



A promotional poster for the TV series 'Killing Eve'. The background is a solid, vibrant red. On the left, a large, close-up photograph of two women is featured. The woman in the foreground, Sandra Oh, has dark, curly hair and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. Behind her, the back and shoulder of another woman, Jodie Comer, are visible; she has blonde hair tied in a bun and is looking down. The title 'KILLING EVE' is printed in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on the right side of the poster. In the bottom right corner, there are two smaller, black-and-white inset images. The first shows a woman in a long, flowing dress walking away. The second shows a woman in a dark suit and trench coat running towards the viewer, carrying a bag.

KILLING EVE



KILLING EVE

Killing Eve Rewritten

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Not actually trying to make any copyright claims here. This is just a little project intended to make the Killing Eve books by Luke Jennings more palatable to fans of the TV series by editing some dialogue and character background details. But Reedsy insists on including a copyright page, so here we are.

First edition

Editing by Squid Blankets

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

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I

Codename Villanelle

1

The Palazzo Falconieri stands on a promontory on one of the smaller Italian lakes. It's late June, and a faint breeze touches the pines and cypresses that cluster like sentinels around the rocky headland. The gardens are imposing, and perhaps even beautiful, but the deep shadows lend the place a forbidding air, which is echoed by the severe lines of the Palazzo itself.

The building faces the lake, and is fronted by tall windows through which silk curtains are visible. The east wing was once a banqueting hall, but now functions as a conference room. At its center, beneath a heavy art deco chandelier, is a long table bearing a Bugatti bronze of a panther.

At first glance, the twelve men and women sitting around the table look ordinary enough. Successful, judging from their quietly expensive clothes. Most are in their late fifties or early sixties, with the kind of faces that you instantly forget. There is an unblinking watchfulness about these individuals, however, which is not ordinary.

The morning passes in discussion, which is conducted in Russian and English, the languages common to all those present. Then a light lunch—antipasti, lake trout, chilled Vernaccia wine, fresh figs and apricots—is served on the terrace. Afterwards, the twelve men and women pour themselves coffee, contemplate

the breeze-ruffled expanse of the lake, and pace the garden. There are no security people, because at this level of secrecy, security people themselves become a risk. Before long they have returned to their places in the shadowed conference room. The day's agenda is simply headed "EUROPE."

The first speaker is an ageless, darkly tanned figure with deep-set eyes. He looks around him. "This morning, ladies and gentlemen, we discussed Europe's political and economic future. We talked, in particular, about the flow of capital, and how this can best be controlled. This afternoon I want to speak to you about a different economy." The room darkens, and the twelve turn to face the screen on the room's north wall showing an image of a Mediterranean port, of container ships and ship-to-shore gantry cranes.

"Palermo, ladies and gentlemen, today the principal point of entry for cocaine into Europe. The result of a strategic alliance between the Mexican drug cartels and the Sicilian Mafia."

"Aren't the Sicilians a spent force?" asks a heavyset man to his left. "I was under the impression that the mainland syndicates ran the drugs trade these days."

"That used to be the case. Until eighteen months ago, the cartels dealt principally with the 'Ndrangheta, from the southern Italian region of Calabria. But in recent months, a war has broken out between the Calabrians and a resurgent Sicilian clan, the Greci."

A face appears on the screen. The dark eyes coldly watchful. The mouth is a steel trap.

"Cesare Greco has dedicated his life to resurrecting the influence of his family, which lost its place in the Cosa Nostra power structure in the 1990s, following the murder of Cesare's father by a member of the rival Matteo family. A quarter of

a century later, Cesare has hunted down and killed all of the surviving Mattei. The Greci, and their associates the Messini, are the richest, most powerful, and most feared of the Sicilian clans. Cesare is known to have personally murdered at least sixty people, and to have ordered the deaths of hundreds more. Today, at fifty-five years of age, his hold over Palermo and its drug trade is absolute. His enterprises, worldwide, turn over some twenty to thirty billion dollars. Ladies and gentlemen, he's practically one of us."

A faint ripple of amusement, or something approximating to it, runs around the room.

"The problem with Cesare Greco is not his predilection for torture and murder," he continues. "When mafiosi kill mafiosi it's like a self-cleaning oven. But recently he has started ordering the assassination of members of the establishment. To date, his tally is two judges and four senior magistrates, all killed by car bombs, and an investigative journalist, who was gunned down last month outside her apartment. The journalist was pregnant at the time of her death. The child did not survive."

He pauses and raises his gaze to the screen with the image of the dead woman, spread-eagled on the pavement in a pool of blood.

"Needless to say, it has not been possible to directly implicate Greco in any of these crimes. Police have been bribed or threatened, witnesses intimidated. The code of silence, or *omertà*, prevails. The man is, to all intents and purposes, untouchable. A month ago I sent an intermediary to arrange a meeting with him, as I felt that we needed to reach some sort of accommodation. His activities in this corner of Europe have become so excessive that they threaten to impact on our own interests. Greco's response was immediate. The following day

I received a sealed package.” The image on the screen changes. “It contained, as you can see, my associate’s eyes, ears, and tongue. The message was clear. No meeting. No discussion. No accommodation.”

Those seated around the table regard the grisly tableau for a moment, then return their focus to the speaker.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I think we need to take an executive decision concerning Cesare Greco. He is a dangerously uncontrollable force, and beyond the reach of the law. His criminal activities, and the social havoc they entail, threaten the stability of the Mediterranean sector. I propose that we remove him from the game, permanently.”

Rising from his chair, the speaker makes his way to a side-table, returning with an antique lacquered box. Taking out a black velvet drawstring bag, he pours its contents on the table in front of him. Twenty-four small ivory fish, twelve of them aged to a smooth yellow, twelve of them stained a dark blood-red. Each individual receives a contrasting pair of fish.

The velvet bag makes its way around the table counter-clockwise. When it has made a full revolution, it is passed to the man who proposed the vote. Once again, the contents of the bag are poured onto the dimly gleaming surface of the table. Twelve red fish. A unanimous sentence of death.

* * *

It’s evening, a fortnight later, and Villanelle is sitting at an outside table at Le Jasmin, a private members club in Paris’s Sixteenth Arrondissement. From the east comes the murmur of traffic on the Boulevard Suchet, to the west is the Bois de Boulogne and the Auteuil racecourse. The club’s garden is

bordered by a trellis hung with blossoming jasmine whose scent infuses the warm air. Most of the other tables are occupied, but conversation is muted. The light fades, the night awaits.

Villanelle takes a long sip of her Grey Goose vodka Martini, and discreetly surveys the surroundings, particularly noting the couple at the next table. Both are in their mid-twenties: he elegantly disheveled, she cat-like and exquisite. Are they brother and sister? Colleagues? Lovers?

Definitely not brother and sister, Villanelle decides. There's a tension between them—a complicity—that's anything but familiar. They're certainly rich, though. Her silk sweater, for example, its dark gold matching her eyes. Not new, but definitely Chanel. And they're drinking vintage Taittinger, which doesn't come cheap at Le Jasmin.

Catching Villanelle's eye, the man raises his champagne flute a centimeter or two. He murmurs to his companion, who fixes her with a cool, assessing stare.

"Would you like to join us?" she asks. It's a challenge as much as an invitation.

Villanelle stares back, unblinking. A breeze shivers the scented air.

"It's not compulsory," says the man, his wry smile at odds with the calm of his gaze.

Villanelle stands, lifts her glass. "I'd love to join you. I was expecting a friend, but she must have been held up."

"In that case..." The man rises to his feet. "I'm Olivier. And this is Nica."

"Julie."

The conversation unfolds conventionally enough. Olivier, she learns, has recently launched a career as an art dealer. Nica intermittently works as an actress. They are not related, nor,

on closer inspection do they give the impression of being lovers. Even so, there is something subtly erotic in their complicity, and the way they've drawn her into their orbit.

"I'm a day-trader," Villanelle-as-Julie tells them. "Currencies, interest-rate futures, all that." With satisfaction, she notes the immediate dimming of interest in their eyes. She can, if necessary, talk for hours about day-trading, but they don't want to know. Instead, she describes the sunlit first-floor flat in Versailles from which she works. It doesn't exist, but she can picture it down to the ironwork scrolls on the balcony and the faded Persian rug on the floor. Her cover story is perfect now, and the deception, as always, affords her a rush of pleasure.

"We love your style, and your eyes, and your hair, and most of all we love your shoes," says Nica.

Villanelle laughs, and flexes her feet in her strappy satin Louboutins. She deliberately mirrors Olivier's languid posture.

"What's funny?" asks Nica, tilting her head and lighting a cigarette.

"You are," says Villanelle. How would it be, she wonders, to lose herself in that golden gaze? To feel that smoky mouth on hers? She's enjoying herself now; she knows that both Olivier and Nica want her. They think that they're playing her, and Villanelle will go on letting them think so. It will be amusing to manipulate them, to see how far they will go.

"I have a suggestion," says Olivier, but at that moment, the phone in Villanelle's bag begins to vibrate. A text message: YOUR APARTMENT. NOW. She stands, her expression blank. She glances at Nica and Olivier, but in her mind they no longer exist. She's out of there without a word, and in less than a minute is swinging into a northbound stream of traffic on her Vespa.

It's been nearly four years now since she first met the man who sent her the text. The man who, to this day, she knows only as Konstantin. Her circumstances then were very different. Her name was Oksana Astankova, and for the past three years, she had been an inmate at Novinskaya, a high-security women's correctional facility in Moscow.

* * *

It takes perhaps thirty minutes to ride from Le Jasmin to Villanelle's apartment in the Montmartre area of the city. The mid-nineteenth-century building is anonymous and quiet, and within easy walking distance of anything she might need. After parking the Vespa on the street behind her car, a fast and anonymous silver-gray Audi TT Roadster, she enters her building, retrieves her mail from the box in the entryway, and takes the stairs to her apartment. The wide double doors through which she enters are identical to the others in the building, with no added reinforcements or other enhanced security measures to suggest there is anything out of the ordinary about the woman living here.

Inside, the apartment is comfortable and spacious, if perhaps a little shabby. Konstantin handed Villanelle the keys and title deeds two years ago. She has no idea who lived there before her, but the place was fully furnished when she moved in, and from the decades-old fixtures and fittings, she guesses it was someone elderly. She has added some personal touches—souvenirs and knickknacks from her travels, and a few pieces of mismatched furniture—but has mostly left the apartment as she found it, with its gaudy pink bathroom, faded wallpaper, and bare herringbone floors.

She rarely has visitors—Konstantin only checks in on her if he has a job for her or some other business in Paris, and her sexual liaisons are mostly conducted elsewhere—but if anyone were to look around inside the apartment, they would find it rather unremarkable, on the whole.

* * *

Conditions at Novinskaya were unspeakable. The food was barely edible, the sanitation nonexistent, and an icy, numbing wind from the Moskva River penetrated every cheerless corner of the institution. The slightest infraction of the rules resulted in a prolonged period of *shiza*, or solitary confinement. Oksana had been there for three years when she was ordered from her cell and marched without explanation to one of the visitors' rooms.

A man in a navy pea coat was sitting on one of the chairs, and to begin with, he just looked at her. Took in the threadbare prison uniform, the gaunt features, the posture of sullen defiance. "Oksana Anatolyevna Astankova," he said eventually, consulting a printed folder on the table. "Age, twenty-one years and eight months. Convicted of homicide, with multiple aggravating circumstances."

She waited, assessing him with her flat, unblinking gaze. Medium height, a bit stocky, somewhere between fifty and sixty years old. His hair was white, his hairline receding, and his beard neatly trimmed. He looked harmless enough, but his shrewd eyes told her this was not someone who could be manipulated easily.

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, an imported brand, and offered her one. It would have bought her an extra helping of

food for a week, but Oksana refused it with a barely perceptible shake of the head. He shrugged and set the pack down on the table without taking one for himself. From beneath the table he took a thermos and two cardboard cups. Poured slowly, so that the scent of strong tea infused the cold air. Nudged one of the cups towards her.

She took an exploratory sip of her tea. "So who are you?"

"Someone before whom you can speak freely, Oksana Anatolyevna. But first, I need you to confirm the truth of the following." He took a folded sheaf of papers from his coat pocket. "Your father, Anatoly, was a soldier, and was absent for much of your childhood. Your mother, Tatiana, expressed concerns about your antisocial behaviors from a young age, and surrendered you to the care of the Sakharov orphanage in Perm while your father was posted to Chechnya. The staff there noted your exceptional academic skills. They also identified other traits, including a near-total inability to form relationships with other children. When you were only eight years old, you severely wounded a peer with a pen, but faced no repercussions due to your young age and your claim that you had acted in self-defense after the other child attacked you first. He denied it, of course."

She exhaled slowly, and touched the tip of her tongue to a ridge of scar tissue on her upper lip. The gesture, like the scar itself, was barely perceptible, but the man in the coat saw it, and noted it.

"When you were ten, you set fire to the dormitory block at the orphanage, resulting in the death of another child. You were transferred to the psychiatric unit of Municipal Hospital Number 4 in Perm, where your therapist diagnosed you as suffering from a sociopathic personality disorder, then to a

juvenile detention facility in Moscow, where you spent the next five years. Upon your release, you remained a ward of the state, and enrolled in secondary school, where, once again, you won praise for your academic results—particularly for your language skills—and once again it was noted that you made no attempt to make friends or form relationships with your peers. In fact, it's on the record that you were involved in, and suspected of instigating, a number of violent incidents over the next few years."

From his stack of documents, he pulled out a black and white crime scene photograph and placed it on the table between them. A dead man, lying in a bathtub, half naked and covered in blood. She picked it up and studied it, but her expression betrayed nothing.

"You did, however, form a strong attachment to your French teacher, Anna Leonova, and became increasingly... agitated... by the fact that she was married. So you cut her husband's throat and castrated him with a kitchen knife. Not something anyone would have expected from an eighteen-year-old girl who had already been accepted into one of the top universities in Russia. But knowing your history, it makes more sense. And I have to admit, it was an inspired piece of work." He set his stack of papers down and looked at her, folding his arms over his chest.

She placed the picture back on the table, leaned back, and crossed her arms as well, mirroring his motions and body language. "Is this leading somewhere?"

"Just between the two of us. What did you feel when you killed him?"

"At the time, I felt satisfaction at a job well done. Now..." She shrugged. "Nothing."

“So for a minute of satisfaction and then nothing, you are spending the next twenty-two years of your life in this miserable shithole?”

“You came here just to tell me that?”

“The truth, Oksana Anatolyevna, is that the world has a problem with people like you. Men or women who are born, as you were, without a conscience, or the ability to feel guilt. You represent a tiny fraction of the population at large, but without you...” He took a sip of tea, and sat back in his chair. “Without predators, people who can think the unthinkable, and act without fear or hesitation, the world stands still. You are an evolutionary necessity.”

There was a long silence. His assessment of her was not entirely accurate, at least not according to her own limited understanding of herself, but she clung to the words anyway, to the sentiment she had always longed to hear: that she was different, that she was special, that she was born to soar.

“So what do you want from me?” she asked.

Konstantin told her, sparing no detail of what was to come. And listening to him, it was as if everything in her life had led to that moment. Her expression never flickered, but the thrill that ripped through her was as avid as hunger.

* * *

Over Paris, the light is fading. Konstantin has already come and gone. Sitting cross-legged on her bed with her laptop open in front of her, Villanelle studies the postcard he’d given her. On the front is a picture captioned Monte Pellegrino, Palermo; on the back, someone—possibly Konstantin, but she has never bothered to ask whether the postcards come directly from him

or from someone else altogether—has scribbled “Miss You” on one side and an address which almost certainly doesn’t exist on the other. The important information, however, is a small line of text printed along the edge: *STAMPA IN ITALIA R008H77102986*.

She inputs this code into a secure website. At the top of the page that opens is a name, Cesare Greco. Below that are several photographs, all of the same man. His eyes are dark, almost black, and the set of his mouth is hard. Villanelle stares at the pictures. She has never seen the man before, but there’s something in his face that she recognizes. A kind of emptiness. It takes her a moment to remember where she’s seen that look before. In the mirror. In her own eyes.

“Nice face,” she says, sneering at the screen, then turns her attention to the paragraphs of text below the pictures, and, once she is done reading, to the attached documents.

One of the unique attributes that recommended Villanelle to her present employers was her photographic memory. It takes her thirty minutes to read the Greco file, and when she has finished, she can recall every detail as if she were reading it from the page open in front of her. Culled from police files, surveillance logs, court records, and informers’ statements, it is an exhaustive personal portrait. All things considered, though, it is frustratingly brief. A timeline of Greco’s career to date. An FBI psychological profile. A breakdown, in large part hypothetical, of his domestic situation, personal habits and sexual proclivities. A list of properties held in his name. An analysis of his known security arrangements.

The portrait that emerges is of a man of austere tastes. Pathologically averse to public attention, he is extremely skilled at avoiding it, even in an era of mass communication. At the

same time, his power stems in large part from his reputation. In a region of the world where torture and murder are routine, Greco's ferocity sets him apart. Anyone who dares to stand in his way or question his authority is eliminated, usually with spectacular cruelty. Rivals have seen their entire families shot, informers discovered with their throats slashed and their tongues drawn out through the gaping wounds.

Villanelle looks out over the city. In the distance, the lights of the Sacré-Cœur Basilica illuminate the structure so that it seems to glow against the background of the darkening sky. She considers Greco. Sets his personal refinement against the baroque horror of his actions and commissions. Is there any way she can turn this contradiction to her advantage?

She re-reads the file, scanning each sentence for a possible entrée. Greco's principal residence, a majestic stone villa situated outside Palermo, is a fortress. His family lives there, protected by a loyal and vigilant team of armed bodyguards. His wife, Calogera, rarely leaves home; his only daughter, Valentina, lives in a neighboring village, where she is married to the oldest son of her father's *consigliere*. The region has its own dialect and a history of obdurate hostility to outsiders. Those whom Greco wishes to meet—allied clan members, prospective associates, his tailor, his barber—are invited to the villa, where they are searched, and if necessary, disarmed. When Greco leaves home to visit his mistress in Palermo, he is invariably accompanied by an armed driver and at least two bodyguards. There appears to be no predictable pattern in these visits.

One document in particular, though, interests Villanelle. It's a five-year-old press cutting from the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* reporting a near-fatal accident sustained by one of the paper's own journalists in Rome. According to Bruno De

Santis: “I was coming out of a restaurant in Trastevere when a car came racing towards me on the wrong side of the street. The next thing I knew, I was in hospital, lucky to be alive.”

De Santis’s none-too-subtle suggestion is that this attempt on his life is the consequence of a piece he wrote for the *Corriere* a month earlier, about a young Sicilian soprano named Franca Farfaglia. In the piece, he criticized Farfaglia for having accepted a donation towards her studies at the La Scala Theatre Academy in Milan from Cesare Greco, “the notorious organized crime boss.”

It is a brave and perhaps foolhardy piece of journalism, but Villanelle is not interested in De Santis. Instead, she wonders what inspired Greco’s generosity towards Farfaglia—not that he couldn’t afford an infinity of such gestures. Was it a love of opera, the wish to help a talented local girl to achieve her potential, or an altogether more basic desire?

An Internet search produces a wealth of images of Farfaglia. Commanding in appearance, with proud, severe features, she looks older than her twenty-six years. Several of the images reappear on the singer’s own website, where there’s a history of her career to date, a selection of performance reviews, and her schedule for the next few months. Scrolling through the engagements, Villanelle pauses. Her eyes narrow and she touches a fingertip to the scar on her lip. Then, clicking on the hyperlink, she brings up the website of the Teatro Massimo in Palermo.

* * *

Oksana’s training took the best part of a year.

The worst came first. Six weeks of fitness training and

unarmed combat on a lonely, wind-scoured stretch of the Essex coast. She arrived in early December. The instructor was a former Special Boat Service Instructor named Roy, a knotty, taciturn figure of about sixty, with a gaze as cold as the North Sea. His habitual get-up, worn in all weathers, was a faded cotton tracksuit and a pair of old tennis shoes. Roy was merciless. Oksana was underweight and in poor condition following her years of incarceration, and for the first fortnight, the interminable runs across the marshes, with the sleet whipping at her face and the greasy coastal mud sucking at her boots, were torture.

Determination kept her going. Anything, even death from exposure on the mudflats, was better than returning to the Russian penal system. Roy didn't know who she was, and didn't care. His brief was simply to bring her to combat readiness. For the duration of the course, she lived in an unheated Nissen hut on a mud-and-shingle island linked to the mainland by a quarter-mile-long causeway. During the Cold War, the place had been an early warning station, and something of its grim, apocalyptic purpose lingered.

On the first night, Oksana was so cold she couldn't sleep, but from then on, exhaustion took its toll, and she was wrapped in her single blanket and dead to the world by 9 p.m. Roy kicked the corrugated-iron door open every morning at 4 a.m. before tossing her the day's rations—usually a plastic canteen of water and a couple of tins of processed meat and vegetables—and leaving her to pull on her T-shirt, combat trousers, and boots, invariably still sodden from the day before. For two hours, they ran repeated circuits of the island, either across the oozing gray mudflats or along the icy tideline, before returning to the Nissen hut to brew tea and heat up a mess-tin of rations on a

small hexamine stove. By sunrise, they would be outside again, pounding the mudflats until Oksana was vomiting with fatigue.

In the afternoons, as the darkness closed in, they worked on hand-to-hand combat. Over the years, Roy had taken elements of jujitsu, street-fighting, and other techniques and refined them into a single discipline. The emphasis was on improvisation and speed, and practice sessions were often conducted knee-deep in the sea, with the mud and shingle shifting treacherously beneath their feet. Assuming her English to be poor, Roy taught by physical example. Oksana thought she knew a thing or two about fighting, but Roy seemed to anticipate every move she attempted, deflecting her blows with casual ease before pitching her, yet again, into the icy seawater.

Oksana didn't think she'd ever hated anyone as much as she hated the ex-SBS instructor. No one, not in the Perm orphanage or the juvenile detention center, not even in prison, had so systematically belittled and humiliated her. Hatred became a simmering rage. She was Oksana Astankova, and she lived by rules that few would even begin to understand. She would beat this *angliski ublyudok*, this donkey-fucker, if it killed her.

Late one afternoon in the final week, they were circling each other in the incoming tide. Roy had a Gerber knife with an eight-inch blade, Oksana was unarmed. Roy moved first, swinging the oxidized blade so close to her face that she felt the breeze of its passing, and in response she ducked under his knife-arm and hammered a short-arm punch into his ribs. It stopped him for a second, and by the time the Gerber came slicing back, she was out of reach. They danced back and forth, and Roy lunged for her chest. Her body outraced her brain. Half-turning, she grabbed his wrist, wrenched him in the direction to which he was already committed, and booted

his legs from under him. As Roy fell backwards into the water, arms flailing, she was already lifting her knee to stamp his knife-hand into the shingle—"Control the weapon, then the man," Roy had taught her—and as the instructor involuntarily released the Gerber, fell forwards to pin him underwater. Straddling him, she forced his head back with the palm of her hand, and watched the agonized working of his face as he began to drown.

It was interesting—fascinating, even—but she wanted him alive to acknowledge her triumph, so she dragged him to shore, where he rolled onto his side and retched up gouts of seawater. When he finally opened his eyes, she was holding the point of the Gerber knife to his throat. Meeting her eyes, he nodded in submission.

A week later, Konstantin came to collect her, looking her up and down with quiet approval as she waited, rucksack slung loosely over one shoulder, on the muddy track leading to the causeway. "You look good," he said, his sharp gaze taking in her newly confident stance and windburned, salt-blistered features.

"You know she's a fucking psycho," said Roy.

"Ha! Nobody's perfect," said Konstantin.

Two days later, Oksana flew to Germany for three weeks' escape and evasion training at the mountain warfare school in Mittenwald. She was attached to a NATO Special Forces cadre, and her cover story was that she was on secondment from a Russian Interior Ministry counter-terrorism unit. On the second night, while dug into deep snow, she felt stealthy fingers at the zip of her bivvy bag. A silent but furious fight erupted in the darkness, and the following day, two of the NATO soldiers were helicoptered off the mountain, one with a severed forearm tendon, the other with a stab wound through the palm of his hand. After that, no one bothered her.

Immediately after Mittenwald, she was flown to a U.S. Army facility in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where she was put through an advanced Resistance to Interrogation program. This was calculatedly nightmarish, and designed to induce maximal stress and anxiety in its subjects. Shortly after her arrival, Oksana was stripped naked by her male guards and marched to a brightly lit, windowless cell, empty except for a closed-circuit camera mounted high on one wall. Time passed, hour after endless hour, but she was given only water, and without toilet facilities, was forced to use the floor. Before long, the cell stank, and her stomach was twisting with hunger. If she tried to sleep, the cell would reverberate with white noise, or with electronic voices repeating meaningless phrases at ear-splitting volume.

At the end of the second day—or it might have been the third day—she was hooded and led to another part of the building where she was questioned, in fluent Russian and for hours on end, by unseen interrogators. Between these sessions, in which she was offered food in exchange for information, she was forced to adopt agonizing and humiliating stress positions. Starved, sleep-deprived, and severely disoriented, she drifted into a trance-like state, in which the boundaries between her senses blurred. She managed, nevertheless, to hang on to some vestigial sense of self, and to the knowledge that the experience would come to an end. However terrifying and degrading it turned out to be, it was preferable to twenty-two more years in Novinskaya. By the time the exercise was officially pronounced over, Oksana was beginning, in a deeply perverse way, to enjoy it.

Further courses followed. A month of weapons familiarization at a camp to the south of Kyiv, in Ukraine, followed by

three more at a Russian sniper school. This was not the high-profile establishment outside Moscow where the Spetsnaz Alfa and Vypmel detachments trained, but a much more remote facility near Yekaterinburg, run by a private security company whose instructors asked no questions. Being back in Russia felt strange to Oksana, even under the false identity provided by Konstantin. Yekaterinburg, after all, was less than five hundred kilometers from where was born.

It wasn't long, though, before the deception began to give her a certain heady satisfaction. "Officially, Oksana Astankova no longer exists," Konstantin informed her. "A certificate issued at City Clinical Hospital No. 19 indicates that she hanged herself in her cell. Official records show that she was buried at public expense in the district cemetery. Trust me, no one misses her, and no one is looking for her."

Severka urban sniper school was built around a deserted town. In Soviet times it had been home to a thriving community of scientists studying the effects of radiation exposure; now it was a ghost town, peopled only by life-sized target dummies, strategically situated behind plate-glass windows and at the wheels of rusting, skeletal vehicles. It was an eerie place, silent except for the wind that whistled between its empty buildings.

Oksana's basic training was with the standard-issue Dragunov. Soon, though, she graduated to the VSS, or Special Sniper Rifle. With its exceptionally light weight and integral silencer, it was the ideal urban weapon. By the time she left Severka, she had fired thousands of rounds under a variety of operational conditions, and in less than a minute was able to arrive at a firing point with the VSS in its polystyrene case, assemble the weapon, zero the sights, calculate wind speed and other vectors, and squeeze off a lethal head or body shot ("one

shot, one kill," in the words of her instructor) at a range of up to four hundred meters.

Oksana sensed herself changing, and the results pleased her. Her observational ability, sensory skills, and reactive speeds had all been extraordinarily enhanced. Psychologically, she felt invulnerable, but then, she had always known that she was different from those around her. She felt none of the things they felt. Where others would experience pain or horror, she knew only a frozen dispassion. She had learned to imitate the emotional responses of others—their fears, their uncertainties, their desperate need for affection—but she herself had never fully experienced them. She knew, however, that if she was to escape notice in the world, it was essential to wear a mask of normality, and to disguise the extent of her difference.

After the sniper course, she learned about explosives and toxicology in Volgograd, surveillance in Berlin, advanced driving and lock-picking in London, and identity management, communications, and coding in Paris. For Oksana, who had never left Russia before meeting Konstantin, the international traveling was dizzying. Each course was taught in the language of the country in question, testing her linguistic aptitude to the limit and, more often than not, leaving her mentally as well as physically drained.

Konstantin tried to maintain a professional distance between himself and Oksana, but could not help but feel an avuncular fondness towards her, and his walls quickly crumbled. When her training was going well, she took great pleasure in nettling him and testing the limits of his patience; when it was going poorly, she lashed out, blaming him for failing to prepare her adequately, or for pairing her with instructors who took sadistic pleasure in watching her struggle. He was sympathetic towards

her on the handful of occasions when the pressure became too much, and she demanded, coldly, to be left alone. “Take a day off,” he told her on one occasion in London. “Go and explore the city. And start thinking about your cover name. Oksana Astankova is dead.”

By November, her training was almost over. She had been staying in a dingy one-star hotel in the Paris suburb of Belleville and traveling every day to an anonymous office building in La Défense, where a young man of Indian origin was teaching her the finer points of steganography—the science of concealing secret information in computer files. On the final day of the course, Konstantin appeared, paid her hotel bill, and accompanied her to an apartment on the Quai Voltaire, on the Left Bank.

