left were wearing their earpieces, murmuring excitedly to each other as the lines filtered through in Chinese. Juliette didn’t need her earpiece, not just because she could read English, but because she wasn’t really watching the film. Her eyes, no matter how much she tried, kept wandering down.

Don’t be a fool, Juliette scolded herself. She had tipped herself into this situation at full speed. She would not regret it. It was what had needed to be done.

But still, she couldn’t stop looking.

It had been only three months, but Roma had changed. She already knew that, of course, from the reports that came back to her about dead gangsters with Korean characters slashed in blood beside them. From the bodies piling up farther and farther inward into Scarlet territory lines, as if the White Flowers were testing the limits they could encroach upon. It was unlikely that Roma had sought out Scarlets specifically for vengeance killings—he didn’t have it in him to go *that* far—but each time a conflict erupted, the message left behind was clear: *This is your doing, Juliette*.

It was Juliette who had escalated the feud, who had pulled the trigger on Marshall Seo and told Roma to his face that whatever happened between them had been nothing but a lie. So now all the blood left in his wake was his revenge.

He looked the part too. At some point, he had traded his dark suits for lighter colors: for a cream jacket and a golden tie, for cuff links that caught the light each time the screen flashed white. His posture was sharp, no more slouching to feign casual, no more

stretching his legs long so he could slump into the chair and avoid being seen by anyone giving the room a cursory glance.

Roma Montagov wasn't the heir scheming in the shadows anymore. It seemed that he was sick of the city seeing him as the one slitting throats in the dark, the one with a heart of coal and the clothing to match.

He looked like a White Flower. He looked like his father.

A flash of movement blurred in Juliette's peripheral vision. She blinked, pulling her gaze away from Roma and searching the seats across his aisle. For a moment, she was certain she had merely been mistaken, that perhaps a lock of hair had come undone from her front curl and fallen into her eyes. Then the screen flashed white again as a shrieking train derailed in the Wild West, and Juliette saw the figure in the audience rise.

The man's face was cast in shadow, but the gun in his hand was very, very illuminated.

And it was pointed right at the merchant in the front row, who Juliette still needed to speak to.

"Absolutely *not*," she muttered angrily, reaching for the pistol strapped to her thigh.

The screen dropped into shadows, but Juliette took aim anyway. In the second before the man could act, she pulled the trigger first with a loud *bang*.

Her pistol kicked. Juliette pressed back into her seat, her jaw hard as the man below dropped his weapon, his shoulder wounded. Her gunshot had hardly drawn any notice, not when there was a shoot-out going on in the picture, too, drowning out the scream coming from the man's mouth and covering up the smoke wafting from the barrel of her pistol. Though the picture had no dialogue sound, the orchestral backing track had an uproarious cymbal banging in the background, and the theatergoers all assumed the gunshot a product of the film.

All except for Roma, who immediately swiveled around and looked up, eyes searching for the source of the gunshot.

And he found it.

Their gazes locked, the *click* of mutual recognition so forceful that Juliette felt a physical shift in her spine, like her body was finally righting itself into alignment after months out of configuration. She was frozen, breath caught in her throat, eyes pulled wide.

Until Roma reached into his jacket pocket and drew his gun, and Juliette had no choice but to jolt herself out of her daze. Instead of combating the would-be assassin, he had decided to shoot at *her*.

Three bullets whizzed by her ear. Gasping, Juliette struck the floor, her knees grazing the carpet hard as she threw herself down. The couple to her left started screaming.

The theatergoers had realized the gunshots were not a part of the soundtrack.

“Okay,” Juliette said under her breath. “He’s still mad at me.”

“What *was* that?” Kathleen demanded. Her cousin dropped quickly too, using the railing of the second level for cover. “Did you shoot into the seats? Was that Roma Montagov shooting back?”

Juliette grimaced. “Yes.”

It sounded like a stampede was starting on the floor below. The people on the upper level were certainly starting to panic too, hurtling out of their seats and rushing for the exit, but the two doors on either side of the theater—marked EVEN and ODD for the seat arrangements—were rather thin, and all they managed to achieve was a bottleneck situation.

Kathleen made an indecipherable noise. “*He’s not doing anything... he’s taking his seat!*”

“Oh, don’t mock me!” Juliette hissed.

This situation was not ideal. But she would salvage it.

She scrambled to her feet.

“Someone was trying to shoot the merchant.” Juliette made a quick glance over the railing. She didn’t see Roma anymore. She did see the merchant pulling his suit jacket tightly around his middle and securing his straw hat, trying to follow the crowds out of the theater.