The first-floor apartment was furnished with spare, minimal chic. Its occupant was a tiny, fierce-looking woman of about sixty, dressed completely in black, whom Konstantin introduced as Fantine.

Fantine stared at Oksana, appeared unimpressed by what she saw, and asked her to walk around the room. Self-conscious in her faded T-shirt, jeans and sneakers, Oksana complied. Fantine watched her for a moment, turned to Konstantin, and shrugged.

And so began the final stage of Oksana’s transformation. She moved into a four-star hotel two streets away, and each morning joined Fantine for breakfast in the first-floor apartment. At nine o’clock every morning, a car came for them. On the first day they went to the Galeries Lafayette on Boulevard Haussmann. Fantine marched Oksana round the department store, ordering her to try on a succession of outfits—daywear, casual, evening—and buying them whether Oksana liked them or not. The tight, flashy clothes to which Oksana was drawn

Fantine dismissed without a glance.

"I'm trying to teach you Parisian style, *chérie*, not how to dress like a Moscow streetwalker, which you obviously know how to do already."

By the end of the day, the car was piled high with shopping bags, and Oksana was beginning to enjoy the company of her ruthlessly critical mentor. Over the week that followed, they visited shoe shops and fashion houses, couture and prêt-à-porter shows, a vintage emporium in St. Germain, and the costume and design museum at the Palais Galliera. At each of these, Fantine offered an unsparing commentary. This was chic, clever and elegant; that was crass, tasteless and irredeemably vulgar. One afternoon, Fantine took Oksana to a hairdresser in the Place des Victoires. Her instructions to the stylist were to proceed as she chose, and to ignore anything that Oksana suggested. Afterwards, Fantine stood her in front of a mirror, and Oksana touched a hand to her hair, which had been neatly trimmed, dyed from her natural dull brown to a warm honey blonde, and styled into a complicated braided chignon. She was satisfied with the look that Fantine had put together for her. The designer biker jacket, the stripy T-shirt, the low-rise jeans, and ankle boots. She looked... Parisian.

Later that afternoon, they visited a boutique selling perfume on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. "Choose," said Fantine. "But choose well." For ten minutes, Oksana stalked the elegant shop floor, before stopping in front of a glass display cabinet. The assistant watched for a moment. "*Vous permettez, Mademoiselle?*" he murmured, handing her a slender glass phial with a scarlet ribbon at its neck. Cautiously, Oksana touched the amber scent to her wrist. Fresh as a spring dawn, but with darker base notes, it spoke to something deep inside her.

"It's called Villanelle," said the assistant. "It was the favorite scent of the Comtesse du Barry. The perfume house added the red ribbon after she was guillotined in 1793."

"If anyone ever tries to guillotine me, *I'll* cut off *their* head," promised Oksana.

Two days later, Konstantin came to collect her from the hotel. "My cover name," she said. "I've chosen it."

* * *

As she crosses the Piazza Verdi in Palermo, her heels clicking faintly on the cobblestones, Villanelle glances up at the imposing frontage of Sicily's, and indeed Italy's, largest opera house. Palm trees rise from the piazza, their leaves whispering faintly in the warm breeze; bronze lions flank the broad entrance stairway. Villanelle is wearing a silk Valentino dress and elbow-length Fratelli Orsini opera gloves. The dress is red, but so darkly shaded as to be almost black. A spacious Fendi shoulder bag hangs by a slim chain. Villanelle's face is pale in the evening light, and her hair is pinned up with a long, curved clip. She looks glamorous, if less showy than the socialites in Versace and Dolce & Gabbana thronging the mirrored entrance hall. First nights at the Teatro Massimo are always an occasion, and tonight's offering is Puccini's *Tosca*, one of the most popular operas of all. That the title role is being sung by a local soprano, Franca Farfaglia, makes the occasion unmissable.

Villanelle buys a program and moves through the entrance hall to the vestibule. The place is filling fast. There's a buzz of conversation, the muted clink of glasses, and an aroma of expensive perfume. Ornate wall-lights paint the marble decorations with a soft lemon glow. At the bar she orders a

mineral water, and notices that she is being watched by a lean, dark-haired figure.

"Can I get you something more... interesting?" he asks, as she pays for her drink. "A glass of champagne, perhaps?"

She smiles. He is thirty-five, she guesses, give or take a year or two. Saturnine good looks. His silver-gray shirt is impeccable and his lightweight blazer looks like Brioni. But his Italian has the rasp of Sicily, and there's an edge of threat in his gaze.

"No. Thank you."

"Let me guess. You're obviously not Italian, even though you speak the language. French?"

"Sort of. It's complicated."

"So do you like Puccini operas?"

"Of course," she murmurs. "Although *La Bohème* is my favourite."

"That's because you're French." He holds out his hand. "Leoluca Messina."

"Sylviane Morel."

"So what brings you to Palermo, Mademoiselle Morel?"

She is tempted to terminate the conversation. To walk away. But he might follow, which would make things worse. "I'm staying with friends."

"Who?"

"No one you'd know, I'm afraid."

"You'd be surprised who I know. And trust me, everyone here knows me."

Half turning, Villanelle allows a sudden smile to light her face. She waves towards the entrance. "Will you excuse me, Signor Messina? My friends are here." That was less than convincing, she reproves herself as she edges through the crowd. But there's something about Leoluca Messina—some

long acquaintanceship with violence—that makes her want him to forget her face.

Will Greco come? she wonders, moving through the crowd with vague purpose, scanning the faces around her as she goes. According to Konstantin's local contact, who has had several of the front-of-house staff discreetly bribed and questioned, the Mafia boss comes to most of the important first nights. He always arrives at the last moment and takes the same box, which he occupies alone, with bodyguards stationed outside. Whether he has actually booked to come here tonight has, frustratingly, been impossible to establish. But his protégée Farfaglia is singing the lead soprano role. The odds are good.

At considerable cost, Konstantin's people have secured the neighboring box to the one Greco favors. It is on the first tier, almost directly adjacent to the stage. With ten minutes to curtain-up, and with the box on her left as yet unoccupied, Villanelle enters the nest of red plush. The box is at once public and private. At the front, perched on one of the gilt chairs, with the scarlet-upholstered rail at chest level, Villanelle can see and be seen by everyone in the auditorium. If she leans forward past the partition, she can look into the front of the boxes on either side of her. With the house lights extinguished, however, each box will become a secret world, its interior invisible.

In the gloom of that unseen, secret world, she slips her bag from her shoulder and takes out a lightweight Ruger automatic pistol with an integrated Gemtech suppressor and inserts a clip of .22mm low-velocity rounds. Returning the weapon to the bag, she places it on the floor at the base of the partition separating her from the box to the left.

* * *

In the first nine months following her rebirth as Villanelle, she killed two men. Each project was initiated by a postcard from Konstantin, followed by the review of detailed background information—film clips, biographies, surveillance reports, schedules—compiled by parties unknown to her. Each planning period lasted about four weeks, in the course of which she was armed, informed of any logistical support she might expect, and provided with an appropriate identity.

The first target, Yiorgos Vlachos, had been buying radioactive cobalt-60 in Eastern Europe with a probable view to detonating a dirty bomb in Athens. She had put an SP-5 round through his chest as he changed cars in the port of Piraeus. The shot, taken with a Russian VSS at a range of 325 meters, had involved an all-night lie-up under a tarpaulin on a warehouse roof. Later, reliving the event in the safety of her hotel room, Villanelle felt an intense, heart-pounding exhilaration. The dry snap of the suppressed report, the distant smack of the impact, the collapsing figure in the scope.

The second target was Dragan Horvat, a Balkan politician who ran a human trafficking network. His mistake had been to take his work home with him, in the form of a pretty, heroin-addicted seventeen-year-old from Warsaw. Unaccountably, he had fallen in love with her, and taken to flying her on expensive shopping sprees in European capital cities. Vienna was the couple's favorite weekend destination, and when Villanelle bumped into him in a side street near the Stephansplatz, Horvat smiled indulgently. He didn't immediately feel the stab wound to the inner thigh that severed his femoral artery, and as he bled to death on the pavement, his Polish girlfriend watched him with spaced-out eyes, absently twisting the gold bracelet that he'd bought her earlier that day on the Kohlmarkt.

In between kills, Villanelle lived in the Paris apartment. She explored the city, sampled the pleasures it had to offer, and enjoyed a succession of lovers. These affairs always took the same course: a heady pursuit, a devouring couple of days and nights, the abrupt termination of all contact. She simply vanished from their lives, as swiftly and as mystifyingly as she had entered them.

She ran in the Bois de Boulogne every morning, attended a jujitsu dojo in Montparnasse, practiced her marksmanship at an elite shooting club in Saint-Cloud, and expanded her linguistic repertoire by imitating radio plays and books on tape in various languages. Meanwhile, unseen hands paid her rent and managed the trading activities of her cover identity, depositing the proceeds into a current account at the Société Général. "Spend what you like," Konstantin told her. "But stay under the radar. Live comfortably, but not excessively. Don't leave a trail."

And she didn't. Perhaps she lived a little more immoderately than her neighbors, and dressed a little more colorfully than the monochrome army of professionals she claimed to be a part of, their solitude stamped into their gazes as they hurried from place to place, but she made no surface ripple. What authority imposed the sentences of death that she executed, she didn't know. She didn't ask Konstantin, because she was certain that he wouldn't tell her, and in truth, she didn't really care. What mattered to Villanelle was that she had been chosen. Chosen as the instrument of an all-powerful organization which had understood, just as she herself had always understood, that she was different. They had recognized her talent, sought her out, and taken her from the lowest place in the world to the highest, where she belonged. A predator, an instrument of evolution,

one of that elite to whom no moral law applied. Inside her, this knowledge bloomed like a great dark rose, filling every cavity of her being.

* * *

Slowly, the auditorium of the Teatro Massimo begins to fill. Sitting back in her seat, Villanelle studies the program, her face shadowed by the partition between her box and the next. The performance time arrives and the house lights dim, the audience hubbub fading to silence. As the conductor takes his bow, to warm applause, Villanelle hears a figure quietly take his place in the adjoining box. She doesn't turn, and as the curtain rises on the first act, leans forward to gaze with rapt attention at the stage.

Minute succeeds minute; time is slowed to a crawl. Puccini's music engulfs Villanelle, but does not touch her. Her consciousness is focused, in its entirety, on the unseen person to her left. She forces herself not to look, but senses his presence like a pulse, malign and infinitely dangerous. At moments, she feels a coldness at the nape of her neck, and knows that he is watching her. Finally, the strains of the *Te Deum* die away, the first act ends, and the crimson and gold curtain falls.

As the house lights come up for the interval, and conversation swells in the auditorium, Villanelle sits motionless as if hypnotized by the opera. Then, without a sideways glance, she stands and leaves the box, noting with her peripheral vision the presence of two bodyguards who are lounging, bored but watchful, at the end of the corridor.

Moving unhurriedly into the vestibule, she makes her way to the bar and orders a glass of mineral water, which she holds

but doesn't drink. At the far end of the room, she sees Leoluca Messina moving towards her. Pretending she hasn't seen him, she turns into the crowd, re-emerging near the entrance to the foyer. Outside, on the opera house steps, the heat of the day has not yet abated. The sky is rose-pink over the sea, a livid purple overhead. Half a dozen young men passing Villanelle whistle and make appreciative comments in the local dialect.

She returns and takes her place in the box moments before the curtain rises on the second act. Once again, she makes a point of not glancing to her left at Greco; instead, she gazes fixedly at the stage as the opera unfolds. The story is a dramatic one. Tosca, a singer, is in love with the painter Cavaradossi, who has been falsely accused of aiding the escape of a political prisoner. Arrested by Scarpia, the chief of police, Cavaradossi is condemned to die. Scarpia, however, proposes a deal: if Tosca gives herself to him, Cavaradossi will be released. Tosca agrees, but when Scarpia approaches her, she seizes a knife and kills him.

The curtain falls. And this time, when Villanelle has finished applauding, she turns to Greco and smiles, as if seeing him for the first time. It is not long before there is a knock at the door of the box. It is one of the bodyguards, a heavyset man who inquires, not discourteously, if she would care to join Don Cesare for a glass of wine. Villanelle hesitates for a moment and then politely nods her acceptance. As she steps into the corridor, the second bodyguard looks her up and down. She has left her bag in the box, her hands are empty, and the Valentino dress clings to her lean, athletic form. The men glance knowingly at each other. It is clear that they have delivered many women to their boss. The heavyset man gestures to the door of Greco's box. *"Per favore, Signorina..."*

He stands as she enters. A man of medium height in an expensively cut linen suit. A lethal stillness about him, and a smile that doesn't begin to reach his eyes. "Excuse my presumption," he says, "But I couldn't help observing your appreciation of the performance. As a fellow opera lover, I was wondering if I might offer you a glass of *frappato*? It comes from one of my vineyards, so I can vouch for its quality."

She thanks him. Takes an exploratory sip of the cold wine. Introduces herself as Sylviane Morel.

"And I am Cesare Greco." There is a questioning note in his voice but her gaze does not flicker. It is clear to him that she has no idea who he is. She compliments him on the wine and tells him that it is her first visit to the Teatro Massimo.

"So what do you think of Farfaglia?"

"Superb. A fine actress and a great soprano."

"I'm glad you like her. I was fortunate enough to assist, in a small way, with her training."

"How wonderful to see your belief in her confirmed."

"*Il bacio di Tosca.*"

"Excuse me?"

"*Questo è il bacio di Tosca.* 'This is Tosca's kiss!' Her words when she stabs Scarpia."

"Of course! I'm sorry, my Italian..."

"Is most accomplished, Signorina Morel." Again, that icy half-smile.

She inclines her head in denial. "I don't think so, Signor Greco." Part of her is conducting the conversation, part of her is calculating ways and means, timing, evasion routes, exfiltration. She is face to face with her target, but she is alone. And this, as Konstantin has so often made clear, is how it will always be. No one else can be involved except in the most peripheral,

disconnected way. There can be no backup, no staged diversion, no official help. If she's taken, it's the end. There will be no discreet official leading her from the cell, no waiting vehicle to speed her to the airport.

They talk. For Villanelle, language is fluid. Most of the time she thinks in French, but every so often she awakes and knows that she's been dreaming in Russian. At times, close to sleep, the blood roars in her ears, an unstoppable tide shot through with polyglot screams. On such occasions, alone in the Paris apartment, she anesthetizes herself with hours of web-surfing, usually in English. And now, she notes, she is mentally playing out scenarios in Sicilian-inflected Italian. She hasn't sought out the language, but her head echoes with it. Is there any part of her that is still Oksana Astankova? Does she still exist, that little girl who lay awake night after night in bed at the orphanage, planning her revenge? Or was there only ever Villanelle, evolution's chosen instrument?

Greco wants her, she can tell. And the more she plays the well-born, impressionable young Parisienne with the wide-eyed gaze, the greater his desire grows. He's like a crocodile, watching from the shallows as a gazelle inches closer to the water's edge. How does it usually play out? she wonders. Dinner somewhere they know him well, with the waiters deferential and the bodyguards lounging at a neighboring table, followed by a chauffeured drive to some discreet, old town apartment?

"Every first night, this box is reserved for me," he tells her. "The Greci were aristocrats in Palermo before the time of the Habsburgs."

"In that case, I consider myself fortunate to be here."

"Will you stay for the final act?"

“With pleasure,” she murmurs, as the orchestra strikes up.

As the opera continues, Villanelle once again gazes raptly at the stage, waiting for the moment that she has planned. This comes with the great love duet, “*Amaro sol per te.*” As the final note dies away, the audience roars its applause, with cries of “*Bravi!*” and “*Brava Franca!*” echoing from every corner of the house. Villanelle applauds with the others, and eyes shining, turns to Greco. His eyes meet hers, and as if on impulse he seizes her hand and kisses it. She holds his gaze for a moment, and raising her other hand to her hair, unfastens the long, curved clip, so that the dark tresses fall to her shoulders.

“You should really ask before you touch a person,” she says. And then her arm descends, a pale blur, and her clip is buried deep in his left eye.

His face blanks with shock and pain. Villanelle presses the tiny plunger, injecting a lethal dose of veterinary-strength etorphine into the frontal lobe of his brain and inducing immediate paralysis. She lowers him to the floor, and glances around. Her own box is empty, and in the box beyond, an elderly couple are dimly visible, peering at the stage through opera glasses. All eyes are on Farfaglia and the tenor singing Cavaradossi, both standing motionless as wave after wave of applause breaks over them. Reaching over the partition, Villanelle recovers her bag, retires into the shadows, and takes out the Ruger. The double snap of the suppressed weapon is unremarkable, and the low-velocity .22 rounds leave barely a loose thread as they punch through Greco’s linen jacket.

The applause is subsiding as Villanelle opens the door of the box, her weapon concealed behind her back, and beckons concernedly to the bodyguards, who enter and genuflect beside their employer. She fires twice, less than a second separating

the silenced shots, and both men drop to the carpeted floor. Blood jets briefly from the entry wounds in the back of their necks, but the men are already dead, their brainstems shot through. Then, slipping the Ruger into her bag and squaring her shoulders, she exits the box.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving, Signorina Morel?”

Her heart slams in her chest. Walking towards her down the narrow corridor, with the sinister grace of a panther, is Leoluca Messina.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“That’s too bad. But how do you know my uncle?”

She stares at him.

“Don Cesare. You’ve just come out of his box.”

“We met earlier. And now, if you’ll excuse me, Signor Messina...”

He looks at Villanelle for a moment, then steps firmly past her and opens the door of Greco’s box. When he comes out, a moment later, he is carrying a gun. A Beretta Storm 9mm, part of her registers as she levels the Ruger at his head.

For a moment they stand there, unmoving, then he nods, his eyes narrowing, and lowers the Beretta. “Put that away,” he orders.

She doesn’t move. Aligns the fiber-optic foresight with the base of his nose. Prepares to sever a third Sicilian brainstem.

“Look, I’m glad the bastard’s dead, OK? And any minute now, the curtain’s going to come down and this whole place is going to be crowded with people. If you want to get out of here, put that gun away and follow me.”

Some instinct tells her to obey. They hurry through the doors at the end of the corridor, down a short flight of stairs, and into a crimson-upholstered passageway encircling the stalls. “Take

my hand,” he orders, and Villanelle does so. Coming towards them is a uniformed usher. Messina greets him cheerily, and the usher grins. “Making a quick getaway, Signor?”

“Something like that.”

At the end of the passageway, directly below Greco’s box, is a door faced in the same crimson brocade as the walls. Opening it, Messina pulls Villanelle into a small vestibule. He parts a blanket-like curtain and suddenly they are backstage, in the heavy half-dark of the wings, with the music, relayed by tannoy from the orchestra pit, blaring about them. Men and women in nineteenth-century costume swim out of the shadows; stagehands move with regimented purpose. Placing an arm round Villanelle’s shoulder, Messina hurries her past racks of costumes and tables set with props, then directs her into the narrow space between the cyclorama and the brick back wall. As they cross the stage, they hear a volley of musket-fire. Cavaradossi’s execution.

Then more corridors, discolored walls hung with fire extinguishers and instructions for emergency evacuation of the house, and finally they are stepping from the stage door onto the Piazza Verdi, with the sound of traffic in their ears and the livid purple sky overhead. Fifty meters away, a silver and black MV Agusta motorcycle is standing at a bollard on the Via Volturmo. Villanelle climbs up behind Messina, and with a low growl of exhaust they glide into the night.

It’s several minutes before they hear the first police sirens. Leoluca is heading eastwards, winding through side streets, the MV Agusta nervily responsive to the sharp twists and turns. At intervals, to her left, Villanelle catches a glimpse of the lights of the port and the inky shimmer of the sea. People glance at them as they pass—the man with the wolfish features, the

woman in the scarlet dress—but this is Palermo; no one looks too closely. The streets narrow, with washing suspended above and the sounds and smells of family meals issuing through open windows. And then a dark square, a derelict cinema, and the baroque facade of a church.

Rocking the bike onto its stand, Messina leads her down an alley beside the church, and unlocks a gate. They are in a walled cemetery, a city of the dead, with family tombs and mausoleums extending in dim rows into the night. “This is where they’ll bury Cesare when they’ve dug your bullets out of him,” says Messina. “And sooner or later, where they’ll bury me.”

“You said you were happy to see him dead.”

“You’ve saved me the trouble of killing him myself. He was *un animale*. Out of control.”

“You’ll take his place?”

Messina shrugs. “Someone will.”

“Business as usual?”

“Something like that. But you? Who do you work for?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters if you’re going to come after me next.” He draws the squat little Beretta from his shoulder holster. “Perhaps I should kill you now.”

“You’re welcome to try,” she says, drawing the Ruger.

He stares at her, noting how, in the half-light, the asymmetrical tilt of her upper lip makes her look not sensual, as he’d previously imagined, but menacing.

Then she takes a step back, and as he watches, her expression changes and her features soften until she appears harmless, even as she keeps the Ruger trained on him.

“Truce?” she says.

He nods and returns his weapon to its holster.

She lowers hers, but keeps it drawn.

“And now?” he asks.

“Now you go, before I change my mind.”

“Will I see you again?”

“Pray that you don’t.”

He glances at her for a moment and walks away. The MV Agusta kicks into life with a snarl and fades into the night. Picking her way downhill between the tombs, Villanelle finds a small clearing in front of a pillared mausoleum. From the Fendi shoulder bag, she takes a Briquet lighter, a crumpled blue cotton frock, a pair of wafer-thin sandals and a lingerie-fabric money belt. The money belt holds €500 in cash, an airline ticket, and a passport and credit card identifying her as Irina Skoryk, a French national born in Ukraine.

Quickly changing her clothes, Villanelle makes a pyre of the Valentino dress, all documents relating to Sylviane Morel, and the green contact lenses and brunette wig that she has been wearing. The fire burns briefly but intensely, and when there is nothing left, she sweeps the ashes into the undergrowth with a cypress branch.

Continuing downhill, Villanelle finds a rusty exit gate and a path leading down steps to a narrow lane. This gives onto a broader, busier road, which she follows westwards towards the city center. After twenty minutes she finds what she has been looking for: a large wheeled garbage bin behind a restaurant, overflowing with kitchen waste. Pulling on the opera gloves, she looks around her, and makes sure she that she’s unobserved. Then she plunges both hands into the bin, and pulls out half a dozen bags. Unknotting one, she thrusts the Fendi shoulder bag and the Ruger into the stinking mess of clam shells, fish heads and coffee grounds. Returning the bag to the bin, she piles the

others on top. Last to disappear are the gloves. The whole operation has taken less than thirty seconds. Unhurriedly, she continues walking westwards.

* * *

At 11 a.m. the following morning, agent Paolo Vella of the Polizia di Stato is standing at the bar of a café in the Piazza Olivella, taking coffee with a colleague. It has been a long morning; since dawn, Vella has been manning the cordon at the main entrance to the Teatro Massimo, now a crime scene. The crowds, by and large, have been respectful, keeping their distance. Nothing has been officially announced, but all Palermo seems to know that Don Cesare Greco has been assassinated. Theories abound, but the general assumption is that this is family business. There's a rumor that the hit was carried out by a woman. But there are always rumors.

"Will you look at that," breathes Vella, all thoughts of the Greco murder temporarily banished. His colleague follows his gaze out of the café into the busy street, where a young woman in a blue sundress—a tourist, evidently—has paused to watch the sudden ascent of a flight of pigeons. Her lips are parted, her eyes shine, the morning light illuminates her blonde hair, which is pulled back in a loose bun.

"Madonna or whore?" asks Vella's colleague.

"Madonna, without question."

"In that case, Paolo, too good for you."

He smiles. For a moment, in the sun-dazed street, time stands still. Then as the pigeons circle the square, the young woman continues on her way, long limbs swinging, and is lost in the throng.

2

Villanelle sits in a window seat in the south wing of the Louvre art gallery in Paris. She is wearing a black cashmere sweater, loosely fitting slacks, and low-heeled boots. Winter sunshine pours through the vaulted window, illuminating the white marble statue in front of her. Life-sized, and entitled *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss*, it was carved by the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova in the final years of the eighteenth century.

It's a beautiful thing. Psyche, awakening, reaches upwards to her winged lover, her arms framing her face. Cupid, meanwhile, tenderly supports her head and breast. Every gesture speaks of love. But to Villanelle, who has been watching the visitors come and go for an hour now, Canova's creation suggests darker possibilities. Is Cupid luring Psyche into a sense of false security so that he can rape her? Or is it Psyche that's sexually manipulating him, by pretending to be passive and feminine?

Unaccountably, passers-by seem to take the sculpture at its romantic face value. A young couple imitates the pose, laughing. Villanelle watches closely, notes how the girl's gaze softens, how the flutter of her eyelashes slows, how her smile turns to a shy parting of the lips. Turning the sequence over in her mind like a phrase in a foreign language, Villanelle files it away for

future use. Over the course of her twenty-six-year lifespan, she has acquired a vast repertoire of such expressions. Tenderness, sympathy, distress, guilt, shock, sadness... Villanelle does not actually experience any such emotions, but she can simulate them all in a hundred different ways.

She abandons her window perch and makes her way towards the Café Mollien on the gallery's first-floor landing. Once she is finally installed at table, she orders a small espresso and a slice of cake. As she sips her coffee, she looks around her at the shining silver and glassware, the flowers, the paintings, the golden wash of the lights. Outside, beyond the tall windows, the sky has faded to a snow-laden gray, and the Carousel Gardens are almost deserted. Her mind wanders. Fine-living and designer clothes are all very well, but it's months now since the Palermo operation, and she badly needs to feel her heart race with the prospect of action. More than that, she needs a distraction from the depressingly introspective turn her thoughts have taken as of late.

She can still see, half a world away, the grim sprawl of Novinskaya. Was it worth it? Konstantin had asked her. Throwing her life away to liberate a woman from an unhappy marriage, only to be rejected for it? Put like that, of course, it wasn't worth it. But given her time again, she knew that she'd act exactly as she'd acted that night, for it led her to where she is now.

* * *

A married woman of about thirty, Anna Ivanovna Leonova was more than a little awed by her troubled student's linguistic gifts, and ignoring Oksana's rudeness and gracelessness, determined

to open her eyes to a world beyond the gray walls of the institutions that had been her home for most of her life.

Oksana was bemused by the attention at first. No one had ever expended so much time on her. What Anna Ivanovna was giving her, she realized, was something selfless, something close to love. Intellectually, Oksana understood such an emotion, but she also understood that she herself was incapable of feeling it. Physical desire, though, was another matter, and she lay awake, night after night, tortured by a raw longing for her teacher.

The more attention Anna gave her, the more Oksana demanded, and each time Anna attempted to establish boundaries with her, Oksana stepped right over them. Extra time after class became extra lessons after school, then weekend sessions at the apartment Anna shared with her husband, discussing Colette and Françoise Sagan, and on one memorable occasion, a visit to the Stanislavsky Theatre, to see a performance of the opera *Manon Lescaut*.

It was after the opera that they shared their first kiss. For twelve months after this, they carried on their affair in secret. Oksana penned long letters to Anna in French and showered her with designer clothes, perfumes, and other expensive gifts, all stolen. She made love to her as often as Anna would permit her to, expressing her devotion with her hands and her mouth, although Anna never reciprocated, and never allowed her into the bed she shared with her husband, Maxim. Oksana was more than capable of taking care of herself if Anna wouldn't, and there was something intensely erotic about fucking a married woman on her husband's favorite chair, but she resented Maxim, because as long as he existed, Anna refused to give herself over completely to her.

She begged Anna to leave him, and lashed out when she

refused. "You only love him because he has a penis!"

Anna had laughed at the absurdity of the outburst. "You might be right."

Oksana chose to interpret this literally, and resolved to take matters into her own hands.

A few days later, Maxim arrived home in the evening to find Oksana alone in the apartment, decorating it with balloons and streamers.

"What are we celebrating?" he asked.

"It's our anniversary. Mine and Anna's." She took a moment to relish the look of shock and betrayal on his face, then brandished a kitchen knife at him. "Go into the bathroom. I don't want to make a mess all over the apartment."

He did as she ordered, too stunned to react otherwise. She slit his throat as soon as he stepped onto the tiled bathroom floor, then shoved him into the bath as he bled out. As a final touch, she cut off his penis with one swift chop.

"Now there's nothing left of you for her to love," she'd said, admiring her handiwork.

* * *

She blinks. The restaurant swims back into focus. The waiter hovers patiently at her side and asks if there is anything else he can get her.

"L'addition, s'il vous plaît."

As she waits for him to return with the bill, her phone buzzes in her bag, alerting her to a text message. It's from Konstantin, asking where she is.

When she lets herself into her apartment, she finds him already inside, dozing on her sofa with his legs propped up

on the coffee table. He springs to his feet as she enters.

"Hello, Villanelle."

"Hello, Konstantin." She lowers her voice, doing a deliberately poor impression of him because she knows it annoys him.

"Where have you been? I've been waiting here for over an hour."

"Out with a friend," she lies.

"Ha! You're making friends now? I hope you're not getting too close to anyone. I don't want to be the one who has to tell you to get rid of them when they start asking questions about what you do for work."

"Don't act so jealous. I'll still make time for you." She makes herself comfortable on the sofa and pats the cushion next to her, inviting him to sit back down. "You want to hang out and watch a movie?"

He remains standing. "No. I'm just here to remind you to behave, and to give you your next job. Your train leaves tomorrow. And keep the job tidy, huh? Your fancy hairpin drew some attention. The investigators are all over it."

"Don't worry, I got another one," she says, grinning cheekily.

"It's not funny."

"It was a little bit."

He gives her a stern look in response.

"They won't catch me."

"They might."

"They won't."

"No, listen. They might."

"They won't." She imitates him again, and this time, he does not bother to hide his agitation.

"Quick and clean," he says, wagging a finger in her face. "Nothing fancy."

She sighs. "First class?"

"Of course." He hands her a postcard ("Greetings from London!") and an envelope containing enough cash to buy her train ticket, then sees himself out.

She enters the code from the postcard into the secure website. The page that pops up shows several photographs of a face, shot from different angles. A face she memorizes like the text that fills the rest of the screen. The face of her next target.

* * *

Thames House, the headquarters of the British security service MI5, is on Millbank, in Westminster. In the northernmost office on the third floor, Eve Polastri is looking down at Lambeth Bridge and the wind-blurred surface of the river.

At the next terminal, her deputy, Elena Felton, sets her teacup down on the desk. "Next week's list," she says. "Shall we run through it?"

Eve peels her eyes away from the window and rubs her eyes. She and Elena have been working together for a little over two years. Their department, known as P3, is a subsection of the Joint Services Analysis Group, and its function is to assess the threat to "high-risk" individuals visiting the UK, and if necessary to liaise with the Metropolitan Police with a view to providing specialist protection.

It's in many ways a thankless task, as the Met's resources are not infinite, and specialist protection is expensive. But the consequences of a poor judgment call are catastrophic. As her close friend and former head of section Bill Pargrave once said to her: "If you think a live extremist preacher's a headache, wait until you have to deal with a dead one." It was in the

aftermath of the preacher incident that Bill was relieved of his post and seconded to GCHQ, the government listening center at Cheltenham, and Eve, previously his deputy, became head of section at P3.

"Hit me," Eve says to Elena.

"The Pakistani writer, Nasreen Jilani. She's speaking at the Oxford Union on Thursday week. She's had death threats."

"Plausible?"

"Plausible enough. SO1 have agreed to put a team on her."

"Next."

"Reza Mokri, the Iranian nuclear physicist. Again, full protection."

"Agreed."

"Then there's the Russian, Kedrin. I'm not so sure about him."

"What aren't you sure about?"

"How seriously we should take him. I mean, we can't ask the Met to babysit every crackpot political theorist who shows up at Heathrow."

Eve nods. With her face free of makeup, and her hair hastily pulled back and threatening to escape from her hair tie, she looks like someone for whom there are more important things than being thought pretty. She might be an academic, or an assistant in the better sort of bookshop. But there's something about her—a stillness, a fixity of gaze—that tells another story. Her colleagues know Eve Polastri as a hunter, a woman who will not readily let go once she latches onto something.

"So who requested protection for Kedrin?" she asks.

"Eurasia UK, the group which organized his visit. I've run checks, and they're—"

"I know who they are."

"Then you'll know what I mean. They look more cranky than

dangerous. All this stuff about the mystical bonds between Europe and Russia, and how they should unite against the corrupt, expansionist USA.”

“I know. They’re nutjobs. Yet somehow they have no shortage of supporters. Including in the Kremlin.”

“And Viktor Kedrin’s their poster boy.”

“He’s the ideologist. The face of the movement. Apparently he’s very charismatic.”

“But not at immediate risk in London, surely?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“I mean, who would he be at risk from? The Americans aren’t crazy about him, obviously, but they’re not going to call in a drone strike on High Holborn, and you certainly aren’t going to take up arms in the name of the motherland, are you?”

“Of course not. Besides, I may have been raised in Connecticut, but I was born here, which I think makes this my motherland, technically. So, High Holborn—is that where he’s going to be staying?”

“Yes, at somewhere called The Vernon.”

Eve nods. “You’re probably right. It would be a waste of resources to provide extra protection for Kedrin. But I might go to his talk—I assume he’s addressing the Eurasia UK faithful at some point?”

“The Conway Hall. Friday week.”

“Good. Let me know if anything changes.”

Keying in her identification code, Eve calls up the HST, or High Security Threat list. Circulating among friendly intelligence services, including on-off allies like the Russian FSB and the Pakistani CID, this is a database of known international contract killers. Not local enforcers or fly-in-fly-out shooters, but top-echelon assassins with political clients and price tags

affordable only by the seriously wealthy. Some of the entries are lengthy and detailed, others are no more than a codename harvested in the course of surveillance interrogation.

For months now, Eve has been building up her own file of unattributed killings of prominent figures. A case she constantly returns to is that of Dragan Horvat, a Balkan politician. Horvat was an exceptionally nasty piece of work, implicated in human trafficking and much else besides.

Horvat was killed on a trip to Vienna with his girlfriend, a seventeen-year-old heroin addict from Warsaw named Kasia Molkowska. Officially, he was in Vienna as a member of a high-ranking trade delegation; in truth, he and Kasia spent most of their time shopping. They had just left a Japanese restaurant on a side street near the Stephansplatz when a hurrying figure bumped hard into Horvat, almost knocking him down.

In a cheerful mood, well lubricated by sake, Horvat was initially unaware that he had been stabbed. Indeed, he apologized to the disappearing figure before becoming aware of the warm blood pumping from his groin. Open-mouthed with shock, he sunk to the pavement, one hand clamped uselessly to his severed femoral artery. It took him less than two minutes to die.

Kasia was still standing there, shivering and uncomprehending, when a party of Japanese businessmen left the restaurant a quarter of an hour later. Their German was imperfect, hers nonexistent, and it was a further ten minutes before anyone called the emergency services. Kasia was profoundly traumatized, and initially insisted that she could remember nothing about the attack. But patient questioning by an officer from the Bundespolizei, assisted by a Polish interpreter, eventually elicited a single key fact: Dragan Horvat's killer was

a woman.

Professional female assassins are very rare indeed, and since joining the Service, Eve has been aware of just two. For some years, according to the HST file, the FSB used a woman named Maria Golovkina to execute overseas hits. A member of Russia's small-bore pistol squad at the Athens Olympics, Golovkina is thought to have been trained in covert assassination at the Spetsnaz base in Krasnodar. There's also an entry in the file for a Serbian hitwoman, attached to the notorious Zemun clan, named Jelena Markovic.

Neither could have killed Horvat, for the simple reason that by the time the politician met his end in Vienna, both were dead. Golovkina had been found hanged in a hotel wardrobe in Brighton Beach more than a year earlier, and Markovic had predeceased her by four months, blown to shreds by a car bomb in Belgrade. So if Kasia Molkowska was right, it meant that there was a new female assassin abroad. And this interests Eve very much indeed.

Why, she isn't completely sure. Perhaps because she can't imagine taking a human life herself, she is fascinated by the notion of a woman for whom killing is unexceptional. Someone who could get up in the morning, make coffee, choose what to wear, and then go out and coldbloodedly put a total stranger to death. Did you have to be some kind of anomalous, psychopathic freak to do that? Did you have to be born that way? Or could any woman, correctly programmed, be turned into a professional executioner?

Since taking over P3 from Bill, Eve has conducted a discreet but exhaustive search of the live case files for any further suggestion of female involvement in an assassination, and has flagged two references. The first involves the shooting in

Germany of Aleksandr Simonov, a Russian business oligarch suspected of funding Chechen and Dagestani militants as part of a deal relating to oil and gas concessions. The assassin, who fired a burst of six rounds from an FN P90 submachine gun into Simonov's chest outside the Frankfurt headquarters of the AltInvest Bank, was wearing despatch-riders' waterproofs and a full-face motorcycle helmet, and raced away on a machine later identified as a BMW G650Xmoto. Of the dozen or so onlookers questioned afterwards, two stated that they "had the impression" that the shooter was a woman.

The other case, the close-up slaying in Sicily of a Mafia boss named Cesare Greco, is apparently non-political. Local innuendo attributes the slaying, directly or indirectly, to the dead man's nephew, Leoluca Messina, who has since assumed the leadership of the Greco clan. But there has also been speculation in the press about an accomplice, the so-called "woman in the red dress." According to the investigators of the DIA, the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia, Greco was found dead in a private box at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, following an opera performance. He had been shot in the heart at close range with two low-velocity .22 rounds. His two bodyguards were also found dead on the floor of the box, dispatched with single shots to the base of the skull.

Leoluca Messina is known to have been at the theatre that night, and a witness has described seeing him in the bar shortly before curtain-up, talking to a striking dark-haired woman in a red dress. It appears that they were not sitting together, but CCTV footage shows Messina leaving the theatre via the stage door shortly after the final curtain. A couple of paces behind him is a blurred figure: a woman in a red dress, dark hair swinging around her shoulders. Her face is invisible, masked

by the opera program she's holding up as if to fan herself.

Which, Eve reflects, is certainly no accident. The woman is well aware that the CCTV camera is there. But the really strange detail is one that the DIA have not made public. Before Greco was killed, he was immobilized with a lethal tranquilizer apparently delivered via a custom-made device that was found buried in his left eye. A photograph of this device is in the online case-file, along with details of its inner workings. It's a sinister-looking thing: a curved and hollowed steel spike containing an inner reservoir and armed with a tiny plunger.

Why was it necessary to incapacitate Greco in this way, instead of just shooting him? It's a question that's nagged Eve for some time, and she's no nearer to finding an answer than she was on the day that she first read the file. Given that the assassination took place in an essentially public location, wouldn't it have made sense to get it over with quickly? Why, with discovery possible at any moment, would the killer want to drag things out?

Eve is still pondering this question when she arrives home a few minutes before eight o'clock. Her husband, Niko, is not there; he's gone ahead to the bridge club where he instructs three evenings a week. He's left a shepherd's pie in the oven, which Eve retrieves gratefully. She's not much of a cook and hates having to prepare meals from scratch when she arrives back after a long day at Thames House.

As she eats, she watches the eight o'clock news summary on the BBC. There's a warning of a cold front coming in from the east ("Make sure your boilers are serviced!"), an overwhelmingly bleak piece about the economy, and an imported clip of a rally in Moscow, where an impassioned, bearded figure is addressing an attentive crowd in a snow-whitened square. A blurry caption

identifies him as Виктор Кедрин.

Eve leans forward in her seat, a forkful of shepherd's pie suspended in her hand. Despite the poor image-quality, Viktor Kedrin's magnetism is palpable. She strains to hear his words behind the commentator's voice-over, but the clip cuts to a story of an orphaned kitten adopted by a chihuahua.

When she's finished eating, Eve exchanges her work clothes for jeans, a sweater, and an oversized parka. The result is unsatisfactory, but she can't be bothered to give it more thought.

She steps out the front door, pulling it shut behind her. The club is ten minutes away, and as she walks, she thinks of that cold front coming in from the east. It seems to promise not just ice and snow, but menace.

* * *

It's a tournament night at the West Hampstead Bridge Club, and the place is filling fast. The game room is laid out with folding baize-topped tables and stackable plastic chairs. It's warm after the chill of the streets, and there's an animated buzz of conversation round the bar.

Eve spots Niko Polastri, her husband, straight away. He's playing a practice hand with three beginners, his gaze attentive, his movements economical. Even at a distance Eve can see from their body language how anxious the novices are to impress him. A woman with teased blonde hair leads a card, and Niko regards it for a moment before picking it up and returning it to her with a grave smile. She looks confused for a moment, then her hand flies to her mouth and everyone at the table laughs.

Niko has the gift of imparting knowledge with grace and humor. In the North London school where he teaches maths,

he's popular with the pupils, who are generally acknowledged to be a tough bunch. At the club, where he is one of four senior instructors, the members compete openly for his approval, with even the flintiest veterans melting at a word of praise for a stylishly executed finesse, or a contract made against the odds.

Eve met Niko twelve years ago, when she first joined the club. At the time, she was less interested in improving her bridge-playing than in finding a social life disconnected from the intense, inward-looking hive of Thames House. A social life that would hopefully feature an attractive, intelligent man. In her mind's eye she saw a suave figure, his features not quite discernible, leading her up a broad flight of steps to a smart West End restaurant.

The bridge club, whose members had an average age somewhere north of fifty, did not deliver such a man. Had she wished to meet retired accountants and widowed dentists, it would have been just the place, but attractive single men under forty were thin on the ground. Niko wasn't there when she first presented herself; she and a couple of other prospective members were attended to by Mrs. Shapiro, the blue-haired club secretary.

Dispirited by the experience, she was in two minds about going back the next week. But she went, and this time Niko was there. A tall man with patient brown eyes and the mustache of a nineteenth-century cavalry officer, he took charge of Eve from the moment she arrived, squiring her to a table, summoning two more players, and partnering her without comment for half-a-dozen hands. Then, dismissing the others, he faced her over the green baize table.

"So, Eve. Good news or not-so-good news?"

"Start with the not-so-good news."

“OK. Well, you understand the basics of the game. You learned as a child?”

“My parents both played, yes.”

“And you like, very much, to win.”

Eve met his gaze. “Is it that obvious?”

“To others, maybe not. You like to play the *myszka*, the mouse. But I see the fox.”

“Is that good?”

“It could be. But you have faults.”

“I’m a faulty fox?”

“Exactly. If you’re going to play a strategic game, you need to know very early on where all the cards are. To do this, you need to concentrate harder on your opponents’ play. You need to remember the bidding, and count every suit.”

“Right.” She digested this for a moment. “So what’s the good news?”

“The good news is that there’s a very nice pub just five minutes away.”

They were married later that year.

Eve’s bridge partner tonight is a young guy named Dom. He is nineteen, one of a trio of students from Imperial College who joined the club in the autumn. He’s got a guileless look about him, but he’s a ferociously good player, and at the West Hampstead, that’s what counts.

After her initial uncertainty, Eve has come to look forward to her evenings here. Most of the members are her parents’ age and even, in one or two cases, her grandparents’. But the standard of play is fierce, and after a rigorous day at Thames House, she appreciates the idea of intellectual challenge for its own sake.

At the end of the evening, she thanks Dom. They’ve finished

fourth overall, a good result, and he grins a little awkwardly and shuffles off. At the entrance, Niko helps her into her anorak as if it was a Chanel coat, a tiny act of chivalry that does not go unnoticed by other female members, who glance at Eve enviously.

“So how was your day?” she asks him, linking her arm tightly through his as they make their way back towards home. It’s just started to snow, and she blinks as the flakes touch her face.

“The Year 11 boys would have a better understanding of differential calculus if they didn’t all stay up until two in the morning playing Final Attrition 2. Or maybe not. How about you?”

She hesitates. “I’ve got a puzzle for you. I’ve been trying to figure it out all day.”

Niko knows what she does, and while he never presses her for information, Eve often thinks how useful a mind like his would be to her employers. At the same time, the thought of him walking the featureless corridors of Thames House fills her with horror. It’s her world, but she wouldn’t want it to be his.

After leaving Krakow University with a Master’s degree in Pure and Applied Mathematics, Niko took off round Europe in a battered van with a friend named Maciek. Living and sleeping in the van, the pair traveled from tournament to tournament—bridge, chess, poker, anything offering a cash prize—and after eighteen months on the road, retired with over a million zloty between them. Maciek spent his share in less than a year, mostly on the girls at the Pasha Lounge on Warsaw’s Ulitsa Mazowiecka. Niko headed for London.

“Tell me,” he says.

“OK. Three dead men on the floor of a theatre box, after

a performance. Two bodyguards and a Mafia don. All shot. Presumably by the don's nephew. But the don was tranquilized first. Paralyzed by an immobilizing agent injected into one eye. Why do that? Why not just shoot him like the bodyguards?"

Niko is silent for a minute. "Who was killed first? The bodyguards?"

"That's also weird. Normally you'd have to kill the bodyguards in order to get to the real target. But I think the don was killed first in this case. The shooter used a silencer. Low-caliber weapon at point-blank range. The way the bodies were positioned, it looks like the bodyguards were shot from behind while they were bending over to check on him, but I don't know why they would have let their guard down and turned their backs on the killer if he was still there."

"Body shots?"

"The don, yes. The bodyguards, back of the neck. No mess. Very professional."

"And the syringe, or whatever. The immobilizing agent. What do we know about that?"

"I'll show you."

She takes a photocopy of a photograph from her pocket. They stop for a moment in a whirl of snowflakes beneath a street light.

"Nasty-looking thing." He blows snow from his mustache. "But clever. How was it disguised?"

She stares at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if what you're saying is correct, then the killer's first problem is how to get past the bodyguards with a weapon. These are going to be tough, experienced guys."

"OK."

"But this, on the other hand..." He holds up the photocopy.

“They let it slip through. How come?”

Eve stares at the limp photocopy. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. How did I miss that?” Her voice is a whisper now.

“Miss what?”

“Do you have a pen?”

He reaches into his coat pocket, pulls one out, hands it to her.

“Look, if there’s a wire that attaches here and snaps into place here... It’s a hair clip. A woman’s fucking hair clip. I was right. The woman is the killer.”

“How did she get her hands on the gun, though?”

Eve shrugs. “She must have stashed it somewhere in advance but couldn’t retrieve it until the don was immobilized. Who cares? She’s clearly smart enough to have had some sort of plan for that before she even went into the box.”

* * *

In the business-class lounge at the Gare du Nord, Villanelle checks her messages. A text from Konstantin informs her that his plans have changed, and he will be joining her in London, meeting her at the La Spezia café in Gray’s Inn Road at 2 p.m. Returning her phone to her bag, she sips her coffee. The lounge is mostly empty this morning, with only a few other travelers waiting in the open seating area near the entrance. Villanelle has established herself on a plush, brightly-colored sofa in a nook normally reserved for groups in need of a slightly more private meeting space.

She is traveling on a false passport as Manon Lefebvre, the co-author of a French investment newsletter. Her cover story is that she is in London to talk to an online publisher interested in setting up a partnership. She looks professionally anonymous

in a mid-length trench coat, narrow jeans, and ankle boots. She's wearing very little makeup, and despite the season, gray-lensed acetate sunglasses; transport hubs attract photographers and, increasingly, law-enforcement professionals armed with facial recognition software.

When it's time to board her train, she gathers her coffee and her luggage and makes her way to the platform. She enters her car and takes her reserved seat, and although she makes a point of not meeting his eye, she can tell that the man across the aisle, currently flicking through a magazine, is determined to engage her in conversation. She ignores him, and taking out a tablet and earbuds, is soon immersed in a video clip.

The clip shows, in slow motion, the contrasting terminal performances of two handgun rounds when fired into a block of clear ballistics gelatin, a testing medium designed to simulate human tissue. One round is Russian, one American. Both are jacketed hollow-point, designed to deliver massive kinetic shock and remain within a target's body rather than passing through. Knowing she's likely to be operating in a busy urban environment, this information is of interest to Villanelle. She's going to want a one-shot, lights-out kill. She can't risk the possibility of collateral damage and the extra attention this would bring.

She frowns, torn between the two hollow-point rounds. The Russian round expands on entry, its jacket peeling back like the petals of a flower as it blasts through flesh and bone. The U.S. round, by contrast, doesn't deform, but tumbles nose over point, tearing a devastating wound cavity as it goes. Both have their very considerable merits.

She continues to ponder this as she turns off the tablet and takes out her earbuds.

“Good movie?” asks the man across the aisle, seizing his chance.

She noticed him earlier, in the business-class lounge. Late thirties and implausibly good-looking, like a designer-dressed matador.

“Actually, I was shopping.”

“For yourself?”

“No, for someone else.”

“Someone special?”

“Yes. It’s going to be a surprise.”

“Lucky him.” He levels a dark-brown gaze at her. “You’re Lucy Drake, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Lucy Drake? The model?”

“Sorry, no.”

“But...” He reaches for his magazine, and pages through it until he reaches a fragrance advertisement. “That’s not you?”

Villanelle looks at the page. It’s true, the model does look uncannily like her. But Lucy Drake’s eyes are a piercing green. The fragrance is called *Printemps*. Spring. Villanelle takes off her sunglasses. Her own eyes are hazel, warm brown in the center fading to a grayish-green outer ring.

“Forgive me,” he says. “I was mistaken.”

“It’s a compliment. She’s lovely.”

“She is.” He holds out his hand. “Luis Martín.”

“Manon Lefebvre.” She looks down at the magazine again. “How did you know that model’s name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m in the business. My wife and I own an agency, Tempest. We’ve got divisions in Paris, London, Milan, and Moscow.”

“And this Lucy Drake is on your books?”

"No, I think she's with Premier. She's not working so much anymore."

"Really?"

"She wants to act, apparently. And she thinks the more editorial and advertising she does, the less chance she has of being taken seriously."

"Is she talented?"

"She has talent as a model, which is very much rarer than you might think. As an actress..." He shrugs. "But then, people so often undervalue their real talents, wouldn't you say? They dream of being something they can never be."

"You're Spanish?" asks Villanelle, deflecting the personal questions that she senses coming.

"Yes, but I spend very little time in Spain. Our main residences are in London and Paris. I assume you're traveling for work... What do you do?"

"Financial stuff. Not very glamorous, I'm afraid."

"Does your work take you to England often?"

She considers. Does six weeks' brutal unarmed combat training in the Essex marshes count? A fortnight spent hurtling round hairpin bends on the evasive driving course at Northwood? A week learning to pick locks with a retired burglar on the Isle of Dogs? An afternoon in London to strangle a high-ranking police officer with his own tie at a tango competition?

"Occasionally," she says.

"You should think of modeling," he says. "You have the cheekbones, and the fuck-you stare."

"Thank you?"

"It's a compliment, believe me."

"So... was your wife a model?"

"Elvira? Yes, originally she was. A very successful one. But

these days I deal with the clients, and she runs the back office.”

The conversation takes its predictable course. Villanelle is guarded on the subject of her alter-ego Manon Lefebvre, and presses Martín for details about Tempest. He’s only too happy to talk about himself, while simultaneously plying Villanelle with a stream of increasingly flirtatious compliments.

For a moment, she wonders if he’s a plant from MI5, or France’s external intelligence service, the DGSE. But she didn’t book the ticket in advance; instead, she took the Metro to Chaussée d’Antin–La Fayette, hailed a taxi at random on the Boulevard Haussmann, and paid cash for her ticket when she got to the train station. Basic counter-surveillance measures, including a last-second pull-off into a service station, told her that she wasn’t followed. And Martín was in the business-class lounge before her, already checked in. Most importantly, her instincts—highly tuned when it’s a question of her own survival—tell her that this man is not playing a role. That he really is the over-groomed seducer that he appears to be. The nice thing about narcissistic types like Martín is that they always think they’re in control—at work, in conversation, during sex. And in her experience, men like this are the easiest to manipulate.

* * *

Konstantin is sitting in front of the café counter, facing the door and Gray’s Inn Road. The *Evening Standard* is open in front of him at the sports page, and he’s sipping an espresso. When Villanelle walks in, stamping snow from her boots, he looks up, his gaze vague, and nods her to a seat opposite him. The downbeat welcome robs the moment of potential drama; no one

looks up at the young woman in the thrift-shop coat and knitted beanie. She orders a cup of tea, and the pair begin an inaudible conversation. Were anyone to attempt audio surveillance, they would find their efforts frustrated by the lo-fi snarl of the sound system and the steamy hiss and cough of the Gaggia coffee machine.

For thirty minutes, as customers come and go, they discuss logistics and weaponry in hushed tones. Konstantin tests Villanelle's plan to destruction, throwing up objection after objection, but finally concedes its workability. He orders a second espresso, and runs a finger along the edge of his cup meditatively.

"Your plans are good when you stick to them. But you improvise too much. You need to be more cautious," he says sternly.

"Glaring at me and drinking from a tiny cup doesn't make you intimidating, just so you know."

"Palermo worried me," he continues, ignoring her. "What you did, driving through the city at midnight on the back of Messina's motorcycle, that was reckless. Things could have gone badly."

"I needed an exit. I saw an opportunity. I was in control the whole time."

"Listen to me. You are never completely safe. And you can never fully trust anyone."

"So I shouldn't even trust you? Then how can I trust what you are saying about not trusting anyone?" She reaches across the table to tweak his beard.

He swats her hand away. "You can trust me. But only me. And part of you should always be questioning. Part of you *shouldn't* fully trust me. I want you to survive, OK? Not just because

you're so good at what you do, but..."

He stops, annoyed that his concern for her has become personal, that he is unable to see her as just an asset.

She grins. "Are you scared of losing me?"

His eyes rake the busy café. "Look, right now, no one knows for sure that you even exist. But what happens this week could change everything. The British are a vengeful people. If you give them half a chance, their security services will come after you with everything they've got, and they won't back off."

"So it's important, this job?"

"It's vital. Our employers don't take these decisions lightly, but this man must be eliminated."

With a finger, she traces a V in spilt tea on the melamine surface of the table. "Who are our employers, anyway?"

"They're the people who decide how history is to be written. We are their soldiers, Villanelle. Our job is to shape the future."

"But who are they?" she persists.

"It's safer for both of us if you don't know. Just do the job you've been given, and don't ask questions."

"I will do the job. But I'm not your little puppet, Konstantin. Or theirs."

* * *

Later, high above South Audley Street in Mayfair, she looks westwards. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling window, the sky is umber in the twilight, and the trees are gray. Snowflakes drive silently against the plate glass.

The top-floor apartment is registered in the name of a corporate finance group. There's a TV suite and a state-of-the-art sound system, which Villanelle quickly grows bored

with, and a fully provisioned kitchen, which she will leave only slightly depleted. For the next forty-eight hours, she is expected to spend much of her time here in the apartment, but she is restless, as she always is when she has to wait before putting a plan into action.

She touches a finger to her mouth, tracing the faint ridge of the scar. She was six when her father brought Kalif home. A hunting dog rejected by its previous owner, the animal attached itself devotedly to Oksana's mother, who suffered from severe depression and would often spend days at a time in bed, barely eating or drinking, only getting up to use the bathroom, and leaving her young daughter to fend for herself. Oksana wanted Kalif to love her, too, and one day she climbed onto the steel-framed bed and pressed her face close to the dog, which was curled up on the thin blanket. Baring sharp teeth in a vicious snarl, Kalif struck out at her.

There was a lot of blood. Instead of comforting her, her mother had slapped her and accused her of tormenting the dog. Her torn lip, stitched without anesthetic by a medical student from a neighboring apartment, was slow to heal. Other children stared at her, and by the time the wound ceased to be noticeable, Oksana's father had been seconded to Chechnya and her mother had abandoned her to the tender mercies of the Sakharov Orphanage.

Villanelle could easily have her upper lip remodeled by a plastic surgeon, so that it curves into the perfect bow that nature intended, but she hasn't done so. The scar is the last vestige of her former self, a reminder of how far she's come, and she can't quite bring herself to erase it.

She decides she is not going to spend any more time in solitude if it means dwelling on moments from a childhood

she'd rather forget. Konstantin has instructed her to stay inside as much as possible and keep her head down, but she has no intention of obeying him.

She showers, dresses, and fixes her hair. The lift conveys her soundlessly to the ground floor, and the street. She blinks as the first whirling snowflakes find her face. Cars pass with a faint hiss of tires, but there aren't many people on foot, except a prostitute in a faux leopardskin coat and platform heels waiting on the corner of Tilney Street, patiently eyeing the forecourt of the Dorchester Hotel. Walking northwards, navigating on impulse, Villanelle turns from South Audley Street into Hill Street, then through an archway into a narrower road leading to a square so small it's almost a courtyard. One side is taken up by a brightly illuminated gallery window, beyond which a private view is taking place. There's a single spotlit object in the window: a stuffed weasel on a plinth, strewn with bright, multicolored cupcake sprinkles.

Villanelle stares at it. The sprinkles look like multiplying bacilli. The installation, or sculpture, or whatever it is, conveys nothing to her. She wonders if there is a deeper meaning that she isn't grasping, or if it really is as pointless as it seems.

"Are you coming in?"

The woman—late thirties, black cocktail dress, wheat-blond hair pulled back in a chignon—is leaning out of the glass door of the gallery, holding it half-closed to keep the cold air at bay.

Shrugging, Villanelle enters the gallery, losing sight of the woman almost immediately. The place is packed with prosperous-looking invitees. A few are looking at the paintings on the walls but most are facing inwards, conversing in tight groups as catering staff edge between them with canapés and bottles of cold Prosecco. Sweeping a glass from one of the trays,

Villanelle positions herself in a corner. The paintings seem to have been reproduced from blown-up press photographs and blurry snatches of film. Anonymous, faintly sinister groupings, several with the faces blacked out. A man in a velvet-collared coat is standing in front of the nearest painting, a study of a woman in the back seat of a car, her shocked features lit by photo-flash, her arm raised against the invading lenses of the paparazzi.