“Go find who it was,” Kathleen huffed. “Your father will have your head if the merchant is killed.”

“I know you’re joking,” Juliette muttered, “but you might be right.” She pressed her pistol into her cousin’s hand and took off, calling over her shoulder, “Talk to the merchant for me! Merci!”

By now the bottleneck at the door had thinned enough that Juliette could push through, merging into the main anteroom outside the second floor of Screen One. Ladies dressed in silk qipao were screaming inconsolably at one another, and British officers were clumped together in the corner to hiss hysterics about what was going on. Juliette ignored it all, pushing and pushing to get to the stairs, to get down to the ground floor, where the merchant would be emerging.

She skidded to a stop. The main staircase was far too crowded. Her eyes darted to the side, to the maintenance stairs, and she tore the door open without a second thought, barreling right through. Juliette was familiar with this theater; it was Scarlet territory, and she had spent parts of her early childhood wandering around this building, peering into the different screening rooms when Nurse was distracted. Where the main staircase was a grandiose structure of polished flooring and arched, wooden banisters, the maintenance stairs were made of cement and void of natural light, relying on naught but a small bulb dangling at the middle landing.

Her heels clacked loudly, turning the corner of the landing. She stopped short.

Waiting there, by the door into the main lobby, was Roma, his gun raised.

Juliette supposed she had grown predictable.

“You were three paces away from the merchant,” she said. She was surprised her voice remained level. *Tă mā de*. There was one knife strapped to her leg, but in the time it would take to reach for it, she would be giving Roma plenty of time to shoot. “You left him just to find me? I’m flattered—”

Juliette swerved with a hiss. Her cheek radiated heat, swelling from the harrowingly close contact of the bullets that flew by her head. Before Roma could think to aim again, Juliette ran the quickest survey of her options, then dove through the door behind her, surging into the storage unit.

She wasn’t trying to escape. This was a dead end, a thin room crowded with stacked chairs and cobwebs. She only needed...

Another bullet whizzed by her arm.

“You’re going to blow this place up,” Juliette snapped, spinning around. She had come to the very end of the storage space, her back pressed to the thick pipes that ran along the walls. “Some of these pipes carry gas—put a hole in one and the whole theater bursts into flames.”

Roma was hardly threatened. It was as if he could not hear her. His eyes were narrowed, his expression scrunched. He looked unfamiliar—properly foreign, like a boy who had pulled on a costume and hadn't expected how well it would fit. Even under the dim lights, the gold of his clothes glimmered, as bright as the twinkling billboards outside the theater.

Juliette wanted to scream, seeing what he had been made into. She could hardly catch her breath, and she would be lying if she said it was only because of her current physical exertion.

"Did you hear what I said?" Juliette eyed the distance between them. "Put that gun away—"

"Do you hear *yourself*?" Roma interrupted. In three strides, he was close enough to point his gun right in Juliette's face. She could feel the heat of the barrel, hot steel an inch away from her skin. "You killed Marshall. You killed him, and it's been months, and I haven't heard a word of explanation from you—"

"There is no explanation."

He thought her a monster. He thought she had hated him the whole time, so viciously that she would destroy everything he loved, and he *had* to think that if he was to keep his life. Juliette refused to drag him down just because *she* was weak-willed.

"I killed him because he needed to die," Juliette said. Her arm whipped up. She twisted Roma's gun away, letting it clatter at their feet. "Just as I will kill you. Just as I will not stop until you kill me—"

He slammed her into the pipes.

The effort was so forceful that Juliette tasted blood inside her lip, sliced by her own sharp teeth. She stifled a gasp and then another when Roma's hand tightened around her throat, his eyes murderous.

Juliette was not frightened. If anything, she was only resentful—not at Roma, but at herself. At wanting to lean in even while Roma was actively trying to kill her. At this distance between them that she had willingly manufactured, because they had been born into two families at war, and she would rather die at Roma's hand than be the cause of his death.

No one else is dying to protect me. Roma had blown up a whole house of people to keep Juliette safe. Tyler and his Scarlet men would go on a rampage in the name of defending

Juliette, even if they too wanted her dead. It was all one and the same. It was this city, divided by names and colors and turfs, but somehow bleeding the exact same shade of violence.

“Go on,” Juliette said with effort.

She didn’t mean it. She knew Roma Montagov. He thought he wanted her dead, but the fact of the matter was that he never missed, and yet he had—all those bullets, embedded into the walls instead of Juliette’s head. The fact of the matter was that he had his hands around her throat and yet she could still breathe, could still inhale past the rot and the hate that his fingers tried to press into her skin.