Studying the man's expression—the faint frown of concentration, the unwavering gaze—Villanelle duplicates it. She wants to be invisible, or at least unapproachable, until she's finished her drink.

"So what do you think?"

It's the woman who invited her in. The man in the velvet-collared coat moves away.

"Who is she, in the painting?" Villanelle asks.

"That's the point, we don't know. She could be a film star arriving at a premiere, or a convicted murderer arriving for sentencing."

"If she was a murderer, she'd be handcuffed, and she'd be arriving in an armored van."

The woman looks at Villanelle and laughs. "Are you speaking from experience?"

Villanelle shrugs. "She's just some burnt-out actress. And she's probably wearing no underwear."

There's a long moment's silence. When the woman speaks again, the register of her voice has subtly changed. "What's your name?" she asks.

"Manon."

"So, Manon. This event will take another forty minutes, and then I'm closing the gallery. After that I think we should go and

eat yellowtail sashimi at Nobu in Berkeley Street. What do you say?"

"OK," says Villanelle.

* * *

Her name is Sarah, and she had her thirty-eighth birthday a month ago. She's talking about conceptual art, and Villanelle is nodding vaguely but not really listening. Not to the words, anyway. She likes the rise and fall of Sarah's voice, and she's touched, in an abstract sort of way, by the tiny age-lines around her eyes, and by her seriousness. Sarah reminds her, just a little, of Anna, her French teacher, and the only adult, except perhaps Konstantin, to whom she's ever formed a real, unsimulated attachment.

"Is that good?" Sarah asks.

Villanelle nods and smiles, examining a pearlescent sliver of raw fish before crushing it, pensively, between her teeth. It's like eating the sea. Around them, soft lights touch surfaces of brushed aluminum, black lacquer, and gold. There's a whisper of music; conversation rises and falls. Sarah's lips form words, and Sarah's eyes meet hers, but it's Anna's voice that Villanelle hears.

* * *

For over a year, Anna had nurtured her charge's exceptional academic gifts, and showed endless patience for her graceless, barely socialized behavior. The turning point in their relationship came on the evening they went to *Manon Lescaut*. They were sitting in the balcony, in the back row of seats, and towards

the end of the opera, Oksana had inclined her head against the teacher's shoulder. When Anna responded by putting an arm around her, Oksana was so overwhelmed she could hardly breathe.

As Puccini's music swirled around them, Oksana reached out a hand and laid it over one of Anna's thighs. Gently, but firmly, Anna removed the hand, and equally firmly, a moment later, Oksana replaced it. This was a game she had played many times in her mind.

"Stop it," Anna said quietly.

"Don't you like me?" Oksana whispered.

Anna sighed. "Of course I do. But that doesn't mean..."

"What?" She parted her lips, her eyes searching for Anna's in the half dark.

"It doesn't mean... that."

"Then fuck you, and fuck your stupid opera," Oksana hissed, rage rising uncontainably inside her. Standing, she stumbled towards the exit and ran down the staircase to the street. Outside, the city was lit by the sulfurous glow of night, and flurries of snow whirled in the car headlights on the street. It was freezing cold, and Oksana realized that she had left her coat inside the theatre.

She was too furious to care. Why didn't Anna want her? That culture stuff was all very well, but she needed more from Anna than that. She needed to see desire in her eyes. To see everything that gave her power over Oksana—her gentleness, her patience, her fucking *virtue*—dissolve into sexual surrender.

But Anna resisted this transformation. Even though, deep down, she felt exactly the same way, and Oksana knew this to be true, because she had heard the pounding of the other woman's heart as she leaned against her. It was intolerable, unbearable.

Several minutes later, as she stood shivering on the curb, she heard the familiar click of Anna's heels on the sidewalk behind her. Oksana refused to meet Anna's eyes as she stood in front of her and draped her coat around her shoulders, but when a warm hand cupped her frozen cheek, she was overcome with longing. The feeling must have been mutual, because when she leaned in to press her lips to Anna's, Anna was there to meet her halfway.

* * *

"Manon!" She feels Sarah's cool hand take hers. "Where are you?"

"Sorry. You remind me of someone."

"Someone?"

"A teacher I once had."

"I hope she was nice."

Her mind flashes to a memory of Anna lying naked on a sofa, her cheeks flushed, her dark hair fanned out over the cushions behind her, as Oksana gazed reverently up at her from between her thighs.

"She was. And she looked like you." Except that she didn't. She was really nothing like Sarah. Why had she thought that? Why had she *said* that?

"Where did you grow up, Manon?"

"Saint-Cloud, outside Paris."

"With your parents?"

"With my father. My mother died when I was seven."

"Oh my God. That's awful!"

Villanelle shrugs. "It was a long time ago."

"So what did she..."

“Cancer. She was just a couple of years younger than you.” Lies and cover stories are part of Villanelle’s life now. Clothes she puts on, takes off, and hangs up for next time.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Withdrawing her hand from Sarah’s, Villanelle opens the menu. “Look! Wild strawberry sake jelly. Let’s get some.”

She thinks of the night she killed Maxim Leonov. She remembers the metallic smell of his blood. The fluttering of her heart as she sat on the edge of Anna’s bed for the first time, waiting for her to return to see that she had removed the last obstacle between them. The sound of Anna’s horrified gasp when she saw his body. The overwhelming numbness that took over when she realized that this wasn’t what Anna had wanted at all, and that she’d ruined everything.

Sarah lives in a tiny flat over the gallery. As they walk back there, hand in hand, they leave dark footprints in the new snow.

“OK, I get the paintings, but what’s his deal?” Villanelle asks, pointing to the cryptic installation in the gallery window.

Sarah keys a code into the keypad by the door. “Well... the stuffed weasel was a present, given to me as a joke. And the sprinkles were in the kitchen. So I put them together. Quite fun, don’t you think?”

Villanelle follows her up a narrow flight of stairs. “So it doesn’t mean anything at all?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t think anything. I don’t actually care.”

“So what do you—”

Villanelle half turns and pins her to the wall, silencing her with her mouth. It’s a moment that’s been inevitable, but Sarah’s still taken by surprise.

Much later, she wakes to see Villanelle sitting upright in bed, her lean upper body silhouetted against the first dawn light. Reaching for her, Sarah runs a hand down her arm, feels the hard curves of her deltoid and bicep. “What exactly was it that you said you did?” she asks wonderingly.

“I didn’t say.”

“Are you going?”

Villanelle nods.

“Will I see you again?”

Villanelle smiles, and touches Sarah’s cheek. Dresses quickly. Outside, in the little square, there’s virgin snow, and silence. Back at the South Audley Street apartment, she kicks off her clothes and is asleep within minutes.

* * *

When she awakens, it’s past noon. In the kitchen, there’s a half-full cafetière of Fortnum & Mason’s Breakfast Blend coffee, still warm. Several sizable carrier bags stand by the front door, where Konstantin has left them.

She checks the goods. A pair of tortoiseshell-framed glasses with pale-gray lenses. A parka with a fur-trimmed hood. A black polo-neck sweater, a plaid skirt, black woolen tights and zip-up boots. She tries it all on, walks around, accustoms herself to the look. The outfit needs wearing in, and Konstantin isn’t around to try to stop her from leaving, so she drinks a cup of the cooling coffee, exits the apartment building, and makes her way across Park Lane to Hyde Park.

Again, that umber sky, against which the avenues of leafless beeches and oaks are a darker gray-brown. It’s early afternoon, but the light is already ebbing. Villanelle walks fast along the

slush-banked paths, hands in pockets, head down. There are other walkers, but she barely glances at them. At intervals, statues loom out of the dimness, their outlines blurred with encrusted snow. On a balustraded bridge across the Serpentine, she pauses for a moment. Beneath a cracked and starred pane of ice, the water is a lightless black. A realm of darkness and forgetting to which, on days like this, she feels herself almost hypnotically drawn.

"Tempting, isn't it?"

Villanelle turns, annoyed at the interruption, but surprised to hear her thoughts so precisely echoed. He's about fifty, with a round face and reddish blond hair, wearing an ill-fitting tweed coat with the collar turned up.

"I wasn't planning on doing any swimming."

"You know what I mean. 'To sleep: perchance to dream...'" His eyes are steady, and as dark as the frozen waterway.

"You like Shakespeare?"

He wipes snow off the balustrade with his sleeve, and shrugs. "He's a good companion in a war zone."

"You're a soldier?"

"Used to be."

"And now?"

He lifts his gaze to the distant glow of Kensington. "Research, you might say..."

"Well, good luck with that..." She rubs her ungloved hands together, and blows into them. "The light's going. And so should I."

"Home?" The broken smile suggests they're sharing a private joke.

"That's right. Goodbye."

He raises a hand. "See you around."

Hunching into her parka, she walks away. Just some fucked-up weirdo hitting on her. He seems familiar, somehow. Is it possible that she's seen him before, perhaps in the course of the counter-surveillance exercises that she performs, almost subconsciously, wherever she goes? Is he MI5?

Angling sharply southwards, she glances back at the bridge. The man has disappeared, but she still senses his presence. Heading northwards for the nearest exit, she performs a cleaning run, designed to shake off any tail that she might have picked up. No one follows, no one changes direction, no one speeds up to match her pace. But if they're serious, whoever they are, they'll have a primary team foot-following, and a secondary team on static surveillance, ready to latch on if she burns the primaries.

Turning eastwards, Villanelle walks along Bayswater Road towards Marble Arch. Not racing, but fast enough to make any tail pick up his or her speed. She stops briefly at a bus stop as if resting her legs, discreetly checking the area for anyone in the calculatedly drab plumage of the professional pavement artist. There's no one obvious, but then, if she had one of MI5's A4 teams locked on to her, there wouldn't be.

Forcing herself to breathe steadily, she makes for the Marble Arch underpass network. With its multiple exits, it's a good place to expose and lose a tail. Descending the steps at Cumberland Gate, she surfaces beside the Edgware Road, and hovers in a sports shop entrance, watching the reflection of the underpass exit in the plate-glass window. No one glances at her, no one breaks step. Strolling to the Marble Arch entrance, she speed-walks the hundred-odd meters through the underpass, cuts back on herself by Speaker's Corner, and makes for the tube station. On the westbound Central Line platform, she lets

the first two trains pass, scanning the platform for stay-behinds. The line's busy, and there are several possibles. A young woman in a gray windproof jacket, carrying a backpack. A bearded guy in a reefer jacket. A middle-aged couple holding hands.

Stepping onto the third train, she travels as far as Queensway, and then, just as the doors are closing, squeezes out between them. Crossing the platform, she returns eastbound to Bond Street, surfaces, and hails a taxi in Davies Street. For the next ten minutes, she sends the driver on a circuitous route through Mayfair. A gray BMW follows them for a time, but then turns eastwards on Curzon Street with an irritable growl. A minute later a black Ford Ka appears in the wing-mirror, and three turn-offs later is still there. As they coast into Clarges Mews, a choke-point, Villanelle hands the driver a fifty-pound note and issues swift instructions. Thirty seconds later, the taxi drifts to a halt, blocking the road, and the engine dies. As Villanelle slips out of a rear door, she hears the angry blare of the Ka's horn, but no one follows her down the narrow, brick-walled passageway, and when she doubles back five minutes later, the mews is deserted.

And perhaps, she tells herself later in the South Audley Street apartment, no one was following me anyway. What would be the point? If the UK Intelligence Services know who and what she is, then it's all over. There won't be an arrest, just a visit from a Special Forces action team, probably E Squadron, and cremation in a municipal waste incinerator. This, according to Konstantin, is the British way, and nothing that Villanelle has seen of the British gives her the slightest reason to doubt him.

But the E Squadron scenario is not going to happen, and with a smooth effort of will, she erases the apprehensions prompted by the afternoon's encounter. Curled like a panther on the

white leather Eames chair, she raises a glass of pink Alexandre II Black Sea champagne to the fading light. The wine is neither distinguished nor expensive, but it's a symbol of everything that in her other, earlier life she could never have dreamed of.

And it suits her mood. As the next day's action gets closer, anticipation rises through her, as sharp and effervescent as the bubbles prickling to the surface of the champagne. She coils and uncoils on the white leather, even more restless than she'd felt the previous evening. Perhaps she'll go out and find someone else to distract her.

Before she leaves, she pours the rest of the bottle of champagne into the toilet and flushes it away, like so many other remnants of her past.

* * *

Eve groans. "What time is it?"

"Six forty-five," murmurs Niko. "Like every day at this time."

Eve buries her face in the warm valley between his shoulder blades, clinging to the last vestiges of sleep. She's decided, during the night, to put an SO1 Protection team on Viktor Kedrin. She doesn't get up when Niko does, refusing to confront the rest of the day just yet, and instead burrowing further into the blankets.

"Coffee's done," Niko calls.

"OK. Give me a couple of minutes."

Returning from the bathroom, she trips, not for the first time, over the bin Niko insists on having in the bedroom so she'll stop leaving used tissues and cotton wools on her nightstand. She smacks her shin on the bed frame as she tries to catch herself and lets out a colorful string of expletives.

“Eve? Everything OK up there?”

Ensuring that the blind is down—it has a habit of shooting up without warning—Eve lifts the T-shirt she slept in over her head, and reaches for her underwear. “I’m fine,” she yells back.

She dresses quickly and hurries downstairs, where she startles as she nearly bumps into Niko emerging from the kitchen.

“You seem tense, Eve. I think the First Directorate is working you too hard.” He checks the knot of his tie in the hallway mirror. “You are going to make it back in time for the tournament at the club tonight, aren’t you?”

“I should be able to make it.” The calculation being that with an SO1 team on Kedrin, she won’t feel duty-bound to attend his lecture, or political rally, or whatever it is.

Eve pulls on her coat, and Niko sets the state-of-the-art alarm that Thames House has thoughtfully provided. The front door closes, and hand in hand, their breath vaporous, they make their way through the half-light of morning towards the tube station.

* * *

In the P3 office at Thames House, Elena Felton looks inscrutable as she puts down the receiver. “Unless you can come up with a specific reason for changing your mind on Kedrin, it’s a no go,” she tells Eve. “Too short notice.”

Eve shakes her head. “That’s ridiculous. SO1 could have a team in place in just a few hours. Is the problem coming from our end or theirs?”

“Ours, as far as I can tell. There’s hesitation to deploy SO1 on the basis of, um...”

“Of what?”

“The phrase used was ‘female intuition.’”

Eve stares at her. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

She rolls her eyes and tears off an angry bite of croissant. “I guess that’s it, then. But really, ‘female intuition’? All I said in my memo was that I was concerned that I’d underestimated the potential threat to Kedrin.”

“What exactly made you change your mind?”

“Check this out.” On her screen, Eve calls up an article from *Izvestiya*. “This is from a speech he gave last month in Yekaterinburg. The translation: ‘Our sworn enemy, which we will fight to the death, and to which we will never surrender, is American hegemony in all its forms. Atlanticism, liberalism, the deceitful’—he actually says snake-like—‘ideology of human rights, and the dictatorship of the financial elite.’”

“Pretty standard stuff, surely?”

“Mostly. But there’s a huge tranche of the Russian and former Soviet-bloc population who see him as a kind of messiah. And messiahs usually don’t last long. They’re too dangerous.”

“Then let’s just hope he says his piece at the Conway Hall and pushes off fast.”

“Let’s hope.” She sighs and exits the *Izvestiya* page. “I don’t really want to go, but I probably should, just to keep an eye on him, if nobody else is going to...”

“Well, if someone decides to try to kill him, do try to stay out of it. Or don’t, actually. With you out of the way, my career could really take off.”

Elena manages to duck out of the way as Eve flicks the last bit of croissant at her head.

* * *

The Vernon Hotel is a six-story edifice faced with gray stone on the north side of High Holborn. Its clientele is, for the most part, as anonymous as its frontage, so reception manager Gerald Watts is happy to give his attention to the strikingly attractive young woman standing before him. She's wearing a fur-trimmed parka, and the eyes that meet his from behind the gray-tinted glasses are bright and direct. Her accent, with its hint of France and suggestion of Eastern Europe (after five years at Vernon's front desk, Gerald considers himself something of an expert in these matters), is charmingly fractured.

Her name, he discovers when he takes her credit card details, is Julia Fanin. She's not wearing a wedding ring; absurdly, this pleases him. Proffering her the key card to Room 416, he allows their fingers to touch. Is it his imagination, or does he detect a flicker of complicity? Indicating with a raised hand that one of his assistants take her valise and show her to her room, he watches the easy sway of her hips as she walks towards the elevator.

* * *

By the time Eve arrives at Red Lion Square, it's 7:45. Inside the Conway Hall, the crowd is about two hundred strong. The majority of those who have come to hear Viktor Kedrin speak are already seated in the Main Hall; a few stand chatting against the wood-paneled walls, while others have found their way up to the gallery. Most are men, but there are a few couples here and there, and several younger women in T-shirts printed with Kedrin's portrait. And there are other more enigmatic figures, male and female, whose predominantly black clothing is imprinted with slogans which might be musical, mystical,

political, or all three.

Looking around her, Eve feels more than a little out of place, but not threatened. The hall is filling fast, and the various tribes seem content to coexist. If the individuals present have anything in common, it is perhaps that they are outsiders. Kedrin's audience is a coalition of the disenfranchised. Climbing the stairs to the gallery, she finds a seat at the front on the right-hand side, overlooking the stage and the lectern, and with a rush of guilt, realizes that she hasn't called Niko to tell him that she can't make it to the bridge tournament. She searches her bag for her phone.

She doesn't tell him where she is, just that she can't come, and as always, he's understanding. He never questions her about her work, her absences, or her late nights. But she can tell that he's disappointed; it's not the first time he's had to apologize for her at the club. I'll make it up to him somehow, she tells herself.

In the hall, the lights flicker and dim. On the stage, a pony-tailed man walks to the lectern and adjusts the microphone.

"Friends, I greet you. And I apologize if my English is not so good. But it gives me pleasure to be here tonight, and to introduce my friend and colleague from St. Petersburg State University. Ladies and gentlemen... Viktor Kedrin."

Kedrin is an imposing figure, broad and bearded, in a battered corduroy jacket and flannel trousers. There's applause as he walks out, and a few cheers. Taking her phone from her bag again, Eve grabs a shot of him at the lectern.

"It's cold outside," Kedrin begins. "But I promise you, it's colder in Russia." He smiles, his eyes dead-leaf brown. "So I want to talk to you about the spring. The Russian spring."

Rapt silence.

"In the nineteenth century there was a painter named Alexei Savrasov. A great admirer, as it happens, of your John Constable. Naturally, like all the best Russian artists, Savrasov succumbed to alcohol and despair and died penniless. But first, he created a very fine series of landscape paintings, the best known of which is called *The Rooks Have Come Back*. It's a very simple painting. A frozen pond. A distant monastery. Snow on the ground. But in the birch trees, the rooks are building their nests. Winter is dying, spring is coming.

"And this, my friends, is my message to you. *Spring is coming*. In the Russian heartland, there is a yearning for change. And I feel the same thing in Europe. A longing to throw off the dictatorship of capitalism, of degenerate liberalism, of America. A longing to reclaim an older world of Tradition and the Spirit. So I say to you, *join us*. Leave the U.S. to their pornography, their blood-sucking corporations and their empty consumerism. Leave them to their Reign of Quantity. Together, Europe and Russia can build a new Imperium, true to our ancient cultures, true to the old beliefs."

Eve scans the ranks of the audience. Sees the rapt gazes, the mute nods of agreement, the desperate yearning to believe in the golden age that Kedrin promises. In the center of the front row is a young woman in a black sweater and plaid skirt. She appears to be about fifteen years younger than Eve, and beautiful, even at a distance. On impulse, Eve raises her phone, and surreptitiously zooming in on the woman's face, photographs her. She catches her in profile, lips parted, gazing fervently up at Kedrin.

The speech gathers pace. Kedrin recalls another who dreamt of a new imperium—a thousand-year Reich, no less—but dismisses the Nazis for their crude racism and lack of higher

consciousness. He makes an exception of the Waffen-SS, from whose rigorous idealism, he says, much can be learned. This is too much for one audience member, a middle-aged man who stands up and starts shouting incoherently at the stage.

Within seconds, two figures in quasi-military clothing appear from the shadows at the back of the hall, grab the man, and half lead him, half drag him towards the exit. A minute later, to desultory cheers, they return without him.

Kedrin smiles beatifically. "There's always one, no?"

In all, he speaks for about an hour, setting out his mystical, authoritarian vision for the northern hemisphere. Eve is appalled but fascinated. Kedrin is charismatic, and satanically persuasive. That he will make true believers out of those assembled tonight, she is in no doubt. He is not yet well known in Europe, but in Russia he commands a growing following, and has a small army of dedicated street fighters ready to do his will.

"And so my friends, I finish as I started, with that simple message. Spring is coming. Our day is dawning. The rooks have come back. Thank you."

As one, the audience rises to its feet. As they cheer, stamp their feet, and applaud, Kedrin stands at the lectern, unmoving. Then, with a small bow, he leaves the stage.

Slowly, as Eve watches from the gallery, the hall empties. The spectators have a dazed look, as if waking from a dream. After a couple of minutes, accompanied by the ponytailed master of ceremonies and flanked by the two foot soldiers who ejected the protester, Kedrin appears in the auditorium. He is quickly surrounded by admirers, who take it in turns to address a few words to him and shake his hand. The woman from the front row waits on the outskirts of the group, a faint smile touching

her sharp, catlike features. If I dressed like that, I'd look like a librarian, Eve muses. So how come this little fascist princess gets to look like Audrey Hepburn?

Kedrin's certainly registered her, and gives her a glance as if to say: wait, just let me finish with these people and you'll have my full attention. Soon, watched with barely suppressed amusement by the shaven-headed foot soldiers, the two of them are deep in conversation. Her body language—the head fetchingly tilted, the neat little breasts out-thrust—makes her availability unambiguously clear. But eventually she settles for shaking his hand, pulls on her parka, and vanishes into the night.

Eve is one of the last to depart the hall. She waits outside at a nearby bus stop, and when Kedrin and his party leave the building, she follows them at a discreet distance. After a couple of minutes, the four men turn into an Argentinian steak restaurant in Red Lion Street, where they are clearly expected.

Deciding to call it a night, Eve makes for Holborn tube station. It's past 9:30, and she's too late for the bridge tournament. But she'll get to the club in time to grab herself a gin and tonic and watch Niko play a few hands. She needs to wind down. It's been a weird day.

* * *

At a little after 9:45, when she's satisfied that the Russians are settled in, Villanelle moves away from the doorway from where she's been watching the steakhouse and takes a back route to the hotel. As she moves through the lobby towards the lifts, her face shadowed by her fur-trimmed hood, she directs a smile and a brief flutter of her leather-gloved fingers at the reception

desk, where Gerald Watts is still on duty.

Letting herself into room 416, Villanelle opens the valise, takes out a packet of surgical gloves, and exchanges a pair for the leather ones she's wearing. Then, from a sealed polythene bag, she takes a micro-transmitter the size of a fingernail and a pinch of Blu-Tack. Placing this in the pocket of her parka, she leaves the room and takes the stairs up to the fifth floor, where she seems to straighten a picture on the wall outside Room 521. This done, she continues upwards to the sixth floor, where the stairs terminate in an exit to the roof. It's unlocked, and stepping outside, she conducts a quick reconnaissance of the area, noting the placement of chimney stacks and fire-escape ladders. Then, without hurry, she returns to the fourth floor.

Back in her room, she switches on an iPod-sized UHF receiver and inserts one of the earbuds. Nothing, as she expected, just a faint, ambient hiss. Pocketing the receiver, leaving one earbud trailing, she takes a waterproof case from the valise. Inside, each component lying in its bed of customized foam, is the weapon she ordered from Konstantin: a polymer-bodied CZ 75 9mm handgun and an Isis-2 suppressor. Villanelle prefers a lightweight action on a combat weapon, and the CZ's trigger-pull weight has been adjusted to two kilos for double-action firing, and one kilo for single action.

Hotel-room assassination, she knows, is a complex science. Taking down the target is easy; it's doing so swiftly, silently, and without collateral damage that's difficult. There must be no recognizable gunshot report, no scream of alarm or pain, no bullets smacking through plasterboard partition walls, or worse, through the guests on the other side of the them.

So after attaching the suppressor, Villanelle loads the Czech handgun with Russian-made *Chernaya Roza*—Black

Rose—hollow-point rounds. These are constructed with an oxidized copper jacket whose six sections, on impact, peel back like petals. This slows penetration, initiates a massive and incapacitating shockwave, and causes enhanced disruption of tissue along the wound path. For a 9mm round, the Black Rose's stopping power is unequalled.

Villanelle waits, her breathing steady. Visualizes and re-visualizes the coming course of events. Replays every conceivable scenario. Through the earbuds, she hears hotel guests bid each other goodnight, snatches of laughter, doors closing. It's more than an hour and a half before she hears what she's been waiting for: voices speaking Russian.

"Come in for five minutes. I've got a bottle of Saraya Moskva. We need to run over arrangements for tomorrow."

Villanelle considers. The drunker they all are, the better. But she can't leave it too late. She hears murmurs of assent, and the sound of the door closing.

Again, Villanelle waits. It's past 1 a.m. when the security team finally, and noisily, leaves the room. But how drunk is Kedrin? Will he remember the wide-eyed young woman he met at the Conway Hall? She picks up the hotel phone and dials Room 521. A slurred voice answers. "Da?"

She answers in English. "Mr. Kedrin? Viktor? It's Julia. We spoke at the lecture. You said to call you later. Well... it's later."

Silence. "Where are you?"

"Here. At the hotel."

"OK. I gave you my room number, yes?"

"Yes. I'll come up."

She puts on the parka. The valise is now empty except for a clear plastic evidence bag. Opening this, Villanelle shakes its contents into the valise, which she then stows in the wardrobe.

The evidence bag goes into the inside pocket of her parka. Then, after a last look around the room, she leaves, holding the CZ 75 by the suppressor so that the body of the handgun is up her sleeve.

Outside Room 521, she taps lightly on the door. There's a pause, and it opens a few inches. Kedrin is flushed, his hair awry, his shirt open halfway to the waist. His eyes narrow as he examines her.

"Can I come in?" she asks, tilting her head and looking up at him.

He bows, semi-ironically. Ushers her in with a vague, sweeping gesture. The room is similar to Villanelle's own, but larger. An ugly gilt chandelier hangs from the ceiling. "Take off your coat," he says, sitting down heavily on the bed. "And get us a drink."

She slips off her parka and drops it into an armchair, the CZ 75 concealed in the sleeve. A side table holds an empty bottle of Staraya Moskva vodka and four used glasses. Villanelle checks the mini fridge. In the freezer, there's a plastic half-bottle of duty-free Stolichnaya. Uncapping the bottle, she pours a liberal amount into two of the glasses, and meeting his gaze, hands him one.

"A toast," he says blearily, his eyes dropping to her breasts. "We must have a toast. To love. To beauty!"

Villanelle smiles. "I drink to our ruined home..." she begins, speaking Russian. "And to life's evils, too..."

He stares at her for a moment, his expression at once surprised and melancholy, and continues the Akhmatova poem. "I drink to the loneliness we share." He throws back the vodka. "And I drink..."

There's a sound like a snapping stick, and Kedrin is dead.

Blood jets briefly from the entry wound beside his left nostril.

“...I drink to you,” murmurs Villanelle, completing the couplet as she pulls the bedclothes over him. Quickly, she wipes her fingerprints from everything she touched, pulls on the parka, and makes for the door. As she’s leaving the room, she finds herself face to face with one of Kedrin’s pet thugs. He’s broad-shouldered, scowling, and smells of cheap cologne.

“Shh,” hisses Villanelle. “Viktor’s sleeping.”

The eyes narrow in the skull-like head. Some instinct tells him that something is wrong. That he’s fucked up. He tries to look past her, and realizes far too late that the Glock 19 that he collected from the driver this morning is in his shoulder holster, not in his hand. Villanelle puts two rounds through the base of his nose, and as his knees go, catches the front of his flight jacket and swings him back through the door of the room. He falls backwards, hitting the monogrammed hotel carpet like a ton of condemned beef.

She briefly considers dragging the body out of view, but it will take more time than it will save. Then the phone in the room starts ringing, and she knows she has to get out. Making for the stairs, she passes Skull-Head’s colleague and Ponytail, hears them running to Kedrin’s room. One look inside the door and they’re after her, pounding along the corridor.

Villanelle races up the stairs to the sixth floor, continues upwards, and bursts out into the night. The roof is virgin white, and a blizzard of snow swirls around her as she bolts the stairwell door. Visibility is no more than a few feet. She has perhaps fifteen seconds start.

The door splinters and the lock flies outwards. The two men come out fast, breaking left and right respectively, leaving the door swinging in the icy wind. The roof is deserted. Footsteps

lead from the stairwell to a balustrade, beyond which is whirling darkness.

Suspecting a trap, the two men duck behind a chimney stack. Then, very slowly, the younger man leopard-crawls across the snowy roof to the balustrade, peers over, and beckons cautiously to Ponytail. There, just visible, is Villanelle, with her back to them, the parka whipping around her body in the wind. She appears to be watching the chimney stack.

Both men discharge their weapons, and seven suppressed headshots tear through the parka hood. When the slight figure doesn't fall, they freeze; there's an instant of terrible comprehension, and then their heads twitch in near unison as Villanelle squeezes off two shots from the fire escape behind them.

Like lovers, the two men fold into each other. And stepping up from the fire escape ladder, unknotting her parka from the flue-pipe, Villanelle watches them die. As always, it's fascinating. There can't be much brain-function left after a Black Rose round has bloomed inside your cerebellum, clawing its way through your memory, instincts and emotions, but somehow, some spark lingers on. And then, inevitably, dims.

Standing there on the rooftop, in her cage of snow, Villanelle feels the longed-for power-surge. The feeling of invincibility that only a successful killing truly confers. The knowledge that she stands alone at the whirling heart of events. And looking around her, with the dead men at her feet, she sees the city resolved into its essential colors. Black, white and red. Darkness, snow and blood. Perhaps it takes a Russian to understand the world in those terms.

* * *

That Saturday is, without exception, the worst day of Eve Polastri's life to date. Four men shot dead on her watch, an A-grade assassin on the loose in London, her MI5 superiors incandescent, the Kremlin no less so, a COBRA group convened, and—it goes without saying—her Thames House career fucked.

When the office ring to tell her that Viktor Kedrin has been found shot dead in his hotel room, she's still in bed. At first she thinks that she's going to faint, and then, staggering to the bathroom, and finding it occupied by Niko, she vomits all over her bare feet. By the time Niko opens the door to investigate the commotion, she's crouched on the floor in her T-shirt and shorts, ash-gray and shaking. Elena rings while Niko is sitting with her in the kitchen. They agree to meet at the Vernon Hotel. Somehow, she manages to get dressed and drive there.

There's quite a crowd in Red Lion Street, held at bay by a barrier of crime scene tape and two police constables. The senior investigating officer at the scene is DCI Gary Hurst. He knows Eve, and hurries her into the hotel, away from the probing camera lenses. In the reception area, he directs her to a banquette, pours her a cup of sugary tea from a Thermos flask, and watches as she drinks it.

"Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Gary." She closes her eyes. "God, what a shit-storm."

"Well, it's a colorful one. I'll say that."

"So what have we got?"

"Four dead. Shot at close range, all headshots, definitely a pro job. Victim one, Viktor Kedrin, Russian, university professor, found dead in his room. With him, victim two, late twenties, looks like hired muscle. On the roof, victims three and four. We think three is Vitaly Chubarov, supposedly a political

associate of Kedrin's, but almost certainly with organized crime connections. Four is more muscle. All armed with Glock 19s except for Kedrin. The pair on the roof discharged seven shots between them."

"They must have picked up weapons here."

The DCI shrugs. "Easily done."

"They were expecting trouble."

"Maybe. Maybe they just feel happier if they're carrying. Do you want to get suited up and go upstairs? The other Thames House girl's waiting for you up there."

"Elena?"

"Yeah."

"Sure. Where do I change?"

"Staging area that way." He points. "I'll be up in a minute."

In the staging area, Eve is handed a white Tyvek coverall, a mask, gloves and bootees. When she is finally suited up, a mixture of dread and morbid excitement floods through her. She's seen plenty of photographs of gunshot victims, but never any actual corpses.

With Elena standing beside her, looking as if she would rather be anywhere else, Eve makes herself remember the details. The raised, grayish rims of the entry wounds, the thin trails of blackened blood, the faraway expressions. Kedrin, his sightless eyes directed at the ceiling, has a slight frown on his face, as if he's trying to remember something.

"You did your best," says Elena.

Eve shakes her head. "I should have insisted. I should have made the right call in the first place."

Elena shrugs, keeps her eyes trained on the wall opposite them. "You made your concerns known. And you were overruled."

Eve is about to answer when DCI Hurst calls her name and beckons to her from the top of the stairs. Elena is left to keep an eye on the proceedings surrounding the dead bodies.

“Thought you’d like to know. Julia Fanin, twenty-six. Left the hotel in the early hours of the morning. Bed not slept in, but an empty overnight bag left in her fourth-floor room. Forensics in there now.”

“What do the front desk staff say?” Eve asks.

“They say she’s a looker. We’re going through the CCTV footage.”

A dark certainty fills Eve. She feels beneath her Tyvek suit for her phone. Calls up the photograph of the woman at the meeting. “Could this be her?”

The DCI stares at it. “Where did you get this?”

Eve is telling him about the meeting when his phone rings, and he holds up a hand and turns away to listen in frowning silence. Behind his back, Eve rolls her eyes at the dismissive gesture.

“OK,” he says. “Turns out the credit card she showed the hotel when she checked in yesterday was stolen at Gatwick airport a week ago, from the real Julia Fanin. But we’ve got fingerprints and hopefully DNA from the overnight bag, and we’re soon going to have some CCTV stills. Can you stick around?”

“Sure.” She glances over at Elena, who looks as if she’d much rather not, or at least not next to the decedents. “We’ll wait as long as we have to.”

* * *

That afternoon, Eve attends a meeting at Thames House, in the course of which she is questioned in detail as to her decision

concerning Kedrin's protection and her subsequent change of mind, debriefed about the policy inquiry, and finally, ordered to take ten days' home leave. That she will return to the office to discover she has been demoted or reassigned is a foregone conclusion.

At home, she can't settle. There are a hundred things to do about the house—sorting, storing, cleaning, tidying—but Eve can't bring herself to embark on any of them. Instead, she goes for long, directionless walks through the snow on Hampstead Heath, constantly checking her phone. She's given Niko the bare bones of the situation and he doesn't press her for more, but she can tell he's hurt and frustrated by his inability to help. She's always known that the secrecy aspect of intelligence work imposes its own unique strains on a marriage; what's shocking is just how corrosive it proves to be. How her silence eats away at the very foundations of the trust between herself and Niko.

The accommodation that they reached, early on in their marriage, was that while her working hours belonged to Thames House and the Service, at the end of the day, she came home to him. What they shared—the complicity and intimacy of their evenings and nights—was infinitely more important than the things that they couldn't.

But the Kedrin murder spreads like a toxin into every aspect of her life. At night, instead of slipping into bed beside Niko and letting his solid, reliable warmth heal the rifts of the day, she stays up until the early hours of the morning scanning the Internet and hunting for new reports on the killings.

The Sunday papers make what they can of the case. The *Observer* hints at possible Mossad involvement, and the *Sunday Times* speculates that Kedrin might have been eliminated on the orders of the Kremlin because his increasingly fascist outpour-

ings were beginning to embarrass the president. The police, however, release no more than the barest details. Certainly nothing about a female suspect. And then, on Wednesday morning, just as her toast is beginning to brown—Niko usually prepares breakfast, but he's already at work—Eve gets a call from DCI Hurst.

The fingerprints and the DNA analysis on the hair samples found in the valise, a rush job by the forensic lab, have come up with a match on the UK database. An arrest has been made at Heathrow. Can Eve come to Paddington Green Police Station to assist with identification?

Eve can, and as she replaces the receiver, the smoke alarm goes off. Throwing the burning toast into the sink with a pair of salad tongs, she opens the kitchen window and stabs vainly at the alarm with a broom-handle. Fuck domesticity, she thinks bleakly.

* * *

Padding Green Police Station is a brutal, utilitarian building that smells of anxiety and stale air. Beneath ground level is a high-security custody suite where prisoners suspected of terrorist offenses are held. The interview room is gray-painted and strip-lit; a one-way glass window takes up most of one wall. Eve and Hurst sit beneath it, with the prisoner sitting opposite them. It's the woman who was at Kedrin's lecture.

Eve is expecting to feel a fierce triumph at the sight of her. Instead, as at the Conway Hall, she's struck by her beauty. The woman, probably in her mid-twenties, has an oval, high-cheekboned face, framed by a sleek blonde bob. She's simply dressed in black jeans and a gray T-shirt that shows off her

slender arms and neat, small-breasted frame. She looks tired, and more than a little confused, but no less graceful for all that, and Eve is suddenly conscious of her own shapeless cardigan and wild, untended hair. What is it like to look like that? she wonders. To be able to walk into a room and immediately command the attention of everyone in it?

Hurst introduces himself and “my colleague from the Home Office,” and switching on the voice-recorder, officially cautions the suspect, who has elected to dispense with the services of a lawyer. And looking at her, Eve suddenly knows that something is wrong. That this woman is as incapable of murder as she is. That the police case is about to fall apart.

“Please state your name,” Hurst says to her.

The woman leans forward towards the voice-recorder. “My name is Lucy Drake.”

“And your profession?”

She darts a look at Eve. Her eyes, even beneath the strip-lights, are a vivid emerald. “I’m an actress. An actress and a model.”

“And what were you doing at the Vernon Hotel in Red Lion Street, last Friday night?”

Lucy Drake gazes thoughtfully at her hands, which are folded on the table in front of her. “Can I start at the beginning?”

* * *

Even as her heart sinks at how completely she and the police have been blindsided, Eve can’t help but admire the elegance of the deception.

It all started, Lucy explains, with a call received by her agent. The client represented himself as belonging to a production

company that was making a television series about different aspects of human behavior. In this connection, they needed an attractive, confident young actress to undertake a series of social experiments, in which she would play a number of roles. The filming would take place over five days in London and Los Angeles, and the successful applicant would be paid four thousand pounds a day.

"It was all a bit vague," Lucy says. "But given the fee, and the exposure the program would bring, I wasn't too worried. So that afternoon I took the tube from Queen's Park, where I live, to the St. Martin's Lane Hotel, where they were holding the interviews. The director was there—Peter something, I think he was Eastern European—and a cameraman who was videoing everyone. There were several other girls there, and we were called in one by one.

"When it came to my turn, Peter asked me to role-play a couple of scenes with him. One where I was booking into a hotel and I had to make the desk guy fall for me, and one where I had to approach a speaker after a lecture and seduce him, basically. The idea in both scenarios was to be super-flirty and charming but not come across like a hooker. Anyway, I gave it my best shot, and when I'd finished, he asked me to wait downstairs in this Cuban tea house place and order anything I wanted. So I did, and forty minutes later, he came down and said 'congratulations, I've seen everyone and the job's yours.'"

Over the next two days, "Peter" went through everything that Lucy was required to do. She was measured for the clothes that she would wear, and told that this "costume" had to be precisely adhered to, with no changes or substitutions. On Friday afternoon, she was to book into the Vernon Hotel under the name of Julia Fanin and take an overnight bag up to her

room. Peter would provide the credit card that she would use and also the bag, which she was not under any circumstances to open.

Leaving the bag in the room, she was to walk to the Conway Hall, around the corner in Red Lion Square, and buy a ticket to the 8 p.m. lecture given by Viktor Kedrin. After the lecture, she was to gain personal access to Kedrin, charm and flatter him, and arrange to meet him at his hotel later that night. With that done, she was to meet Peter on the corner of the square, give him her hotel room key card, and take a taxi home to Queen's Park.

The following morning, Lucy was told, Peter would pick her up early, drive her to Heathrow, and put her on a plane to Los Angeles. There she would be met, put up at a hotel, and given instructions for the second stage of filming.

"And that's how it worked out?" asks Hurst.

"Yes. He came round at six a.m. with a first-class return to LA, and I was in the air by nine. I was met at the airport by a driver who took me to the Chateau Marmont, where I got a message that the filming had been canceled, but I was welcome to stay on at the hotel. So I used the time to go and see some acting agents, and at midday yesterday caught the return flight to Heathrow. Where I was, um... arrested. For murder. Which was kind of a surprise."

"Really?" asks Hurst.

"Yes, really." Lucy wrinkles her nose and looks around the interview room. "You know, there's a really weird smell of burnt toast in here."

* * *

An hour later, Eve and Hurst are standing on the steps at the rear of the police station, watching as an unmarked BMW turns out of the car park, headed for Queen's Park. Hurst is smoking. As the BMW passes, Eve catches a final glimpse of the flawless profile that she photographed in the Conway Hall.

"Do you think we're ever going to get a useful description of this Peter?" Eve asks.

"Unlikely. We'll bring Lucy back to help us make up a photofit when she's had a few hours' sleep, but I'm not hopeful. It was all far too well planned."

"And you really don't think she was in on any of it?"

"No. I don't. We'll check her story out in detail, obviously, but my guess is that she isn't guilty of anything except naivety."

Eve nods. "Of course she wanted it to be true. The successful audition, the big break, TV..."

"Yeah." Hurst treads out his cigarette on the wet concrete step. "He played her just right. And us, too."

Eve frowns. "So how do you think Lucy's hairs ended up in that overnight bag, if she never opened it?"

"My guess would be that Peter, or one of his people, took the hairs during the fake audition, perhaps out of her hairbrush. And then our shooter drops them in the bag after she's taken Lucy's place in the hotel. And here's a question for you. Why Los Angeles? Why go to the trouble of flying that girl halfway round the world when she's already played her part?"

"That one's easy," says Eve. "To make sure she's out of the picture by the time the murder hits the news. They can't risk her hearing about it and going straight to the police with what she knows. So they make sure that she's taking off for LA—an eleven-hour flight—right around the same time the murder's discovered on Saturday morning. Which not only renders Lucy

incommunicado, but also sets a perfect false trail, giving the real killer and her team plenty of time to cover their tracks and vanish.”

Hurst nods. “And once she’s at the swanky Sunset Boulevard hotel...”

“She’s going to stay there. Even if she sees or hears something about Kedrin, that’s all happening on the other side of the world. Meanwhile, she’s got Hollywood agents to see. That’s her top priority.”

“And then, when they’re ready, and the DNA results are in, they serve her up to us on a plate.” He shakes his head. “You have to admire their cheek.”

“Yeah, well, cheeky or not, that woman shot four foreign nationals dead on our turf. Can we go back and see that CCTV footage again?”

“Absolutely.”

It’s been edited into a single, silent loop. Lucy Drake walking into the hotel foyer in her parka, carrying the valise, and checking in, the suggestiveness of her body language apparent. Lucy exiting the lift on the fourth floor and walking to Room 416. Lucy leaving the hotel without the valise, raising the hood of her parka as she goes.

“OK, stop,” Eve says. “That’s the last time we’re actually looking at Lucy, right? From now on, the woman in the parka is our killer.”

“Right,” says Hurst.

He runs the footage in x16 slow-motion. Infinitely slowly, as if moving through treacle, the hooded figure enters the hotel, lifts a blurry hand in the direction of the front desk, and vanishes out of shot. Her face is invisible, as it is throughout the footage in the hotel corridors.

“Look at her planting that bug outside Kedrin’s room,” says Hurst. “She knows she’s on camera, but she doesn’t care, she knows we can’t make her. You have to admit, Eve, she’s good.”

“You weren’t able to pull any prints off the bug? Or anything else?”

“Look closely. Surgical gloves. And plenty of prints in the hotel rooms, but likely none of them hers. It looks like anything she would have actually touched has been wiped.”

“Motherfucker,” Eve breathes.

Hurst raises an eyebrow.

“She’s a murdering asshole, Gary, and my career is basically over because of her. But you know what? I don’t give a shit anymore. She is outsmarting the smartest of us, and for that, she deserves to do or kill whoever the hell she wants. I mean, if she’s not killing me, then, frankly, it’s not my job to care anymore.”

* * *

On the penultimate day of her enforced leave, an envelope bearing Eve’s name falls through the letterbox. The unsigned message, handwritten in slanting italics, is short and to the point:

Please come to the office of BQ Optics Ltd. Second floor, above Goodge Street Underground station tomorrow (Sunday) at 10:30 a.m. Bring this letter with you. Confidential.

Eve reads the note several times. Could this have something to do with the Kedrin investigation? But why would anyone

go to such lengths to arrange a covert meeting with her, of all people? It could, of course, be a hoax, but who would bother?

At 9:30 the next day, she leaves Niko sitting at the kitchen table amid a sea of maths papers to mark. He rarely brings work home, but she is grateful that he has chosen to do so this particular weekend, as he is too focused on that to ask any probing questions before she slips out.

The entrance to the BQ Optics office is on Tottenham Court Road. Noting it as she exits Goodge Street tube station, she crosses the road and watches the place for five minutes from outside Heal's, the furniture store. The tube station and the first-floor offices are faced with brown glazed tile, and surmounted by a dingy residential block. The second-floor offices appear deserted.

But when she presses the bell at the side of the entrance, she is buzzed in immediately. A staircase leads to the first floor, the headquarters of a recruitment agency, and thence by narrower stairs upwards. The door to the BQ Optics office is ajar. Feeling a little foolish, Eve pushes it open and stands back. Nothing happens for a moment, then a tall figure in an overcoat steps into the dusty light.

"Miss Polastri? Thank you for coming."

"It's Mrs. But please, call me Eve. And you are?"

"My apologies. Carolyn Martens. Please, come in. Excuse the smell."

Eve recognizes the name, and is astounded. Former station chief in Moscow, now head of the Russia desk at MI6, Carolyn is a very senior figure indeed in the Intelligence world.

Eve steps through the door. The office is unheated and dusty, its windows almost opaque with grime. The only furniture is an elderly steel desk, with two takeaway cups of Costa coffee

on it, and a pair of rust-scarred folding chairs.

"I guessed milk but no sugar," Carolyn says, handing one of the coffees to Eve and settling back against the desk, legs outstretched, one ankle crossed neatly over the other.

"Close enough." She takes a sip.

"I'm not very good at 'how are you,' et cetera, so I'm just going to dive right in. I've become aware of your situation at Thames House. You are being held responsible for failing to prevent the murder of Viktor Kedrin at the hands of an unknown female. Your initial judgment was not to request Metropolitan Police protection for Kedrin, but you then changed your mind, and found this decision blocked. Correct?"

Eve nods. "Pretty much, yes."

"My information, and you're going to have to take my word on this, is that this was not due to administrative inflexibility or departmental budget issues. Certain elements at Thames House, and indeed at Vauxhall Cross, were determined that Kedrin should be unprotected."

Eve stares at her. "You're saying that officers of the Security Service conspired to assist in his murder?"

"Something like that."

"But... why?"

"The short answer is that I don't know. But there has definitely been pressure brought to bear. Whether this is an issue of ideology, corruption, or what the Russians call *kompromat*—essentially blackmail—it's impossible to say, but there's no shortage of individuals and institutions who would have liked to see Kedrin silenced. What he offered was the blueprint of a new, fascist superstate, implacably hostile to the capitalist West. It wouldn't have come into being tomorrow, but look a little further downstream, and the prospects are grim."

“So you think whoever’s responsible belongs to some pro-Western, pro-democracy group?”

“Not necessarily. They could just as easily be another hard-right outfit, determined to do things their own way.” Carolyn stares at the traffic on Tottenham Court Road. “I contacted the Russian foreign minister last week via... let’s call it the old spies network. I promised him that as Kedrin was murdered on British soil, we would find his killer. He accepted this, but made it quite clear that until such time as we did so, a state of diplomatic hostility would exist between our respective nations.”

She turns to face Eve. “I want you to go to Thames House tomorrow morning and offer your resignation, which will be accepted. Then I want you to work for me. Not from Vauxhall Cross, but from this office, which we appear to own. You will receive an SIS executive grade salary, a deputy of your own selection, and full tech-com support. Your mission, which you will prosecute by any means necessary, is to identify the killer of Victor Kedrin. You will discuss this with no one outside of your team, and you will answer only to me. Anything you need in the way of extra personnel—watcher teams, armed backup—you will clear through me, and only through me. In effect, you will operate as if in hostile territory. Moscow rules.”

Eve’s thoughts are ricocheting all over the place. “Why me?” she asks. “Don’t you have—”

“To be brutal, because you’re the one person that I know not to be compromised. How far the rot spreads, I can’t say. But I’ve looked pretty closely at your record, and my judgment is that you’re equal to the task.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. This is going to be hard and dangerous.

Whoever this shooter is—and there are echoes of several high-profile international kills by a woman in the last couple of years—she’s dug in deep, and she’s very, very well protected. If you take this on, you must do the same thing. Dig in deep.” She looks around the bare, cold room. “It’s going to be a long winter.”

Eve stands there. She has the dizzying impression that the world has slowed. There’s a moment of intense silence.

“I’ll do it,” she says. “I’ll find her. Whatever it takes.”

Carolyn nods. Holds out her hand. And Eve knows that nothing will ever be the same again.

3

It's almost seven in the evening when FatPanda leaves the rain-streaked building on Datong Road. June in Shanghai is a time of sweltering humidity and frequent downpours. The roads and pavements shine, cars and trucks hiss by in a shudder of exhaust, and the heat rises in waves from the wet tarmac. FatPanda is neither a young man nor a fit one, and his shirt is soon clinging sweatily to his back.

But it's been a good day. He and his White Dragon crew have launched a successful spear-phishing assault against a Belarusian company named Talachyn Aerospace, and have just begun the wholly satisfying business of draining the company's data, stealing passwords and project files, and generally making merry with its most sensitive information.

In the eight years of its existence, the White Dragon crew has hit the best part of a hundred and fifty military and corporate targets. Initially in the U.S., more recently in Russia and Belarus. Like most of its victims, Talachyn has offered only token resistance. A week ago, a junior employee received an email that purported to come from the company's director of security, inviting him to click on a link for information about a new firewall. In fact, the link contained the ZeroT downloader,

a remote-access tool designed by FatPanda, giving his crew the run of Talachyn's operational files.

Since these related to classified fighter-jet designs, they will be of particular interest to FatPanda's superiors in Beijing. For the White Dragon group are not, as some have thought them, merely a gratuitously destructive team of hackers and anarchists. They are an elite cyber-warfare unit of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, engaged in targeted attacks on foreign corporations, military intelligence systems, and infrastructure. The anonymous-looking building on Datong Road has been fitted out with banks of powerful computer servers and high-speed fiber-optic lines, all of them cooled by precision air-conditioning systems. FatPanda, the team's leader, is Lieutenant Colonel Zhang Wu, and it was he who chose the crew's title. A moon-white dragon, according to Chinese symbolism, embodies a ferocious supernatural power. It is an omen of death. A warning.

Ignoring the crowds of home-going workers and the clammy heat, FatPanda walks unhurriedly through the evening haze of the Pudong district, gazing around him with admiration at the city's trophy skyscrapers. At the soaring glass column of the Shanghai Tower, the silver-blue sliver of the World Financial Center, and the vast, pagoda-like Jin Mao Tower. That things are rather less spectacular at street level, where beggars rummage through garbage bins, is not of concern to FatPanda.

He is, in many ways, a clever and even brilliant man. He is certainly a lethal cyber-warrior. But success has led FatPanda to make a cardinal strategic error: he has underestimated his enemy. While he and his crew have been rummaging through the intellectual property of foreign corporations, diverting

terabytes of secret data to Beijing, the world's intelligence agencies and private security firms have not been idle. Their analysts have been amassing their own data: identifying Internet protocol addresses, reverse-engineering the White Dragon crew's malware, and following their actions keystroke by keystroke.

The information they've acquired, and the identities of FatPanda and his team, have been passed up the line. As yet, no Western or Russian administration has risked confrontation with Beijing by directly accusing the People's Liberation Army of state-sponsored data-theft; the diplomatic fallout would be too damaging. But others have been less concerned with such sensitivities. The predations of White Dragon have cost their victims billions of dollars over the years, and a group of individuals, collectively more powerful than any government, has decided that it is time to act.

A fortnight ago, at a meeting of the Twelve at a private seafront estate near Dartmouth, Massachusetts, Lieutenant Colonel Zhang Wu was the subject of a vote. All of the fish placed in the velvet drawstring bag were red.

Villanelle arrived in Shanghai a week ago.

FatPanda proceeds through the crowds and the diesel fumes of Pudong towards the Dongchang Road ferry terminal. He has been trained in the techniques of counter-surveillance, but it has been some years since he practiced them with any real assiduity. He is on his own turf, and his enemies are continents away, little more than flickering usernames behind transparent passwords. That his actions could have deadly consequences has never seriously occurred to him.

Perhaps this is why, as he steps onto the ferry, he takes no notice of the young man in the business suit, just meters behind

him, who has tailed him from his office, and who speaks briefly into his phone before vanishing into the hurrying throng on Dongchang Road. Or perhaps it's just that Lieutenant Colonel Zhang Wu's mind is elsewhere. For this prince of cyber-spies has a secret of his own, of which his colleagues know nothing. A secret which, as the ferry noses into the polluted currents of the Huangpu river, charges him with a dark thrill of anticipation.

He looks ahead of him, seeing and not seeing the illuminated panorama of the Bund, the kilometer-long waterfront on which stand the landmark edifices of old Shanghai. His gaze traverses the former banks and trading houses without interest. These monuments to colonial power are now luxury hotels, restaurants and clubs, the playground of rich tourists and the financial elite. His own destination lies beyond this gilded facade.

As he leaves the ferry at the South Bund terminal, FatPanda performs a cursory sweep of his surroundings, but once again fails to register the operative reporting his progress, this time a young woman in the uniform of a hotel employee. Fifteen minutes later, he has left the Bund behind him, and is hurrying through the narrow, intersecting alleyways of the Old City. This district, teeming with shoppers and tourists, fragrant with moped exhaust and the fatty tang of street food, is a far cry from the monumental splendor of the Bund. The pinched lanes are hung with laundry and loops of electrical cable, stalls attended by squatting women are piled high with rain-damp produce, tiny shops behind bamboo-pole awnings sell fake antiques and retro-styled girly calendars. As FatPanda turns a corner, a pimp on a scooter gestures towards a dimly lit interior in which rows of young prostitutes wait and whisper.

His pace urgent now, his heart pounding, FatPanda hurries

past these temptations. His destination is a three-story corner building on Dangfeng Road. At the entrance, he keys in a four-figure code. The door opens to reveal a middle-aged woman behind a reception desk. Something in the fixity of her smile suggests extensive maxillofacial surgery.

“Mr. Leung,” she says brightly, consulting her laptop. “Please, go right on up.” He knows that she knows that Leung is not his name, but in the house of Dangfeng Road, a certain etiquette prevails.

The first floor is given over to more or less conventional sexual pleasures. As FatPanda climbs the stairs, he is afforded a glimpse, through a briefly opening door, of a pink-lit room and a girl in a baby-doll nightie.

The second floor is altogether more specialist. FatPanda is met by an unsmiling young woman dressed in a crisp green and white skirted uniform. She wears a starched cap pinned to her upswept hair, a surgical mask, and a transparent plastic apron which rustles as she moves. She smells of some austere disinfectant. A name tag pinned to her chest identifies her as Nurse Lei.

“You’re late,” she says icily.

“I’m sorry,” FatPanda whispers. He’s already so excited that he’s trembling.

Frowning, Nurse Lei leads him into a room dominated by a gurney, several monitors, and a ventilator. Beneath the ceiling light, an array of scalpels, retractors, and other surgical instruments gleam dimly on aluminum trays.

“Remove your clothes and lie down,” she orders, indicating a pink hospital gown. The gown barely reaches FatPanda’s fleshy hips, and as he takes his place on the gurney with his genitals exposed, he feels profoundly, thrillingly vulnerable.

Beginning with his arms, Nurse Lei begins to fasten a series of canvas and Velcro restraints, pulling the cuffs so tightly around FatPanda's chest, thighs and ankles that he is completely immobilized. The final restraint encircles his throat, and with the strap secured, she places a black rubber oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. His breathing is now audible as a shallow, urgent hissing.

"You understand that all this is for your own good?" says Nurse Lei. "Some of the procedures you require are highly intrusive, and may be painful."

FatPanda manages a faint groan from inside the mask and nods as much as the restraints will allow. His panicked eyes skid around. For an instant, inches in front of his face, Nurse Lei's plastic apron falls forward and her gown parts to reveal a pair of utilitarian, possibly military-issue, knickers.

"Now!" she says, and he hears the snap of latex gloves. "You need a full bladder flush. So I'm going to have to shave and catheterize you."

FatPanda hears water running, feels the blood-temperature warmth as she lathers his pubic area and begins to scrape away with a surgical razor. Soon, his penis is rearing and twitching like a marionette. Laying down the razor, her eyes thoughtful above the three-ply surgical mask, Nurse Lei reaches for a pair of locking forceps from the tray. Holding them briefly in front of his face, she clamps the sharp teeth of the forceps onto the base of his scrotum. FatPanda looks up at her adoringly, tears of pain running down his cheeks. Once again, as if by the sheerest accident, he is permitted a glimpse of Nurse Lei's panties. He hears the clink of metal, feels the forceps lifted, and a moment later feels a fiery sensation tearing across his perineum.

"Now look at what you've made me do," Nurse Lei murmurs

exasperatedly, holding up a scalpel with a red-tinged blade. "I'm going to have to stitch that."

Tearing open a sterile pack, she takes out a monofilament suture line, and sets to work. The first entry of the needle makes FatPanda gasp, and as Nurse Lei wrenches the surgical knot tight, he shudders with barely containable pleasure. Frowning at this impertinence, Nurse Lei takes a chromium-plated probe from an ice-filled kidney dish, and inserts it forcibly into FatPanda's rectum. His eyes are closed now. He's in the zone, the place where terror and ecstasy meet in a dark, swirling tide.