Juliette finally reached for her blade. Just as Roma shifted forward, perhaps intent on his kill, her hand closed around the sheath beneath her dress and she pulled the weapon free, slicing down on whatever she came in contact with first. Roma hissed, releasing his hold. It was only a surface cut, but he cradled his arm to his chest, and Juliette followed close, leveling the blade to his throat.

“This is Scarlet territory.” Her words were even, but it took everything in her to keep them that way. “You forget yourself.”

Roma grew still. He stared at her, utterly unreadable as the moment drew long—long enough that Juliette almost thought he would surrender.

Only then Roma leaned into the blade instead, until the metal was pressed right into his neck, one hairsbreadth away from breaking skin and drawing blood.

“Then do it,” Roma hissed. He sounded angry.... He sounded *pained*. “Kill me.”

Juliette did not move. She must have hesitated for a fraction too long, because Roma’s expression morphed into a sneer.

“Why do you pause?” he taunted.

The taste of blood was still pungent inside her mouth. In a blur, Juliette flipped the blade onto its blunt end and slammed the handle to Roma’s temple. He blinked and dropped like a rock, but Juliette threw the weapon away and lunged to break his fall. As soon as her hands slid around him, she let out a small exhale of relief, stopping Roma just before his head could hit the hard floor.

Juliette sighed. In her arms, he felt so solid, more real than ever. His safety was an abstract concept when he was at a distance, far from the threats that her Scarlets posed to him. But here, with his pulse thudding through his chest and beating an even rhythm

onto hers, he was just a boy, just a bloody, beating heart that could be cut out at any moment by any blade sharp enough.

“Why do you pause?” Juliette mimicked bitterly. Softly, she set him down, brushing his mussed hair out of his face. “Because even if you hate me, Roma Montagov, I still love you.”

Two

Roma felt the prodding sensation on his shoulder first. Then the stiffness in his bones. Then the terrible, terrible pain shooting through his head.

“*Christ,*” he hissed, jerking awake. As soon as his vision cleared, he sighted the black boot responsible for the prodding, attached to the last person he wanted to encounter while slumped on the floor.

“What the hell happened?” Dimitri Voronin demanded, his arms crossed over his chest. Behind him stood three other White Flowers. They were inspecting the storage unit with particular attention, eyeing the bullet holes studded into the walls.

“Juliette Cai happened,” Roma muttered, hobbling to his feet. “She knocked me out.”

“It looks like you’re lucky she didn’t kill you,” Dimitri said. He smacked his hand on the wall, rubbing charred grit and dust onto his palm. Roma didn’t bother saying that all those bullets were his. It was not as if Dimitri were actually here to help. He had probably gathered his reinforcements as soon as he heard about the Grand Theatre rocking with gunshots, frantic to be where the chaos was. Dimitri Voronin had been everywhere these few months, ever since he missed the showdown at the hospital and had to piece together afterward what had gone on between the White Flowers and the Scarlet Gang, like everyone else. Dimitri Voronin would not be left out of the next big showdown. At the sound of any disturbance in the city—no matter how slight—so long as it involved the blood feud, he was now the first on the scene.

“What are you doing here?” Roma asked. He touched his cheek, wincing at the bruising that had spread. “My father sent *me*.”

“Yes, well, that was not a great decision, was it? We saw the merchant outside having a nice chat with Kathleen Lang.”

Roma bit back his curse. He wanted to spit it to the ground, but Dimitri was watching, so he only turned away, picking up his fallen pistol. “No matter. Tomorrow is a new day. It’s time to go.”

“You will give up like that?”

“This is *Scarlet*—”

A whistle blew outside, echoing up and down the maintenance stairs. This time Roma did curse aloud, tucking his pistol away before the garde municipale barged into the storage unit, their batons out. For whatever reason, the enforcement saw the White Flowers and decided to direct their attention to Dimitri, eyes pinned on his weapons.

“Lâche le pistolet,” the man at the front demanded. His belt glinted, metal handcuffs catching the low light. “Lâche-moi ça et lève les mains.”

Dimitri did not do as he was told, did not drop the gun dangling casually in his grip nor put his hands up. His refusal seemed to be insolence, but Roma knew better. Dimitri did not speak French.

“You don’t control us,” Dimitri snapped in Russian. “So why don’t you go on and—”

“Ça va maintenant,” Roma interrupted. “J’ai entendu une dispute dehors du théâtre. Allez l’investiguer.”