And then suddenly, soundlessly, Nurse Lei is gone. FatPanda's eyes drowsily revolve, scanning their limited field of vision, and another, different figure swims into view. Like Nurse Lei, she is dressed in surgical scrubs, cap, face-mask and gloves. But the eyes that are staring down at FatPanda are certainly not Nurse Lei's.

FatPanda regards her with hazy surprise. A new practitioner is a departure from the scenario that he hasn't anticipated.

"I'm afraid things have gotten very serious," she tells him, in English. "That's why I've been called in."

FatPanda's eyes shine with fearful anticipation. A *gweipo* surgeon. The clinic have excelled themselves.

Villanelle can tell from his expression that he understands what she has said. Not that she doubts for a moment that a man who has spent the best part of a decade reading the confidential files of international corporations is fluent in English. From a bag at her feet, she takes an aluminum cylinder, just nine inches long. Disconnecting the airflow from the oxygen tank to FatPanda's rubber mask, she attaches it to the cylinder and hovers over him, watching as his life fades away.

Pure carbon monoxide is odorless and tasteless. To the

hemoglobin in the human body, it is indistinguishable from oxygen. With the first cold rush of the gas into his nostrils, FatPanda feels the threads of reality drifting away. Twenty seconds later, his breathing ceases.

When she's sure that he's dead, Villanelle reconnects the rubber mask to the oxygen. She has no doubt that someone with the specialist skills of Lieutenant Colonel Zhang Wu will receive a very thorough autopsy indeed, and that the true cause of his death will swiftly be revealed, but there's no harm in sowing a few seeds of confusion.

Kneeling, she examines the prostrate form of Nurse Lei. When Villanelle clamped a latex-gloved hand over her mouth, punched a hypodermic needle into her neck, and injected a carefully measured dose of etorphine, the young woman managed a faint mew of surprise before slumping backwards into Villanelle's arms. Minutes later she still looks startled, but her breathing is steady; she will be conscious again in half an hour.

As an artistic touch, Villanelle pulls a pair of panties out of her bag, not unlike those worn by Nurse Lei, and places them over FatPanda's head. Then, taking out a cheap mobile phone she has bought for cash that afternoon, she photographs him from a number of angles, none of them flattering. A final click emails the pictures, with a pre-written commentary, to half a dozen of China's most influential bloggers and dissidents. This is one story the Beijing establishment is not going to be able to cover up.

If there is a house rule common to the world's pleasure houses, it is that the customer who is arriving must not meet the customer who is leaving. In the Dangfeng house, a back stair leads to the exit, and it is this that Villanelle now takes, having

changed from her surgical uniform. Outside, the streets are humid, and still teeming with tourists and strolling families, and no one takes any notice of a young Western woman wearing a baseball cap and carrying a small backpack. When pressed—and in the days and weeks to come, there will be hard questions asked in the lanes and alleyways of the Old Town—one or two observers will recall that the woman's cap carried the insignia of the New York Yankees, and that her blonde hair was worn in a ponytail, and from these slender impressions will be born the rumor that the suspect is an American. Frustratingly for the intelligence services and the police, no one will recall her face.

Ten minutes' walk is enough for Villanelle to dispose of the phone, battery and SIM card in separate restaurant garbage bins. The scrubs, gloves, mask and cap, together with the aluminum CO cylinder, sink to the murky bed of the Huangpu river in a string shopping bag weighted with stones.

* * *

Hours have passed, and Villanelle is lying in a claw-footed bathtub in a tenth floor apartment in Shanghai's exclusive French Concession, meditating upon the murder that she just committed. The water is scented with essence of stephanotis, the walls are jade-green, silk curtains billow in the faint breeze.

As always on these occasions, the current of Villanelle's emotions ebbs and flows. There's satisfaction at a job well done. Detailed research, imaginative planning, and a clean, silent kill. Could anyone else have taken out FatPanda with such style, such frictionless ease? In her mind, she replays his last moments. The surprise as their eyes met. Then that curious acceptance as he began the drift into the depths.

There's satisfaction, too, in the importance of her role. It's exhilarating to stand at the still center of the turning world, and to know yourself an instrument of destiny. It makes up for the savage humiliations of her years as Oksana Astankova to know that she is not cursed, but blessed with a terrible strength.

Of all those humiliations, it's her rejection by her French teacher-turned-lover, Anna Leonova, that she still feels most keenly.

The night she killed Maxim Leonov, she led Anna into the bathroom to show her what she had done, presenting her kill with the same sense of pride as a cat bringing home a mutilated bird. But with Anna's reaction, Oksana's world collapsed. She'd hoped for gratitude, admiration, profuse thanks. Instead, Anna had called her evil and crazy, then turned around and left the apartment. The police were summoned immediately and Oksana was escorted out in handcuffs. She knew she should have fled before they arrived, but she had nowhere else to go, and at that moment, no longer cared what happened to her, anyway.

The injustice of it, and the lacerating sense of loss, brought Oksana to the brink of suicide. In the remand center, she considered hanging herself with the sheets from her bed, and wondered whether Anna would even mourn her if she did. But Oksana was a survivor. She always had been. And when Konstantin came to her at Novinskaya three years later, offering freedom and so much more, the part of her that once yearned so desperately to make Anna her own simply froze.

Lying in the scented water in the Shanghai apartment, Villanelle feels her earlier elation displaced by an undertow of melancholy. She turns her head towards the window, a sweep of plate glass framing the glimmering dusk and the rooftops of

the French Concession, and bites pensively at her upper lip. In front of the window is a Lalique bowl of white peonies, their petals soft and enfolding.

She knows that she should lie low. That to go out on the prowl, tonight of all nights, would be reckless. But everything about her life is fraught with danger, so why shouldn't she also enjoy herself from time to time? Stepping from the bath, wreathed in steam, she stands naked in front of the plate glass, and considers the infinity of possibilities before her.

It's after midnight when she walks into the Aquarium. The club is in the basement of a former private bank on the North Bund, and entrance is by personal introduction only. Villanelle was told about the Aquarium by the wife of a Japanese property developer whom she met at the Peninsula Spa in Huangpu. A stylish, gossipy woman, Mrs. Nakamura explained to Villanelle that she usually went there on Friday nights. "And alone, rather than in the company of my husband," she added, with a meaningful sideways glance.

Certainly the name Mikki Nakamura is one the doorman knows. He shows Villanelle through an interior door to a spiral staircase winding down to a spacious, dim-lit subterranean chamber. The place is crowded, and an animated buzz of conversation overlays the muted pulse of the music.

For a moment, Villanelle stands at the foot of the stairs, looking around her. The most striking feature is a floor-to-ceiling wall of glass, perhaps ten meters long. A moving shadow darkens its luminous blue expanse, and then another, and Villanelle realizes that she is looking into a shark tank. Hammerheads and reef sharks glide past, the underwater lights painting their skins with a satin sheen.

Mesmerized, Villanelle makes her way towards the tank. The

smell of the club is that of wealth, a heady mix of frangipani blossom, incense, and designer-scented bodies. In the tank, a tiger shark drifts into view, and fixes Villanelle with its blank, indifferent gaze.

“Dead eyes,” says Mikki Nakamura, materializing beside her. “I know too many men who look like that.”

“We all do,” says Villanelle. “And women, too.” Herself among them.

Mikki smiles. “I’m glad you came,” she murmurs, running a finger down Villanelle’s black silk qipao dress. “This is Vivienne Tam, isn’t it? It’s lovely.”

Villanelle mirrors Mikki’s smile and compliments her on her own outfit. At the same time, she’s running a security check, scanning the club for anything out of place. For the nondescript figure in the shadows. The eyes that look away too quickly. The face that doesn’t fit.

Her attention is snagged by a willowy figure in a white halter-top and miniskirt. Mikki follows Villanelle’s gaze and sighs. “Yes, I know what you’re thinking. Who let the dogs out?”

“Pretty girl,” says Villanelle.

“Girl? Up to a point. That’s Janie Chou, one of Alice Mao’s ladyboys.”

“Who’s Alice Mao?”

“She owns this club. In fact, she owns this building. She’s one of the richest women in Shanghai, thanks to the sex-trade.”

“Obviously quite a businesswoman.”

“That’s one way of putting it. She’s certainly not the sort of person you want to get on the wrong side of. But let me get you a drink. The watermelon Martinis are fabulous.”

As the other woman joins the crush at the small art deco bar, behind which an elegant young person is shaking cocktails,

Villanelle allows herself to be swept along by a gesticulating crowd of young Chinese men, all designer-dressed to within an inch of their lives.

"I don't think you have what they want," says a soft voice at her side. "But I might have what *you* want."

Villanelle looks into the pretty, upturned eyes of Janie Chou. "And what's that?"

"Full girlfriend experience? Kissing on the mouth, lots of nice sucking and fucking, then afterwards I cook for you?"

She pretends to consider the offer. "Mmm, no thanks. I've had a busy day. I just want to take it easy tonight."

Janie leans in close, so that Villanelle can smell the jasmine flowers in her hair. "I got crabs," she whispers.

Villanelle raises an eyebrow. "Is that really something you want to advertise when you're trying to pick someone up?"

"No, silly! In my fridge, not my lady-garden! Hairy crabs. Very expensive."

Mikki approaches with two brimming Martini glasses and hands one to Villanelle, pointedly ignoring Janie. "Someone I want you to meet," she says, taking Villanelle's arm and steering her away.

"What are hairy crabs?"

"A local delicacy," says Mikki. "Unlike that little prostitute."

She introduces Villanelle to a handsome young Malaysian man in a seersucker suit. "This is Howard," she says, clearly anxious for Villanelle's approval. "Howard, meet Astrid."

They shake hands, and Villanelle summons the details of her cover story. Astrid Fécamp, twenty-seven-year-old columnist for *Bilan21*, a French-language investment newsletter. Like all her legends, this one has been carefully constructed. Should anyone care to investigate Mademoiselle Fécamp online, they

will discover that she has been a contributing editor of *Bilan*²¹ for two years, and specializes in petrochemical futures.

But Howard is too busy lavishing compliments on Mikki to concern himself with such minutiae. “Fuchsia!” he breathes, standing back to admire her Hervé Léger cocktail dress. “The perfect color for you.”

Privately, Villanelle thinks the color a disaster. Against her pale ivory complexion, it makes Mikki look like Howard’s mother. But perhaps that’s what Howard likes.

“So what do you do?” Villanelle asks. “Are you in the fashion business?”

“Not as such. I have a concept spa in Xintiandi.”

“It’s heaven,” Mikki breathes. “There’s a rock garden and an Evian ice fountain and Buddhist monks to align your chakras and do your hair.”

“Sounds wonderful. I’m sure my chakras are all over the place.”

“Well, then.” Howard smiles. “You must come visit.”

As soon as she can decently extract herself, Villanelle leaves them alone. Circulating, Martini glass in hand, she soon finds herself face to face with the sharks again. And, moments later, with Janie Chou.

“Come with me,” Janie says, her features soft in the lunar glow of the tank. “Someone wanna meet you.”

“Who?”

“Come.” Her slim hand takes Villanelle’s.

In a dim-lit alcove, a woman is sitting alone, scrolling through the messages on her phone. She’s Eurasian, and when she looks up to dismiss Janie with a casual sweep of one hand, Villanelle sees that she has eyes of the palest glass-green.

“Janie’s right,” says the woman. “You’re beautiful. Won’t you

sit down?"

Villanelle inclines her head in acceptance. From the woman's proprietorial manner, she guesses that this is Alice Mao.

"So. Do you like my club?"

"It's... fun. Things could happen here."

"Trust me, things do." Amusement touches the glass-green eyes. "Will you have some tea? One of those Martinis is quite enough, in my experience."

"That would be lovely. My name is Astrid, by the way."

"It suits you. Mine, as you know, is Alice. What is your occupation, Astrid?"

"Financial forecasting. I write for an investors' newsletter."

Alice Mao frowns. "Do you now?"

"Yes." Villanelle holds her gaze. "I do."

"I've met a lot of finance people in my time, Astrid, and none of them is remotely like you."

"So what am I like?"

"On the basis of our brief acquaintance, I'd say you're rather like me."

Villanelle smiles, allowing Alice's cool regard to flood her veins. Something in the other woman's features, the way the taut line of her cheekbone softens into the curve of her chin, stirs her. She knows that such feelings are dangerous, but there are times when the secrecy and the almost feral caution with which she has to conduct her life become unbearable.

Alice glances at her phone. She stands, her midnight-blue dress rippling with the same underwater gleam as the sharks. "Follow me."

She leads Villanelle to a door, and a lift. The noise and the music die, there's a dizzying ascent, and Villanelle follows Alice into a rooftop apartment as dimly lit as the club. There's a

folding gold-leaf screen, and shadowy contemporary paintings on the walls, but the room is dominated by a dramatic expanse of plate-glass window. Far below them is the city, its sprawling glitter made vague by a shroud of smog.

"The whore of Asia. That's what they used to call Shanghai. And it's still true. This apartment, the club, this building... All paid for by sex. Tea?" She indicates a spotlighted side table. "It's Silver Needle from Fuding Province. I think you'll like it."

Villanelle sips the pale infusion. It tastes of fragrant, rain-swept hillsides.

"I could make you very rich," says Alice. "I have clients who would pay a great deal of money for a night with you."

Villanelle looks out into the night. She can smell the other woman's scent, and her hair. "And you, Alice. What would you pay for me? Right here and now?"

Alice looks at her, her smile unwavering. "Fifty thousand *kuai*."

"A hundred thousand," says Villanelle. "But I'm worth much more than that."

Alice laughs, then steps round to face Villanelle. Green eyes meet hazel. "I'm sure you are. But I don't think you came up here expecting to get paid, anyway," she says, undoing the silk-covered button at Villanelle's collar.

Villanelle shakes her head, and stands there, unmoving, as Alice's fingers move down her qipao dress. She closes her eyes, feels the silk lifted from her shoulders, and her underwear removed. Naked, she feels the floor tilt beneath her feet. She tries to speak Alice's name, but it comes out as Anna, and when she tries to whisper "fuck me," what she actually says is "kill me."

Four days later, Eve Polastri and Bill Pargrave step from the air-conditioned cool of the Pudong airport arrivals building into the 30-degree heat of the taxi rank. It's midnight. Exhaust-tainted humidity rolls over them like a wave. Eve feels her scalp moisten and her H&M cotton twinset wilt on her shoulders.

With her drab clothes and untamed hair, Eve knows that she's not the sort of woman who gets noticed. Since landing an hour earlier, the only person who's given her a second glance is the Chinese customs officer who checked her passport, perhaps struck by the quiet intensity of her gaze. She has never put much effort into her appearance. She is, objectively speaking, attractive, in a quiet, understated sort of way, but it's not something she has ever tried to capitalize on. As a woman, and a minority, at that, it's always been hard to make her voice heard. She certainly never wants anyone speculating that her career trajectory, such as it is, is based on anything other than merit.

Flagging down a taxi, a green Volkswagen Santana, Bill gives the driver the address of their hotel.

"I didn't know you spoke Mandarin," Eve says.

Bill chuckles and pushes back his hat to wipe the sweat from his brow. "Only what I memorized from my phrasebook. If this guy starts a real conversation, I'm stuffed."

"So does he know where the Sea Bird Hotel is?"

"I think so. His expression suggested he didn't think much of it."

"Discreet' was how Carolyn described it."

Eve and Bill's visit is strictly non-official, so there's no one from the Shanghai MI6 station to meet them. Indeed,

everything about their status is irregular. Since her recruitment by Carolyn to investigate the Kedrin killing, an operation run strictly off-the-books, Eve has not contacted a single one of her former colleagues, except to inform Elena of her resignation—she owed her that much, she reasoned, after all that Elena had put up with under her—and to reach out to Bill, her close friend and disgraced former head of section, to beg him to come work as her deputy. The reversal of roles has required something of an adjustment for both of them.

Day after day, week after week, she has made her way to the cramped and dingy office over Goodge Street tube station. There, she has scrolled through file after classified file, staring at her computer screen until her head pounds and her eyes ache with tiredness, in the search for anything—a whisper, an afterthought, the ghost of a suggestion—that might lead her closer to the woman who murdered Kedrin.

And she's gotten nowhere. She's identified several high-profile political and criminal killings in which a woman is rumored to have been involved, and another handful which she's almost certain were carried out by a woman even though the official investigations drew no such conclusions. She has watched, more times than she can remember, the CCTV recording from Kedrin's London hotel in which his killer can be seen coming and going. But the images are smeared and indistinct, even when fully enhanced, and the figure's face is never visible.

When not scouring cyberspace, Eve has followed the real-world lines of inquiry presented by the Kedrin case. But every lead, no matter how initially promising, has brought her up against a smoothly impermeable barrier. There's no witness, no forensic evidence, no useful ballistics, no money or paper

trail. At a certain point, everything just cuts out.

Despite this lack of progress, Eve has a sense of the woman she's hunting. The woman she sometimes calls *Chernaya Roza*—Black Rose—after the 9mm Russian hollow-point ammunition used to kill Kedrin and his bodyguards. Eve thinks that her Black Rose is in her mid-twenties, highly intelligent, and a loner. She is audacious, cool under pressure, and supremely skilled at compartmentalizing her emotions. In all probability, she is a psychopath, wholly lacking in affect and conscience. She will have few or no friends, and such relationships as she forms will be overwhelmingly manipulative or sexual in nature. Killing, in all probability, will have become necessary to her, with each successful murder further proof of her untouchability.

* * *

After countless hours invested in research that led them nowhere, the Zhang Wu case was a breath of fresh air. Information about the murder from any official source was sparse. The local authorities seemed to be attempting—unsuccessfully—to bury the case, which was interesting in itself. Even more interesting was the reason the cover-up had failed so spectacularly: the killer had taken it upon themselves to provide a wealth of information, including photographs of the victim taken just moments after his death, to several Chinese bloggers and other influential figures. Eve clicked through the photos and read the accompanying commentary with morbid fascination. Most interesting of all, though, at least to her, was that the hit was thought to have been carried out by a woman. And while Eve had no evidence to support her theory, she was

sure that it was the same woman who murdered Kedrin. She rang Carolyn immediately to tell her about the new lead.

Carolyn arrived at the office over the tube station within the hour.

"What is that smell? Does anyone ever clean this place?" she'd inquired, with vague distaste.

Eve sniffed, and, unable to identify any unusual odors beyond those which had been present since their very first meeting here, shrugged. "Only if we absolutely need to. Sorry if it's not up to Vauxhall Cross standards."

"Well, you might want to consider 'needing to' a little more often. And in the meantime, I've approved your request to go to China. You leave tonight." She opened her briefcase and took out two well-used passports and a sheaf of flight tickets and schedules.

"When you arrive," she told Eve, "you are to make discreet contact with the MSS, the Chinese Ministry of State Security, and convey my assurances that the murder of Zhang was not sponsored, enabled or executed by us. Furthermore, you are to offer them any assistance they might need in investigating the murder, including sharing our suspicions about a female contract killer."

"Do we have a contact at the MSS?"

"Yes. His name is Jin Yeong. I knew him in Moscow, when he was their head of station there, and he's a good man. Since then he and I have kept certain back-door channels open. He knows you're coming."

"Isn't he going to wonder why he's dealing with us, and not the local station officers? Who are presumably already on the case?"

"He'll guess there are sensitivities. Reasons why you can't go

in under official cover.”

“So should we make contact with the MI6 station at all?”

Carolyn stood, walked to the window, and peered through the grime at the traffic. “For safety’s sake, we have to assume that the conspiracy to cover this woman’s tracks has global reach. If she’s killing people in Shanghai, they’ll have people there. Possibly our people. So you’ve got to keep clear of them. We can’t afford to trust anyone.”

“How much should I tell this MSS guy?”

“Jin Yeong? As far as our hitwoman goes, you’ve got nothing to lose by giving him everything you’ve got.” She drained her tea, and dropped the paper cup into the bin. “We need to catch her, he needs to catch her.”

Bill arrived just as Carolyn was leaving. “Sorry I’m late. Childcare emergency,” he said, setting a baby carrier down on his desk and groaning as he eased himself into his chair. “Never have a baby in your sixties. What was Carolyn doing here?”

“Discussing a new lead. We’re going to Shanghai.”

“We? Must I? Traveling makes my dandruff flare up.”

“Yes. I’ve never done any overseas fieldwork before. I need your experience. This is my first chance to investigate this woman for real. I can’t blow it. I need you.”

“Oh, you’re too sweet.”

“It’s one trip, Bill. One trip! Then you can go back to riding your desk until you retire in, what, a year or two?”

Bill picked up his infant daughter and cooed to her. “Oh, God. One last job, this close to retirement. I think I’ve seen this film before. I’m going to die, aren’t I?” The baby giggled as he hoisted her up in the air and swung her around gently.

“Oh, come on,” said Eve. “It’s not like she’s gonna still be there.”

"I'm joking! Keiko won't be happy, though."

Niko wouldn't be, either. Eve wondered what on earth she was going to tell him.

* * *

"Look at this," Bill says, lowering the window of the taxi and flooding it with the warm night. "It's extraordinary."

And it is. They're approaching the Nanpu Bridge, with vast office blocks to right and left of them, their numberless windows pinpricks of gold against the bruised purple of the sky. And suddenly Eve's tiredness evaporates, and she's lightheaded with the novelty of it all. Everything's about money and profit. She can see it in the soaring high-rises, smell it in the diesel fumes, taste it on the night air. The hunger. The high stakes and the huge returns. The unbridled sense that more is more.

It's an impression that's confirmed as they cross the bridge. Below them, boats festooned with tiny lights ply the dark expanse of the river. To their right, in floodlit splendor, waits the Bund.

"What do you think?" Eve asks him.

He leans forward, his buff linen jacket folded on his lap. "I'm not sure. Things have gotten very strange recently."

"She's out there," Eve murmurs. "Our Black Rose, or whatever we're calling her."

"We don't know for certain that it was her who killed the hacker."

"Oh, it was definitely her."

"OK. Assuming it was. Why would she stick around?"

"For me, Bill. She's waiting for me."

"Now you're actually starting to sound mad. She doesn't even

know you exist. I'm putting it down to jet lag."

"Just wait and see."

He closes his eyes. Five minutes later, they're at the hotel.

It's only when she's in her room, a functional space whose off-white walls are decorated with a single out-of-date calendar, that she allows herself to think about Niko. Their last phone call was horrible. It would have been easy enough to think up a cover story, but she couldn't bring herself to lie, and told Niko simply that she had to go away for a few days. He listened, said "I see," and hung up. He has no idea where she is, or when she will be coming home. Eve stares out the window. There's a road, and beyond it the dark gleam of water. A cluster of houseboats, showing dim lights.

She loves Niko, boring and predictable though life with him is, and she's hurting him deeply, and this is especially agonizing because, for all his wisdom and experience, she can't help thinking of herself as his protector. She's guarding him from the truth about herself. From the side of her that he knows exists, but that he chooses not to acknowledge. The side of her that is utterly absorbed by the woman she is hunting, and the dark, refracted world in which she exists.

* * *

"They're staying at the Sea Bird Hotel on Suzhou Creek," says Konstantin. "They got in last night."

Villanelle nods. The two of them are sitting in the tenth-floor apartment in the French Concession. On the table between them is a bottle of Tibet Glasier mineral water and two glasses.

"Which means they're not here officially," Konstantin continues. "The Sea Bird is dirt cheap, by Shanghai standards."

Villanelle stares out at the pale glare of the sky. "So, what are they doing here, unofficially?"

"We both know why they've come. The Polastri woman was asking questions in London after Kedrin's death. If she's here, it's because she's made the right connections."

"She must be very smart if she figured it out. Or very lucky. I want to see her."

"No. That would be reckless. I'm pretty sure she has no idea what's really going on, but that doesn't mean she's not dangerous. Leave her to me, and go back to Paris. The hacker's dead. It's time for you to disappear."

"I'm not ready to go home yet."

His expression hardens. "This is not how things are supposed to be between us, Villanelle. I don't want to have to negotiate every decision."

"I know you don't. You want me to be your killer doll. Wind me up, point me at the target, *bang bang*, and back in my box." She looks him in the eye. "Sorry, but I want to do more than that."

"I see. And what do you want to do, exactly?"

She shrugs dramatically. "I don't know, Konstantin. Whatever I feel like doing, whenever I feel like doing it."

"Don't rock the boat, Villanelle. You like your life, yeah? You live very comfortably, don't you?"

"Maybe."

"And you know why that is? Because give or take a couple of reckless incidents, you've obeyed the rules. Remember what I told you in London?"

She looks away irritably. "That I'm never completely safe. And that I should never fully trust anyone."

"Exactly. Remember that, and you're fine. Forget it, and

you're fucked." He reaches for the bottle and refills his glass. "Forget it, and we're both fucked."

Pouting, Villanelle walks to the plate-glass door to the balcony and pulls it open. Humid air fills the room.

"Aren't you worried about your health?" Konstantin asks. "There's too much pollution in this city. The air out there is bad for your lungs. Though a bullet in the back of the head is probably a more pressing concern."

She turns back and looks at him over her shoulder. "Who's going to shoot me? Eve Polastri? I don't think so."

"Trust me, Villanelle, her people will kill you without a second thought. One word from Polastri to her bosses, and MI6 will send in an E Squadron action team. Which is why you have to get out, *now*. Shanghai's a big place if you're Han Chinese, but it's a very small town if you're not. You could run into her anywhere."

"I won't, don't worry. But I do know how we can find out how much she actually knows."

"Really?" He sighs. "And how is that?"

She tells him, and for a long time, he's silent. "It's too dangerous," he says eventually. "Too many variables. We could end up attracting exactly the wrong kind of attention."

"Aren't you at least a little bit curious about how close they are to the truth?"

"It's too dangerous," he repeats.

She looks away. "It will be even more dangerous if I do it myself."

He stands up. Walks out onto the balcony. Empties his glass and balances it on the railing. "If we do it," he says, "you stay out of sight. I make the play. And tomorrow you go home. No more arguing. Agreed?"

She nods.

* * *

“Shit,” says Eve, staring at her phone. “That’s no good.”

“What’s wrong?” asks Bill.

She sits down next to him on her unmade hotel bed. The room is small, with worn, bamboo furniture and a distant view of the creek. Her underwear is visible in the open suitcase sitting at the foot of the bed, and she stretches out a leg to kick it shut.

“It’s Hurst.” She hands him the phone. “The Fanin credit card trail’s hit a dead end.”

DCI Gary Hurst is the senior investigating officer on the Viktor Kedrin case. He has been following up on a loose end which, just conceivably, could indicate an error on the part of those who set up Kedrin’s murder. It seems that the theft of the card used by Lucy Drake to check into the hotel was reported to the police by Julia Fanin, but not to her bank. As a consequence, the hotel registration went through unchecked.

This discrepancy puzzled Hurst, especially when Fanin insisted that she had rung her bank’s Lost and Stolen Card number, a claim validated by her mobile phone records. It turns out that the bank’s credit card support services are outsourced to a call center near Swindon, in the southwest of England, and Hurst’s investigation has concluded that one of the company’s employees unfroze the card after it was reported missing, so that it remained usable. Thousands of pounds worth of clothes, flights and hotel bills were then charged to the account over a two-week period, at the end of which the expenditure stopped dead. Which is where the investigation has stalled. Hurst’s text

reads:

Right now working thru 90+ employees who might have taken JF's call. But relevant records deleted so not confident of a result.

"And even if by some miracle he gets a result, guaranteed we'll just hit another cut-out," says Bill, returning Eve's phone.

She slips it into her bag. "Time to go see Jin Yeong. The taxi's waiting downstairs."

* * *

Opened in 2009, the first new building on the Bund for seventy years, the Peninsula Hotel is dauntingly grand. The lobby is pillared art deco, a tone-poem in ivory and old gold. The carpets are vast, the conversation muted. White-uniformed bellboys hurry discreetly between the vast reception desk and the near-silent lifts.

Jin Yeong is alone in the suite. It's vast, soft-lit and restfully luxurious. Sky-blue curtains frame a view of the river, and more distantly the skyscrapers of Pudong.

"Mrs. Polastri, Mr. Pargrave. This is a great pleasure."

"Thank you for agreeing to see us," says Eve, as she and Bill lower themselves into silk-upholstered armchairs.

"I have most affectionate memories of Carolyn Martens. I trust she's in good health?"

For some minutes, the niceties are observed on both sides. Jin is a quietly spoken figure in a dove-gray suit. He speaks English with a faint American accent. At intervals, a look of refined melancholy touches his features, as if he's saddened by

the vagaries of human behavior.

"The murder of Zhang Wu," Eve begins.

"Yes, indeed." He steeples his long, manicured fingers.

"We wish to convey our assurances that this action was not sponsored, executed, or in any way enabled by agents of the British government," Eve says. The prepared words sound overly formal to her as she says them. "We have had our differences with your ministry, particularly concerning the activities of the individuals calling themselves the White Dragon. A unit, we have reason to believe, of the Chinese military. But this is not the way we would choose to resolve those differences."

Jin smiles. "Mrs. Polastri, you are mistaken in thinking that the White Dragon group is part of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. They, and others like them, are just mischief makers, acting without reference to anyone."

Eve inclines her head diplomatically. This, she knows, is the official line on all cyber-attacks originating in China.

"We're here in Shanghai to assist in any way we can," Bill jumps in. "Especially with reference to the killer of Lieutenant Colonel Zhang."

"He was, I'm afraid, just plain Mr. Zhang."

"Of course. My apologies. But we understand that Carolyn Martens has communicated to you our suspicions concerning a female assassin?"

"She has. And I'm aware of the circumstances surrounding the death of Viktor Kedrin."

Eve leans forward in her chair. "Let me cut to the chase. We believe that the woman who killed Kedrin also killed Zhang Wu. And we believe she is not acting alone."

"That is indeed cutting to the chase, Mrs. Polastri. May I ask

what Zhang Wu and Viktor Kedrin had in common, that they should both be... *eliminated* by the same people?"

"At this stage, we don't know. But trust me when I say that neither we nor our American colleagues had any hand in the death of Zhang Wu. Nor in Viktor Kedrin's."

Jin folds his hands in his lap. "I must accept your assurances."

"Can I be frank with you?" she asks.

"Please do."

"We believe there is a covert organization committing these murders. We don't know their purpose or agenda. We don't know who they are, or how many. But we suspect they have people placed in our own organization and also in MI5. And almost certainly in other intelligence services as well."

Jin frowns. "I'm not sure how I can help you."

Eve feels the meeting slipping from her grasp. "All we can do is to follow the money. Is there anyone in the Western security services who you know or suspect to be in the pay of an organization like the one I just described?"

Silence swirls dizzily around her. She senses Bill's shock at the impropriety of her question.

Jin's features remain impassive. "Perhaps we might order some tea," he suggests.

* * *

"Where's my jacket?" Villanelle asks.

In answer, Alice Mao groans. She's lying on her bed opposite a young man with chiseled features and a gym-toned body which gleams like oiled teak. Both of them are naked. Beneath the silk sheet, the man's hand is moving rhythmically between Alice's legs. It's half past two in the afternoon.

"I know it's here somewhere," Villanelle mutters.

Exasperated, Alice rolls onto her stomach. "Please. Just come to bed?"

"I have to go shopping."

"Now?"

Villanelle shrugs.

"Ken's very much in demand, you know," Alice says. "He's doing us a huge favor, fitting us in like this."

Villanelle knows Ken's story, because Alice has told it to her. How he was a student at Hong Kong University, completing an MA dissertation on the late poetry of Sylvia Plath, when he was talent-spotted in a hotel steam room. How he became Ken Hung, the most famous porn star in China.

As if on cue, Ken throws back the sheets. "Ladies, we have wood!"

Alice gasps. "Oh my goodness, it's just like in the films. Bigger, even. Sweetie, at least have a little stroke."

"Sorry, but I really don't want that thing anywhere near me. I just want my jacket." Villanelle frowns. "You don't happen to know somewhere I can buy nice kitchen stuff, do you?"

"You could try Putua Parlor on Changhua Lu," says Ken, complacently regarding the most famous penis in China. "I get all my bakeware there. I'm a *big* Nigella fan."

An hour later, Villanelle is strolling down one of the many aisles of Putua Parlor, noting the positioning of the CCTV cameras. It's a warehouse store for the restaurant trade, offering every imaginable appliance and vessel. Shelf after shelf is piled high with pans, skillets, steamers, hotpots, baking dishes and gleaming tinware. There are elaborate cake stands, fantastical jelly-molds, and an entire aisle of woks. Tiny woks for flash-frying individual prawns, jacuzzi-sized woks capacious enough

for a whole ox. Villanelle's imagination runs wild with kill scenarios.

The place has only a handful of customers. There's a young couple quietly arguing about kebab-skewers, a harassed-looking man loading a trolley with bamboo dim-sum steamers, and an elderly woman muttering to herself as she picks through the melon ballers.

In the last aisle, Villanelle finds what she's looking for. Cleavers. Fine-bladed cleavers for slicing and dicing, heavy bone-choppers for hacking and dismembering. Her eye alights on a *chukabocho*, a locally made cleaver with a 25oz carbon-steel blade and a tiger-maple handle. It feels good in her hand. Two minutes later, she checks out, paying for a dozen cocktail glasses and several sets of paper umbrellas. Somehow, unseen by the CCTV cameras, the *chukabocho* has made its way to the bottom of her shoulder bag.

* * *

"OK, I admit it," says Eve. "I'm nervous."

"You've been on dates before, haven't you?"

"This is not a date. This is an appointment with the head of the Chinese Secret Service."

"If you say so. I think he fancies you. You can't wear a bra with that dress, by the way. Whip it off. This is an important meeting."

"Oh, and important meetings require women to go braless?"

"No, dresses like that require women to go braless. A monkey could tell you that. If he has something, you have to get it out of him."

"Oh, please. I haven't flirted since the late nineties."

"How is Niko, by the way?"

"Shut up, Bill. You're not helping." She retreats to the bathroom, where she scrutinizes herself in the mirror for a moment before unclipping her bra and slipping it out from under the dress.

"You look ravishing," Bill says when she re-emerges. "When are you meeting him?"

"He's picking me up in ten minutes. What are your plans for the evening?"

"I thought I might take a bit of a nap, then go stroll down the Bund." He shrugs. "Perhaps pop in somewhere for a cocktail."

"Well, be safe. I'm going to wait downstairs."

"Have fun."

She throws him a sardonic glance, and teetering a little in her new Lilian Zhang cocktail dress and Mary Ching stilettos—the prospect of submitting the expense claim makes her blood run cold—runs a last check in the mirror. She looks, she's forced to admit, pretty good.

"You don't think the makeup's too much? I don't want to encourage him."

"No! Now *go*."

The invitation came as a surprise, to say the least. The meeting in the Peninsula suite had more or less stalled after Eve's questioning of Jin Yeong. Spies, even among themselves, are highly disinclined to admit that they actively engage in spying. Following a further hour of discussion of the murder of Zhang Wu, in the course of which Eve handed over a prepared dossier about the investigation of the Kedrin murder, Jin brought the meeting to a halt and ushered her and Bill down to the lobby.

There, amid the art deco grandeur, the same cast of business

types appeared to be engaged in the same muted conversations. As they shook hands beneath the pillared portico, Jin hesitated. "Mrs. Polastri, I'd very much like to show you something of Shanghai. Are you by any chance free this evening?"

"I am," she said, too taken aback by the request to decline.

"Excellent. I'll call for you at your hotel at eight o'clock."

She opened her mouth to thank him, but he was already gliding soundlessly away.

He arrives at 8 p.m. precisely. He's on a scooter, wearing a sharp black suit and open-necked white shirt, and looks a very different man from the cautious intelligence officer Eve met just hours earlier.

"Mrs. Polastri, you look... spectacular." With a courtly smile, he hands her a tiny bouquet of fresh violets, tied with a silk ribbon.

Eve decides it's in the best interests of the investigation to at least try to play along. She thinks of Niko teaching GCSE maths to a class of bored teenagers half a world away, and feels a stab of guilt. Thanking Jin, she wraps the dewy violets in a tissue and places them in her bag.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Ready." She arranges herself side-saddle, as she's seen Shanghainese women do.

They swing out into the traffic, and onto East Nanjing Road. The thoroughfare, one of Shanghai's busiest, is gridlocked and exhaust-choked. Jin weaves the scooter deftly between the crawling vehicles and comes to a halt at a red light.

As Eve sits there, the scooter burbling beneath her, she catches sight of a striking figure walking up the pavement towards her. A young woman, poised and slender, wearing a bold, brocade-printed pantsuit. Honey blonde hair frames soft, delicate

features, but there is a subtle, sensual twist to the mouth.

Eve watches her for a moment. Has she seen that face before, or is it just déjà vu? As if sensing her stare, the woman glances back. She's beautiful, but never before has Eve encountered a gaze so intense or so chilling. When the lights change, and the scooter lurches forward, the temperature seems to have dropped a degree or two.

Five minutes later, they draw up at an intersection outside a grand art deco building topped by a cascading neon spire. Colored lights course up and down its antique facade. Above the portico, the word *Paramount* blazes into the twilight.

"You like dancing?"

"I... yes," Eve replies. "I do, actually, but I haven't done it in years."

"The Paramount is a famous landmark from the nineteen-thirties. This is where everyone came to dance. Gangsters, high society, beautiful women."

"You sound like you'd like those days to return."

He locks the scooter. "They were interesting times. But then, so are these. Come."

She accompanies him into a foyer hung with sepia photographs, and from there into a small lift that conveys them unhurriedly to the fourth floor. The dance hall is like a music box in gilt and red plush. On the stage, a middle-aged singer in a floor-length evening dress is delivering a smoky-voiced version of "Bye Bye Blackbird," as a dozen or so couples gravely quickstep around the cantilevered dance floor.

Jin leads Eve to a side table in a booth, and orders Coca-Cola for both of them.

"Business first?" he asks.

"Business first," she agrees, sipping the sugary drink. A couple

glides wordlessly past them.

"What I tell you, you never repeat, OK?"

She shakes her head. "This conversation never took place. If anyone asks, we talked about dancing. About nightlife in Old Shanghai."

He moves closer to her on the banquette, and inclines his head towards hers. "Our late friend, as you know, was killed in an establishment in the Old City. He was a surgery fetishist. A masochist. We knew about this. He visited the place every six weeks or so, and paid a professional sex worker to simulate... various medical procedures. He was discreet about these visits; his colleagues knew nothing about them."

"But not discreet enough to escape your department's notice, evidently."

"Evidently."

Eve notes that Jin is, in effect, admitting that Zhang Wu was working for the state.

"So we are either looking at an organization able to mount an extensive and long-term surveillance operation..." She hesitates. "Or one with access to information acquired by your department."

Jin frowns. "Certainly the former. Just conceivably the latter."

Eve nods slowly. "Either way, a sophisticated organization with a long reach."

"Yes. And I don't believe it was the British, or the Americans. The economic consequences of discovery would be..."

"Catastrophic?" Eve suggests.

"Yes. That's right."

"So do you have any idea who might actually be responsible?"

"Right now, not really, although one can never discount a Russian connection, especially if, as you suggest, the same

organization is responsible for the death of Viktor Kedrin. So we're trying very hard to find out more about the woman they sent. We know that she entered by the back stairway, overpowered the sex worker who calls herself Nurse Lei, who remembers nothing beyond the fact that her attacker was a woman, and then eliminated our friend by means of carbon monoxide poisoning."

"And you're sure that was the cause of death? No chance it was an accident or a mistake made by this nurse? I mean, she wasn't actually qualified to administer surgical gas or anything like that, right?"

"The only gas she ever gave her 'patients' was pure oxygen. We tested all the tanks there. And as it happens, as well as being a part-time sex worker, she was also a trained nurse, who worked in a private medical facility in Pudong. So she knew what she was doing. And the signs of carbon monoxide poisoning are unmistakable."

"Cherry-red lips and skin?"

"Exactly. The pathologist was in no doubt."

"But no sign of a CO tank or canister?"

"No, the killer took it away with her."

"And what makes Nurse Lei so sure that her attacker was a woman?"

"She remembers the feel of a woman's breasts against her back when she was grabbed. And the hand that went over her mouth was strong, she said, but not a man's hand."

"She's sure about this?"

"Very sure. And there's a man who has a food stall on Dangfeng Road opposite the backstairs exit. He knows what the building is, and that only men come out of that door. So when he saw a woman, he remembered her."

“Does he remember what she looked like?”

“No, he said all Westerners look the same to him. Baseball cap is all he remembers. New York Yankees.”

“She’s annoyingly good at being invisible even when she should stick out. Has the material on the Kedrin case been any help?”

“Very much so. My service is very grateful, Mrs. Polastri. We showed the images of the woman in the hotel to people who work on Dangfeng Road, and several said they might have seen her that day.”

“But no one was sure?”

“No. Unfortunately.”

“The image quality is terrible. And you can’t see her face. So I’m not really surprised.”

“We are grateful, nevertheless. And of course we’re checking against visas, and watching all border points. We’re talking to people in all the hotels, clubs, and restaurants that a foreigner might visit.”

“Sounds like you’re doing everything you can.”

“We are.” Jin smiles. “And now, would you like to dance?”

* * *

Dragon-fruit Martini in hand, Bill makes his way towards one of the Star Bar’s few unoccupied seats, which appears to be upholstered in zebra-skin. “Boss Ass Bitch” by Nicki Minaj is pumping from concealed speakers, and the place is filling fast. Bill is wearing jeans and a cotton jacket, and the Lonely Planet guide from which he chose the bar (“a watering-hole popular with the cashed-up expat crowd”) is weighing down his right-hand pocket.

He would never admit it to Eve, but he's not exactly happy that she's swanned off without him for a night on the town with Jin. It's not as if she's not going to tell him everything that's discussed when she gets back, but it would have been nice if she'd at the very least, *suggested* that he come along. He's very fond of Eve, and very protective of her, and she doesn't seem to realize how dangerous all this business of pursuing a cold-blooded assassin in the employ of a massively powerful organization with seemingly bottomless pockets really is.

Lowering himself into the zebra-skin chair with an insouciance he doesn't feel, Bill takes a deep hit of his drink. The Star Bar's decor is preposterous, even for Shanghai. The emerald-green stingray skin walls are hung with sub-pornographic paintings, the fireplace is black marble, a vast Fortuny-style chandelier glows overhead. The overall effect is absurd, alluring, vaguely satanic.

The Martini is volcanically strong, caressing Bill's taste buds with sugary top notes before drenching his cerebellum in iced Berry Bros. No 3 gin. Half-closing his eyes, he feels himself wreathed in flavor. Juniper, a hint of grapefruit, and that sexy, suggestive dragon-fruit sweetness. Fuck me, he thinks, his brain clouding with pleasure. That hits the spot. Around him drift expensively dressed revelers. Friends, office colleagues, lovers... Everyone else at ease, having the time of their overpaid lives. Bill thinks of his wife, Keiko, at home in London with their daughter, and wonders what he's doing here.

* * *

Jin Yeong is a superb dancer. To the swooping, shivering strains of "Moon River," he waltzes Eve expertly round the floor, one

hand lightly holding hers, the other against the bare flesh of her back, guiding her. Despite their price, she's glad she bought the cocktail dress and the shoes. For the past several months, she's been so buried in work and the investigation that she's forgotten what it feels like to just let loose and have fun. No, she thinks. Since before that. For years, what's counted as fun for her has been one or two drinks at the pub after work and leaving early so she can wake up at a sensible hour, or evenings at the bridge club with Niko.

"So would you like to have lived in the 1930s?" she asks him.

"It was a time of great inequality. Great hardship for many."

"I know that. But also elegance. Glamour."

"Are you familiar with Chinese cinema, Mrs. Polastri?"

"I can't say that I am."

"There's a film I love, made here in Shanghai in the 1930s, called *The Goddess*. A silent film. Very sad. Very beautiful and tragic actress Ruan Lingyu. She shows great emotion in her face, and in her movements."

"She sounds lovely."

"She killed herself, aged twenty-four. She was unhappy in love."

"Well, that got dark quickly."

"Indeed. Today, I don't think many people in Shanghai would kill themselves for love. Too busy making money."

"Sounds like you're a romantic?"

"There are few of us left. But we operate in secret."

"Like spies?" Eve suggests.

They both smile, and "Moon River" comes to a close. Ice-blue neon flickers round the stage, and the singer segues into "The Girl from Ipanema."

"The foxtrot," says Jin. "My favorite."

"I'm sorry you're stuck with me and my two left feet."

"You have two left feet? Really?"

"It's just an expression. It means I'm a bit clumsy."

"That is something I would never say about you, Mrs. Polas-tri."

Half an hour later, they're on the scooter again, careening through streets vivid with neon. Eve is enjoying herself. Jin is a man of many interests. Hunan food, early Chinese cinema, and post-punk music among them. His favorite band, he tells her, is Gang of Four. "With that name, how could I resist them?" At the same time, Eve recognizes that for all the wry surface charm, there is a steeliness to Jin Yeong. In a tight corner, this man would make the hard choice, take the pragmatic decision.

They come to a halt outside an unprepossessing-looking establishment on a side street. As Jin opens the door, oily steam gusts into their faces. The place is crammed, and noise levels are deafening. Everyone seems to be shouting, and there's a continuous clattering of pans and woks from the kitchen. Standing in the doorway, Eve is pushed roughly out of the way by a departing customer. Taking her arm, Jin steers her towards the small counter. A tiny, ancient woman in a greasy apron appears and directs them to a plastic-topped table. Narrowing her eyes at Eve, she screeches at Jin in Mandarin.

"She says I'm a very naughty boy," he tells Eve. "She thinks I've picked you up."

She laughs. "You're going to have to help me with the menu."

He inspects the streamers pinned to the walls. "How about bullfrog in rice wine?"

In the end, they settle for spicy skewered shrimp and cumin-crusted ribs washed down with cold beer. It's delicious, among the best food Eve has ever tasted. "Thank you," she says, when

she can eat no more. "That was fantastic."

"Not bad," he agrees. "And private."

She knows what he means. Given the noise levels, audio surveillance would be impossible here.

"I have something for you," he says, and below the level of the table, places a sealed envelope on her lap.

She doesn't move or speak.

"I'm trusting you with my career, Mrs. Polastri. If you are right, and we face a common enemy—this organization you speak of—we should work together. But I doubt Beijing would see it that way, so..."

"I understand," says Eve quietly. "And thank you."

* * *

Two dragon-fruit Martinis later, Bill is finally starting to relax.

"All alone?"

At first he takes no notice, not believing that the question has been addressed to him. Then the slight, dark-haired figure at his side swims into focus. He takes in the mischievous upturned eyes, the dimpled grin, the sharp little teeth.

"I suppose I am, yes. But I'm happily married, so don't get any ideas."

She slides onto the seat next to him. "You new here. I think I remember if I see you before."

He smiles, shakes his head, and pulls out his phone to check if Eve has tried to contact him, pointedly ignoring his new friend.

She puts a hand on his arm. "I'm Janie."

"I'm very flattered, but I'm sorry, I'm just not interested," he says, and pulls his arm away.

Janie pouts.

Bill drops his phone into his jacket pocket and stands up, having decided to go back to the hotel to wait for Eve.

Janie stands as well and runs a hand down Bill's chest seductively, then puts both hands on his hips and pulls him in close. In his slightly drunken haze, it takes him a moment to react, and before he can step back, she leans in to whisper in his ear. "I'll be here if you change your mind." Then she slinks away into the crowd.

It is only when he steps outside and reaches for his phone again that he realizes it's gone.

* * *

Back at the Sea Bird Hotel, Eve knocks on Bill's door, but he's still out. She pulls out her phone and tries calling him, but it goes to straight to his voicemail, so she leaves a message. "Hey, Bill. Just wondering where you are. I can't wait to tell you all about my hot date."

In her room, she takes out the envelope that Jin has given her. Inside is a single A4 page, which appears to be a printout of a transfer of funds between two international banks. The banks and account-holders are identified only by number codes. The sum in question is a little over £17 million.

Eve stares at the paper for a moment, trying to divine its importance, before replacing it in its envelope and locking it in her briefcase. Jin, she knows, is returning to Beijing tomorrow. The investigation into Zhang Wu's murder will continue, but there is no more that she can contribute. It's time for her and Bill to fly back to London, report to Carolyn, and investigate the lead that Jin has given her at such personal risk. She also needs to make things right with Niko. It will be good to be home again,

but part of her will miss Shanghai and its luxurious strangeness, its myriad scents and colors.

In bed, she reviews the evening moment by moment, and in particular the dancing. The open window admits a faint breeze, and with it the corrupt tang of Suzhou Creek. It takes her a long time to fall asleep.

* * *

Outside the bar, Bill looks up and down the street. He catches a fleeting glimpse of Janie beneath a street light, moving fast, and then she's gone. He takes off after her. It's rained while he was in the bar, and the air is charged with the smell of the wet streets. He is soon breathless and footsore, his shirt clammy with sweat. He can't believe he'd been so careless.

She rounds a corner, and he almost loses her on a street packed with pedestrians. But there she is ahead, and he drives himself after her. He dodges and weaves through the crowds, dragging the muggy night air into his lungs, and curses himself for not taking better care of his body when he was younger.

The streets are narrowing now, and the crowds thinning. Instead of street lights, there are loops of low-wattage bulbs strung between half-completed dwellings. Incurious faces look up from beneath sagging awnings and watch him as he passes. There are still a few food stalls operating, a few woks sizzling over charcoal fires, and Bill slows to avoid a rickety table supporting a plastic bowl of writhing, living creatures.

Janie's still about forty yards ahead—Christ, she can move—and now they're in some kind of new-build estate. Rendered-brick housing blocks intersected by a grid of unlit lanes. She slows down. The area's almost deserted, and if she

turns now, she'll see him.

Shrinking into the shadows, Bill checks his watch. It's just after midnight. He's tempted to call out to Janie, but knows that if he does, she'll just take off again, and he'll have no chance of catching up. He leans against the wall to catch his breath for a moment.

At the entrance to one of the buildings, Janie stops and presses a buzzer. After just a few moments, a figure steps into the dim pool of light, and Bill knows immediately that the scenario is infinitely worse than just a pickpocket taking advantage of a tourist who had perhaps a bit too much to drink. The man's not Chinese. Russian or Eastern European, Bill would guess, and while his actual appearance is far from menacing, there's a dangerous energy radiating from him. We're fucked, Bill tells himself, as Janie hands the man the MI6-issue phone. We're totally and utterly fucked.

Still hidden in the shadows, Bill tries to memorize every detail of the man's appearance. There's a brief conversation, and then he and Janie vanish into the building together. After a minute, Bill warily approaches the entrance, looking for a name or a number. There doesn't appear to be either, but he's confident he'll be able to find the place again.

He's fifty meters from the building when he hears his name called.

He stops, sure that he's mistaken. But there it is again, low and clear on the warm, damp air. Is it Janie? How could it be? As far as she's concerned, they parted ways at the bar.

"Bill, over here."

The voice is coming from the unlit lane on his left. Heart pounding, he takes half a dozen tentative steps, senses movement in the darkness, catches an incongruous hint of French

perfume on the night air.

“Who’s there?” he asks, his voice unsteady.

He has a momentary impression of a figure exploding from the shadows, of the whirling arc of the *chukabocho*, and then the carbon steel blade chops through his throat with such force that his head is almost severed.

Rising on her toes like a matador, eyes demonic, Villanelle sidesteps the black swathe of blood thrown from the falling body. Bill’s limbs shudder, a bubbling sound issues from his neck, and as he dies, she crouches beside him to stare into his fading eyes. Then, wrenching the *chukabocho* free of the corpse and dropping it into a plastic shopping bag, followed by her bloodied surgical gloves, she walks swiftly away.

Ten minutes later, she spots a battered Kymco scooter parked at the foot of an apartment block. Disabling the ignition lock and kick-starting the engine, she heads northwards, keeping to the narrower roads, until she reaches Nan Suzhou Lu, where she drops the plastic bag into the dark swirl of the creek. It’s a beautiful night—the sky purple, the city dim gold—and Villanelle feels vibrantly, thrillingly alive. Killing the English spy has restored something in her. The Zhang Wu action had its professional satisfactions, but the moment lacked impact. Taking out Bill was a return to first principles. A violent, artistic kill.

The beauty of it is, she had no choice. Konstantin had ordered Janie to make sure that she was never followed to a rendezvous, and to drug the Englishman if necessary. But the little hooker had fucked up, and once Bill saw Konstantin, he couldn’t be allowed to live. That’s the way she’s going to argue it, anyway. The killing will almost certainly be blamed on the Triads, whose traditional weapon is the cleaver. Eve Polastri

will get the message loud and clear, but as far as everyone else is concerned—the press, the police—Bill Pargrave is just going to be written off as a tourist who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Villanelle is about to head southwards towards the French Concession when a thought occurs to her. Within minutes, the scooter is puttering to a halt at the foot of a building adjacent to the Sea Bird Hotel. The hotel is unlit except for a small blue neon sign over the entrance. Villanelle knows which room is Eve's; Konstantin's surveillance people have watched her come and go since the night she and Bill arrived.

Silently, Villanelle climbs up the side of the hotel, the antique pipework and ironwork balconies offering easy hand- and footholds even in the near-darkness, and slips feet-first through the open, third-floor window.

For almost two minutes she crouches there, unmoving, then she steps soundlessly towards the bed.

Eve's clothes have been hung over a chair, and Villanelle gently runs the back of her hand over the blue dress before lifting it to her face. It smells, very faintly, of perfume, perspiration, and traffic-fumes.

Eve is lying with her mouth slightly open and one arm flung across the pillow. She's wearing a loosely fitting T-shirt, and looks unexpectedly vulnerable. Kneeling beside her, Villanelle listens to the whisper of her breath, and inhales her warm smell. Noting the faint tremor of Eve's mouth, she touches her tongue to her own upper lip which has begun, very faintly, to throb.

"Beautiful," she murmurs, touching Eve's hair.

Almost as an afterthought, she searches the room. There's a combination-locked briefcase chained to the bed that she decides to leave alone. But on the bedside table, there's a pretty,

gilt-clasped eternity bracelet, and this Villanelle takes.

“Thank you, Eve,” she whispers, and with one last look, slips silently out of the window. As she goes, she hears the distant siren of an ambulance and the whooping of police cars. But Eve, for now, does not stir.

* * *

It’s five weeks later, and at midday, the gray sky over the Dever Research Station promises rain. Set in sixty acres outside the village of Bullington in Hampshire, the former Logistics Corps barracks appears from the outside to comprise little more than a cluster of dilapidated red-brick blocks and prefabricated huts. Chain-link fencing topped with razor wire and signs prohibiting photography lend the place a grimly uninviting aspect.

Despite its neglected air, Dever is an active station, classified as a top-secret government asset. Among other functions, it acts as a base for E Squadron, a Special Forces unit whose role is to conduct deniable operations in support of the Secret Intelligence Service.

Identifying herself at the gatehouse, Carolyn Martens parks her thirty-year-old S-class Mercedes on an area of cracked tarmac. With the exception of a couple of security personnel who are making an unhurried circuit of the perimeter, the place appears deserted. Making her way past the main administration block, Carolyn enters a low, windowless building. Descending to the underground firing range, she finds Eve field-stripping a Glock 19 pistol under the watchful eye of Calum Dennis, the station armorer.

“So how are we coming along?” Carolyn inquires, when the

slide, spring, barrel, frame and magazine have been neatly lined up on the gun-mat.

“Getting there,” says Calum.

Eve stares fixedly down the range. “Let me try that last drill again.”

“Sure,” says Calum, handing Carolyn a pair of ear defenders.

“Ready when you are,” says Eve, putting on her own ear defenders.

Calum types a series of instructions into a laptop, and as he hits Enter, the range is plunged into darkness. Fifteen seconds pass, during which the only sound is the sigh of the ventilators and a metallic clicking as Eve assembles the Glock. Then a target, a human torso, is briefly illuminated at the far end of the range, and she snaps off two shots, the muzzle flash bright in the darkness. Four more static targets appear, and Eve fires paired shots at each. The final target moves from side to side, and she discharges the last five rounds in her magazine in fast succession.

“Well...” Calum says and smiles faintly, lowering a pair of binoculars. “His afternoon’s fucked.”

Outside, an hour later, Eve walks Carolyn back to her car. Rain is falling in a thin mist, darkening their hair.

“You don’t have to do any of this,” Carolyn tells her. “By rights, I should take you off this investigation. Sort you out with an official position in the Service.”

“No. That bitch killed Bill, and I’m not going anywhere until I find her.”

“You don’t know that. The police report said it was almost certainly a Triad hit, and we know that Janie Chou person who was seen talking to him at the bar had links to organized crime.”

“Don’t treat me like an idiot. The Triads don’t chop up

tourists. That asshole did it. I'm as certain of that as I am that she killed Kedrin and the others. I saw his body. She almost beheaded him."

Carolyn unlocks the Mercedes. Stands there for a moment, head bowed. "Promise me one thing, Eve. That if you find her, you won't go anywhere near her. And I mean *anywhere*."

Eve looks away, expressionless.

"That weapon you insist on carrying. Don't go thinking that a couple of decent groupings on the range gives you any kind of license to take chances. It doesn't.

"Carolyn, the reason I've spent the last ten days here at Dever is that she knows who I am. Killing Bill was a message, addressed to me. She was telling me: I can take you, and the people you care about, *any fucking time I want...*" Eve pats the Glock, now holstered on her side. "I've seen what she can do, and I need to be ready. Simple as that."

Carolyn shakes her head. "I should never have gotten you involved. It was a terrible mistake."

"Well, you did. And the only way this thing is ever going to end is if we find her and kill her. So please just let me do my job."