The garde municipale officers narrowed their eyes, unsure if they should follow Roma’s instruction—if there was truly an incident outside to tend to or if Roma was only making up lies. It was indeed a lie, but Roma only had to snap “Go!” again and the garde municipale scattered.

That was who he had worked so hard to turn into. That was who he was doing everything in his power to stay as. Someone who was listened to even when the officers were Scarlets.

“Impressive,” Dimitri said when it was just the White Flowers again. “Really, Roma, it is most—”

“Shut up,” Roma snapped. The effect was immediate. He wished he could feel some satisfaction at the red that rose up Dimitri’s neck, at the amused smirking from the men that Dimitri had brought along, but all he felt was empty. “Next time don’t come prancing into foreign-controlled territory if you don’t know how to deal with the foreigners.”

Roma marched out, overly aggressive in his stride as he took the maintenance stairs back down to the ground floor. It was hard to say what exactly had him this worked up; there was so much boiling beneath his skin—the merchant slipping away, the strange assassin in the stalls, Juliette being here.

Juliette. He stomped extra hard coming out of the theater, squinting up at the gray clouds. A jolt of pain came from his arm then, and his hand flew to the cut that Juliette had made, thinking he would find a clump of blood, as rancid and dead as his feelings for her. Instead, as he rolled his sleeve up gingerly, his fingers came upon only smooth fabric.

With a start, Roma stopped at the side of the pavement. He peered at his arm. It had been finely wrapped, secured with a bow.

“Is this *silk*?” he muttered, frowning. It looked like silk. It looked like the silk of Juliette’s dress, torn from the hem, but *why would she do that*?

A horn blew from the road, drawing his attention. The car idling there flashed its headlights, before the chauffeur at the driver’s seat stuck his arm out and waved at Roma. Roma remained unmoving, his brow furrowed.

“Mr. Montagov!” the White Flower finally hollered after a long minute. “Can we go yet?”

Roma sighed, hurrying to the car.



There were twenty-two vases scattered around the Cai mansion, all of them filled with red roses. Juliette reached out to cup one bud in her palm, her finger sliding along the delicate petal’s edge. Nightfall had long passed outside. The hour was late enough that most of the servants had gone to sleep, shuffling to their rooms in their nightgowns, bidding Juliette a good rest when they passed her in the hallway. She figured they had spoken only because it would have been strange not to acknowledge the Scarlet heir lying on the floor, arms splayed and legs propped upright on the walls as she waited outside her father’s office. The last servant had bidden her well more than half an hour ago. Since then she had stood up and started pacing, much to Kathleen’s annoyance. Her cousin had remained seated primly on an actual chair the whole time, a folder waiting on her lap.

“What could they possibly be talking about?” Juliette grumbled, releasing the rose in her hand. “It’s been *hours*. Move it to another day—”

Lord Cai’s office door finally opened, revealing a Nationalist taking his leave. Months ago, Juliette would have been curious about the meeting, would have asked for a briefing. Now the sight of Nationalists coming and going in this house was so common that she hardly cared. It was always the same—squash the Communists, whatever the cost. Riddle them with bullets, break up their labor unions: the Nationalists didn’t mind how the Scarlets did it, so long as they achieved their objectives.

The Nationalist hovered at the doorway, then turned back, as if he had one more thing he forgot to say. Juliette narrowed her eyes. The sight of Nationalists had grown familiar to her, true, but this one... There were stars and badges galore decorating his uniform. A general, perhaps.

Testing her limits, Juliette held out her hand for Kathleen to take. Kathleen, albeit confused, accepted and picked up her folder, both of them walking toward the Nationalist.

“No more warlords.” The Nationalist flicked an imaginary piece of lint off his military uniform. “And no more foreigners. We enter a new world, and whether the Scarlet Gang enters with us is a matter of loyalty—”

“Yes, yes,” Juliette interrupted, squeezing past him and pulling Kathleen along. “Blessed be the Kuomintang, wàn suì wàn suì wàn wàn suì...” She started to push at the door.

“*Juliette*,” Lord Cai snapped.

Juliette stopped. A glint had entered her eye. The same sort that came about when the cooks brought out her favorite meal. The same sort when she spotted a diamond necklace she wanted in the window of a department store.

“Present and reporting,” she said.

Lord Cai leaned back in his large chair, folding his hands over his stomach. “Apologize, please.”

Juliette bobbed an unbothered curtsy. When she looked at the Nationalist, he was observing her carefully, but it was not the leer of men on the streets. It was something far more strategic.

“Please accept my apologies. I trust you can find your way to the door?”