As Eve walks back towards the range, Carolyn watches her go. Then she climbs into the Mercedes, switches on the ignition and windscreen wipers, and begins the drive back to London.

4

Villanelle wakes in a warm tangle of limbs. On one side of her, a woman is lying face down, her hair a honey-colored swirl, one suntanned arm trailing across Villanelle's chest. Curled against her other side is a man who emanates a lynx-like elegance, even in sleep. His features are lean and refined, and his limbs are the color of ivory, their musculature precisely defined in the morning light.

Detaching herself, Villanelle walks to the bathroom and takes a shower. Pulling on the silk kimono she finds hanging on the bathroom door, she pads to the tiny galley kitchen, fills the Bialetti coffee maker with Hédiard's "Sur la Côte d'Azur" blend, and switches on the ceramic hob. At the end of the kitchen, a sliding glass door leads to a small terrace, and Villanelle steps outside for a moment. It's September, and Paris is radiant with the dying summer. The horizon is a pale haze, pigeons are cooing on a neighboring rooftop, and the faint murmur of traffic rises from the rue de Vaugirard, six stories below.

Villanelle stands there, gazing out over the city, until she hears the rasp of the percolating coffee. In the bedroom, her companions are stirring, the woman's fingers sleepily reacquainting herself with the hard contours of the man's body.

Villanelle met them twelve hours earlier at a drinks party given by a fashion designer. It took her just three minutes to persuade them to take her home with them.

“Coffee, anyone?” she inquires.

* * *

Over London, a leaden sky promises rain. In her office above Goodge Street Underground station, Eve Polastri wrenches a wad of printing paper from the photocopier and repositions it, but the paper-jam light continues to blink.

“Well, screw you, too,” she mutters, punching the off button.

Eve is using the fifteen-year-old copier because the scanner has given up the ghost and is now lying unplugged on the floor, where sooner or later she’s going to trip over it. She’s put in a request for new office equipment, or at least a budget for repairs, and there have been vague promises from Vauxhall Cross, but given the byzantine arrangement by which the operation is funded, she’s not hopeful.

Today, Eve is to be joined by two new colleagues, both male. Carolyn has described them as “enterprising,” which could mean anything. At a guess, a pair of low-flyers with discipline issues who have failed to adjust to the ordered, hierarchical world of the Secret Intelligence Service. Whatever their history, they’re unlikely to regard Goodge Street as a promotion.

Eve glances at the battered metal desk formerly occupied by Bill. A scattering of effects—a Thermos flask, a mug filled with pens, a baby blanket left behind on that last day at the office before they went to Shanghai—stands as he left them, untouched. Seeing this dusty array, Eve feels a vast weariness. There was a time when her mission was straightforward, and

its purposes clearly defined. Now, three months after Bill's murder, a paralyzing uncertainty bears down on her. The outlines of her task, once so hard-edged, have dissolved into a blur, as indistinct as the view through the grime-streaked office window.

She wonders, vaguely, if she should have taken more care to appear more professional for the first time meeting her new team. She's wearing a shapeless cardigan over a turtleneck, jeans, and sneakers. Her mother always used try to get her to make a bit more of herself, but all that vanity stuff—shopping, makeup, hairdressing—doesn't really seem that interesting to her. When she was working with the Joint Services Analysis Group at Thames House, a well-meaning colleague took her for an afternoon at an expensive spa. Eve tried to enjoy herself, but she was bored witless. It all seemed so unimportant.

One of the things she's always loved about Niko is that none of these things matter to him, either. Yet he makes her feel beautiful, and sometimes, at the most ordinary of moments—when she's getting dressed, perhaps, or climbing out of the bath—she catches him gazing at her with a tenderness that pierces her to the heart.

For how much longer, she wonders, will he look at her like that? How unreasonably will she have to behave for him to wake up one morning and decide that he just can't continue? They must be almost at that point already. She's taken to pacing mutely around the house in the evenings, vodka-tonic in hand, like an alcoholic ghost. Later, as often as not, she passes out in front of her laptop. Murdered men stalk her dreams, and she wakes at random hours of the night, her heart pounding with dread.

Lance Pope and Kenny Stowton arrive at 10 a.m., and exchange unreadable glances as Eve introduces herself. Lance is fortyish, with the lean, suspicious features of a stoat. Kenny looks to be in his early twenties, and his wide eyes and the dimple on his chin give him a look of youthful innocence.

“So this is it,” Lance murmurs.

Eve nods. “A long way from the comforts of Vauxhall Cross.”

“I’ve spent most of my career in the field. I’m not choosy about furniture.”

“I’ve ordered some hardware,” says Kenny, fiddling nervously with the straps of his backpack. “External processors, logic and protocol analyzers. Basic stuff.”

“Good luck with that. I filed a requisition order six weeks ago.”

“It’ll be here this afternoon. I’ll need a bit of space to get everything set up.”

“Well, make yourself at home.” She rubs her eyes. “How much do you know about why you’re here?”

“Bugger all,” says Lance. “We were told you’d brief us.”

She looks back and forth between them. Kenny in shorts, a T-shirt, and a windbreaker; Lance in a seedy version of sports casual. She finds them both deeply unprepossessing, confirming the impression she gained from their files.

At seventeen, Kenny was a member of a hacker collective responsible for a series of well-publicized attacks on corporate and government websites. The FBI and Interpol eventually took the group down, and its leaders received prison sentences, but the underage Kenny was released on bail on the condition that he live at home, under curfew, with no access to the Internet.

Within weeks he had been hired by MI6's Security Exploitation team.

Lance is a career MI6 officer, and a veteran of numerous overseas postings. Although an experienced agent runner, commended by the heads of station he has served under, he has not been promoted in several years. The problem is his chronic insolvency, caused by a predilection for online gambling. He's divorced, and lives alone in a one-room rented flat in Croydon.

"We're here to hunt down a professional assassin," Eve tells them. "We have no name, no country of origin, no known political affiliation. What we do know is that that she is a woman, probably in her mid- to late-twenties, and that she acts on behalf of organization with extensive resources and a global reach. And we know she has at least six high-profile kills to her name. Probably more."

Rain begins to beat at the office window, and she wraps her cardigan tightly around herself. "There are two main reasons we need to catch this woman, aside from the obvious fact that she's a serial murderer who needs to be stopped."

"Which isn't the concern of the Service," says Lance, almost to himself.

"Which wouldn't *normally* be our concern, but in this case, very much is. I'm assuming you both know who I mean by Viktor Kedrin?"

Kenny nods. "Fascist nutjob, Russian, taken out in London last year." He scratches his chin thoughtfully. "Wasn't Moscow behind that?"

"No, that's just what everyone assumed. Kedrin and his bodyguards were actually killed by our target."

"You're sure about that?" asks Lance.

"Absolutely sure. And we have an image of her from CCTV

footage. Not that it's much use." Eve hands each man a printout of a blurry figure in a parka with the hood up. The image has been captured from behind. She could be anyone.

"Best we've got?" asks Lance.

Eve nods, and hands them each another printout. "But she may resemble this woman. Lucy Drake. She's a model. Our killer used her as a double, to check into Kedrin's hotel and to approach him in a lecture hall. But the likeness may only be superficial."

"Could she have been freelancing for Moscow?" asks Kenny. "The shooter, I mean, not the model."

"Unlikely. The SVR have an entire directorate trained in assassination. And why would they have him killed in London, if they could do it at home whenever they felt like it?"

"Make a splash?" Kenny shrugs. "Show that no one's beyond their reach?"

"Maybe, but it seems like the Kremlin were perfectly fine with Viktor and his far-right associates, since they made the official regime look almost moderate. And they certainly didn't hesitate to use his death against us. They demanded a full investigation. That demand came via Carolyn Martens to me. To us. They've made it pretty clear, at a diplomatic level, that they expect the killer to be caught."

Lance purses his lips. "So who was responsible for Kedrin's protection when he was in London?"

Eve meets his gaze. "Officially, me. I was the liaison officer between MI5 and the Metropolitan Police at the time."

Lance lets the answer hang in the air. Above the patter of the rain, Eve can hear the rumble of a passing train.

"You said there's a second reason we want this woman."

"She killed Bill Pargrave, the officer you're replacing. And yes,

I know what the official Service report says, because I helped draft it. What actually happened is that she took a cleaver to his throat, to send a message to me.”

“She took a cleaver to his throat,” repeats Lance flatly. “To send you a message.”

“Yes. So you might want to think very carefully before you agree to join this team.”

Lance looks at her for a moment. “Where exactly do you see us going with all this?”

“We have a lead. The name of someone who might be on the payroll of the organization our target works for. It’s a long shot, but it’s all we have. So we follow the money, and we follow the man, and maybe, just maybe, he leads us to our killer.”

“Any chance of borrowing some A4 surveillance people from Thames House?”

“None whatsoever. This is a closed-circle operation, and what we’re talking about does not leave this room. You are not to make any further contact, social or otherwise, with any Security Services personnel, on either side of the river. If anyone checks your files, you’re both on official secondment to Customs and Excise. And as I said before, this could be dangerous. Everything that we know about our target indicates that she is not only highly trained and well-funded, but a narcissistic psychopath who kills for pleasure.”

“I’m assuming the money’s shit,” Lance says.

“You both stay at present pay-grades, yes.”

The two men look at each other. Then, very slowly, Kenny nods, Lance shrugs his shoulders, and for the first time since their arrival, Eve senses a flicker of common purpose.

“So,” Kenny says. “This lead you mentioned.”

As Villanelle runs, she feels her body relax into the familiar rhythm. Her back and thighs are still sore from the previous afternoon's jujitsu session at the Club d'Arts Martiaux in Montparnasse, but by the time she's completed the circuit of the lake and the Auteuil racecourse, the stiffness has vanished. On her way home, she picks up a takeaway sushi order from Comme des Poissons and a copy of the financial paper *Les Echos*.

Back at the flat, she showers, pulls on a silk robe, and runs a comb through her hair. Sitting on her balcony, she eats the sushi with her fingers and works her way through *Les Echos*. By the time she's finished the last mouthful of tuna, she's scanned every page and processed all the information she needs to maintain her various covers.

Looking out over the city, she checks her phone. But there's no word from Konstantin, no new target. Turning on the Grundig shortwave radio, as she was instructed to do at least twice a day between actions, Villanelle keys in a search code. As usual, it takes a moment or two to find the number station, which tends to skip from frequency to frequency. Today it's broadcasting at 6840 kHz. There's a faint crackle, followed by the first fifteen notes of a Russian folk song, whose name Villanelle once knew but has long forgotten. The music is electronically generated, with a thin, tinny sound that's at once sad and faintly sinister. The notes repeat for two minutes, and then a woman's voice, distant but precise, begins to recite a five-digit Russian number group.

This is the call-up code, identifying the individual for who the message is intended, and the voice has repeated the numbers three times—"Dva, pyat', devyat', sem', devyat'..." Two, five, nine,

seven, nine—before Villanelle realizes that the call-up code is her own. The shock momentarily takes her breath away. A number station call-out entails immediate action. She's been checking in with the station for years without ever hearing her number.

The call-up repeats for four minutes, then six electronic chimes announce the message. Again, this consists of five-digit groups, each voiced twice. Then the chimes again, the opening notes of the folk song, and the hiss of empty air. It takes Villanelle ten minutes to decrypt the message using the one-time pad that she keeps, along with a SIG Sauer P226 automatic and €10,000 in high-denomination notes, in a concealed safe. It reads:

17NORTHSTAR.

After re-locking the safe, Villanelle dresses in jeans, a T-shirt, and a leather jacket, grabs a baseball cap and sunglasses, and leaves the flat. Location seventeen is the heliport at Issy-les-Moulineaux. Taking the ring road as fast as the traffic allows, whipping from lane to lane in the silver-gray Roadster, she makes it in twenty minutes flat. At the entry gate to the car park, two men in high-visibility vests are waiting. They look vaguely official, and as Villanelle pulls up to them, one of them holds out a placard printed with the words NORTH STAR. When Villanelle nods, he beckons her out of the Audi and takes her car keys, then the second man leads her up an unmarked side road to a rectangle of tarmac enclosed by warehouses. At its central point, an Airbus Hummingbird helicopter is waiting, rotors idly turning.

Villanelle climbs into the seat beside the pilot, straps herself

in, and places a noise-reducing communications headset over her baseball cap. She is carrying no luggage, money, passport, or identifying documents.

“OK?” asks the pilot, his eyes invisible behind mirrored sunglasses.

Villanelle gives him a thumbs-up, and the Hummingbird lifts off, hovers for a moment above the heliport, and swings eastwards. Below them, briefly, is the serpentine glitter of the Seine, and the crawl of traffic on the *Périphérique*. And then the city falls away, and there’s just the thrum of the engine. Only now does Villanelle have time to wonder why she’s been called out via the number station. And why there’s been no word from Konstantin.

It’s late afternoon by the time they touch down at Annecy Mont Blanc airfield in southeastern France, where a lone figure is waiting on the tarmac. Something about her stern expression and over-tight suit tells Villanelle that the woman is Russian, and this is confirmed when she speaks, directing Villanelle towards a dusty Peugeot parked fifty meters away. The woman drives with brisk efficiency, making a fast half-circuit of the airfield before pulling up with a screech of brakes in a hangar beside a Learjet bearing the North Star insignia.

“Inside,” she orders, and Villanelle climbs the steps into the Learjet’s climate-controlled interior and straps herself into a seat upholstered in arctic-blue leather. Following her, the woman retracts the steps and seals the exit door. The engines start immediately. There’s a flare of late-afternoon sunshine at the window as the jet exits the hangar, and then, with a muted roar, they’re airborne.

“So, where are we going?” Villanelle inquires, releasing her seat belt buckle.

The woman meets her gaze. She's got dark hair, high cheekbones, and eyes the color of slate. Something about her is familiar.

"East," she says, snapping open an overnight bag at her feet. "I've got your documents."

A passport, Ukrainian, in the name of Angelika Pyatachenko. A worn leather wallet containing a driving license, credit cards, and a reception pass identifying her as an employee of the North Star corporation. Crumpled receipts. A wad of ruble notes.

"And clothes. Please change now."

A leather-look jacket, limp angora sweater, and short skirt. Scuffed ankle boots. Underwear and cheap tights from a Kyiv department store.

Conscious that she's being scrutinized, Villanelle takes off her cap and sunglasses and begins to undress, laying her clothes on the blue leather seat. When she removes her bra, the other woman gasps.

"Shit. It really is you. Oksana Astankova."

"Have we met?"

"I wasn't sure to begin with, but..."

Villanelle stares at her blankly. Konstantin promised her that the cut-out was total. That nothing like this could ever happen.

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't remember me? Nadia? From Butyrka?"

It *can't* be. But it is. She recognizes her from the remand center. Her hair is longer, and she looks older, but it's her. With a supreme effort of will, Villanelle keeps her face expressionless. "Who exactly do you think I am?"

"I know who you are, Oksana. You look different, but it's you. I thought I recognized that little scar on your mouth, and I knew for sure when I saw those moles between your breasts.

Don't you remember me?"

Villanelle considers the situation. Denial isn't going to work. "Nadia," she says. "Nadia Kadomtseya."

They had met, years earlier, at Butyrka remand center, where Oksana was detained for several months after killing Maxim Leonov, until her eventual transfer to Novinskaya.

When she first arrived at the remand center, still reeling from Anna's rejection, she had felt nothing. Her profound numbness gave way to despair as the reality of her situation sank in, and for a time, she even considered killing herself. But this, too, passed, and despair was replaced by anger. She wanted to hurt Anna, but she couldn't reach her, so she directed her rage at those around her instead. The fights she instigated were raw, bloody affairs, and each of them earned her a lengthy stay in solitary confinement, until finally it was decided that it would be easier for everyone to just keep her there.

Some weeks later—she didn't know exactly how many, having long ago given up on trying to track the passage of time—she heard a key turn in the lock, and another inmate was shoved unceremoniously into the cell. Oksana didn't recognize her, but the name tag on her faded prison uniform identified her as Nadezhda Kadomtseya.

"Uh, my understanding of solitary confinement is that it is solitary," Oksana said, but the guards just laughed at her and slammed the door. They remained outside, their faces pressed together as they peered through the small panel in the door through which her meals were passed, when they remembered to feed her.

They circled the cell, sizing each other up. Kadomtseya was bruised and bloodied from a recent skirmish, but overall fit and healthy; Oksana was weak from starvation, but had the feral

look of an animal that would fight tooth and claw if backed into a corner.

"They're watching," Oksana said, tilting her head toward the door. "They want to see us fight. Let's not give them the satisfaction."

Kadomtseya's eyes flickered to the panel, then she shook her head. "They said you are dangerous. A killer."

"And you're not?"

"Not yet. But if it comes down to you or me, I'll defend myself."

There was a commotion outside the cell, and the panel slammed shut. They listened as another inmate was thrown into an adjacent cell, screaming and spewing insults at the guards.

When all was quiet again, they stood and stared at each other for a long time. The guards who had been watching before did not return.

Oksana gestured at her emaciated form. "Look at me. You really think I could kill you right now, even if I wanted to?"

Kadomtseya considered this for a moment, then lowered her fists. "No, I suppose not." She sat down on the metal cot. "I'm Nadia, by the way."

"Oksana."

"What are you in for?"

"I stole some hats."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You're full of shit."

"They were controversial hats."

"I thought you killed someone."

"You should never trust the guards. They always lie."

"So why are you down here?"

“To protect me from the real dangerous criminals.”

Nadia looked doubtful, but didn't question her further.

Oksana knew this truce was fragile, and Nadia still represented a very real threat, given her current state. But more than that, after several weeks in the hole with only her thoughts to entertain her, she was bored.

She sat down next to Nadia and reached out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Nadia's lips parted in surprise, but it didn't take her long to recover. She was, as Oksana had guessed, lonely and desperate for affection, and returned her kisses with the desperation of a starved animal. Later that night, with her mind still clouded by post-orgasmic bliss, she whispered to Oksana that she loved her.

The next day, Oksana was handcuffed and taken to the court. The trial was swift; her guilt was undeniable, her representation poor, and the judge biased by her extensive juvenile record. She was found guilty and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. By late afternoon, she was shackled in a transport van and on her way to Novinskaya, and Nadezhda Kadomtseya had been deleted from her thoughts.

And now, by some malign coincidence, here she is again.

“I tried to find you after I got out,” says Nadia. “I thought I might write to you. But they said you hanged yourself at Novinskaya. I'm glad that wasn't true.”

Conscious that she needs to keep Nadia onside, Villanelle softens her gaze. “I'm sorry we didn't get to spend more time together.”

Nadia shrugs. “Not your fault. Anyway, it probably meant nothing to you, but I've never forgotten that night.”

“Really?”

“Really and truly.”

"So how long is this flight?" Villanelle asks.

"Perhaps another two hours."

"And will we be interrupted?"

"The pilot has instructions not to leave the cabin."

"In that case..." She reaches out and runs a finger softly down Nadia's cheek.

* * *

The light is fading when the Learjet touches down at a small private airfield outside Scherbanka in South Ukraine. A cold wind scours the runway, where a BMW high-security vehicle is waiting. Nadia drives fast, leaving the airfield by a side-gate, where a uniformed guard waves them through. Their destination, she tells Villanelle, is Odesa. For an hour they proceed smoothly through the darkening landscape, but as they approach the city, they run into traffic. Ahead of them, illuminated by the lights of the city, the clouds are a sulfurous yellow.

"I won't say anything about you," says Nadia.

Villanelle inclines her head against the window. The first spatters of rain streak the armor-plated glass. "It won't go well for you if you do. Oksana Astankova is dead."

"A pity. I liked her."

"Forget about her."

I'll speak to Konstantin, Villanelle decides. He can deal with Nadia. Preferably with a 9mm round to the back of the head.

* * *

On her return from China, with the help of an investigator bor-

rowed from the City of London's Economic Crime department, Eve attempted to chase down the lead Jin Yeong had given her: to identify who had made the bank transfer of £17 million, and who had been the beneficiary. The investigation failed to reveal the source of the funds, but led them via an intricate web of shell companies to the payee, a low-profile venture capitalist named Tony Kent.

Detailed investigation of Kent and his affairs revealed little, but one fact caught Eve's interest: that Kent was a member of an exclusive fly-fishing syndicate that owned half a mile of the River Itchen in Hampshire. Information about the syndicate was not easy to come by, but Carolyn was able, after a few discreet inquiries, to furnish Eve with a membership list. This was not long; indeed, it contained only six names. Those of Tony Kent, two hedge-fund managers, a partner in a high-profile commodity trading firm, a senior cardiothoracic surgeon, and Frank Haleton. Eve knew exactly who Frank Haleton was. He was the director of D4 Branch at MI5, responsible for counter-espionage against Russia and China.

* * *

Kenny is hunched over a keyboard at the steel desk that used to be Bill's, hacking into Frank Haleton's email account. The new computer hardware, now connected and running, gives off a faint hum. Lance is sitting on a plastic chair in front of the window, staring at the traffic on Tottenham Court Road. His contribution to the office decor has been a clothes rail, hung with coats and jackets that look like a job lot from a charity shop. In the teeth of all her principles, Eve has given him permission to smoke, as the pungent tang of his roll-ups masks other, worse

odors whose origin they can never seem to pinpoint.

"How's it coming along, Kenny?" Eve hovers behind his chair, clicking a pen impatiently.

"Nearly there, I think." His fingers dance over the keyboard as he stares at his screen. "Oh! You silly, silly man."

"You in?" asks Lance.

"I am. Frank Haleton, let's see what you've been up to."

"So what've we got?" Eve asks, leaning in over his shoulder, a tiny flame of excitement flaring inside her.

"Cloud server data. Everything on his home computer, basically."

"Doesn't sound like he secured it very well."

Kenny shrugs. "He probably thinks that because it's domestic stuff, he doesn't need heavy-duty authentication."

"Or he doesn't want anyone who looks to think he has anything to hide. Maybe this is what we're supposed to see."

Haleton shares an account with his wife, Penny, a corporate lawyer. Their emails are stored in orderly folders with names like Accounts, Cars, Health, Insurance, and Schools. The inbox holds fewer than a hundred messages, which Kenny copies and sends to Eve, who returns to her own desk to start reading. A preliminary examination reveals little of interest.

"This is like a lifestyle advertisement," she says, scrolling through the Haletons' picture files. Almost all of the images are of family activity holidays. Skiing in Megève, tennis camp in Malaga, sailing on the Algarve. Haleton himself is a tall, bearded man of about fifty, who clearly enjoys being photographed in sports kit. His wife, prettyish and well groomed, is perhaps five years younger. Their children, Daniel and Bella, stare at the camera with the sulky entitlement of privately schooled teenagers.

“Twats,” says Lance.

“Pull up their place in London,” says Eve, scooting her chair over to Kenny’s desk.

The street-view image shows a red-brick Georgian house, set back from the road. A pillared porch is half-obsured by a spreading magnolia. A burglar alarm is visible beside a ground-floor window.

“Where is it?” asks Lance.

“Muswell Hill. They’ve been there six years. Cost them one point three million. Today’s it’s got to be worth two, at least.”

“Surely Haleton’s not pretending to have paid for all this on his Service salary?”

“No. The wife’s the big earner.”

“Even so, they’ll have trouble explaining away seventeen fat ones.”

Eve shrugs. “I doubt they’ll have to. If Tony Kent is acting as some sort of financial intermediary for the organization we’re targeting, you know that money’s parked somewhere well out of sight of the Revenue.”

“So how do we know it’s going to Haleton?”

“We don’t, for sure. But Jin Yeong wouldn’t have directed me to Kent if he didn’t know I’d make the connection with Haleton. I specifically asked him about members of the UK Intelligence Services who might be receiving large payments from any unknown source. This was Jin’s answer. I think it was as far as he thought he could go.”

“So,” says Lance, “are we going to turn Haleton’s place over?”

Eve sits with her chin in her hand, looking at the street-view image of the house still pulled up on the screen. “I’d like to, but it’ll be secured. He’s a senior MI5 officer. We’d be in deep shit if we got caught.”

"I'm assuming we're not going the search warrant route?"

"No. We'd never get one, even if we said why we needed one. Which we can't."

"Just asking." Lance leans in towards the screen. "That's a dummy alarm over the first-floor window, so they've probably got a conventional system inside. Infra-red, pressure pads..."

"You think it's doable?" Eve asks him.

He sits back and flicks his lighter beneath his half-smoked roll-up. "Everything's doable. It's a question of opportunity. Can you get the bloke's diary up, Kenny?"

"I've got Penny's. He doesn't seem to have one."

"I need a guaranteed two-hour window. What can they offer us?"

"How about this?" says Kenny. "Dinner with A & L, Mazeppa 8:00."

Eve frowns. "But that's tonight."

"I can do tonight." Lance shrugs. "I'll cancel my date with Gigi Hadid."

"It's too soon. We need time to plan. We can't just go charging in there. What else do they have coming up?"

"Don't know about Frank," says Kenny. "But Penny's not got anything else booked this week."

"Dammit." Eve searches for Mazeppa on her phone. It's a Michelin-starred restaurant in Dover Street, Mayfair. She looks uncertainly at Lance.

"I could check the house out this afternoon," he offers. "Park up and sit tight. Soon as they leave this evening, in we go."

Eve nods. It's far from ideal. And she has no idea about Lance's skills as a housebreaker. But Carolyn wouldn't have sent her a dud operative. And she needs results.

"OK," she says.

Nadia has dropped Villanelle off at a café in Odesa's Bird Market, in the Moldovanka district. It's a dingy place, with yellowish lighting, faded travel posters on the walls, and a blackboard advertising the day's special. Perhaps half of the tables are occupied. By single men, mostly, and a couple of women who might be prostitutes, fueling themselves for the night's work with *solyanka* soup and dumplings. From time to time, the men glance at Villanelle, but on meeting her flatly hostile gaze, look away again.

She's been waiting here for twenty minutes now, sipping a cup of tea and skim-reading a copy of *Sevodnya*, a Russian-language tabloid, in one of the booths at the side of the room. At intervals, she raises her eyes to the café's rain-blurred glass frontage, and the dimly lit streets beyond. She's hungry, but doesn't order anything in case she has to leave.

A stocky figure slips into the booth opposite her. A man she's met before: the man who talked to her in Hyde Park the previous winter, and who spooked her.

And now here he is again. There are the patchy beginnings of a beard, and a battered leather jacket has replaced the ill-fitting coat, but the frozen darkness of the eyes is the same. When they first met, he spoke English, but now he is calling to the elderly waitress in halting, accented Russian.

"You hungry?" he asks in English, running a hand through thinning, rain-damp hair.

She shrugs.

"*Borscht* and *pirozhki* for two," he orders, and sits back.

"So," says Villanelle, her face expressionless.

"So we meet again." He gives her the ghost of a smile. "I

apologize for failing to identify myself in London. The time wasn't right."

"And now it is?"

He looks at her, assessingly. "We were impressed by your handling of the Kedrin action. And now we are faced with a situation requiring your assistance."

"I see."

"You don't see, but you will. My name is Raymond, and I'm a colleague of the man you know as Konstantin."

"Where is Konstantin? Why isn't he here?"

"Konstantin has been abducted. Taken hostage by a mafia gang, based here in Odesa."

She stares at him.

"And yes, we're quite sure. The gang is called *Zolotoye Bratstvo*, or the Golden Brotherhood, and it's headed by a man named Rinat Yevtukh. According to our information, Konstantin is being held in a well-secured house in Fontanka, a half-hour away from here. The house is owned by Yevtukh. The gang's intention, apparently, is to demand a ransom."

Her expression remains neutral, but alarm is jolting through her with nauseating force. Is this a set-up? An attempt to panic her into revealing who and what she is?

"You have to trust me," he says. "If I was a hostile, you'd be dead already."

Still she says nothing. Even if he is telling the truth, and Konstantin has been abducted, she's still lethally compromised. If they—whoever "they" are—can get to Konstantin, with his serpentine wariness, then they can get to her.

"Tell me why I'm here," she says eventually.

"OK. We're certain the kidnappers know nothing about Konstantin's connection to us, or even that we exist. As far

as they're concerned, he's just a visiting businessman, whose company will pay up in the usual way. What concerns us is that Yevtukh's organization has, for some time, been under the control of the SVR, the Russian secret intelligence service. And the SVR have wind of us, as MI6 do. They don't know who or what we are, but they know we exist. So the question is, have they organized this abduction with a view to interrogating Konstantin about us? We're not sure. We've got our own people in the SVR, naturally, but it'll take time to find out what's really going on. And we don't have time."

He pauses as bowls, spoons, and a steaming casserole of *borscht* are placed on their table, followed moments later by a plate of *pirozhki*—small buns filled with minced meat. As the waitress shuffles away, Raymond ladles out the beetroot soup, splashing the front of Villanelle's cheap sweater with spots of dark purple.

"Konstantin's tough," he continues. "He's gotten out of plenty of bad situations before. Some that probably should have killed him. He's like a damn cockroach. But even he can't beat an SVR interrogation."

Villanelle nods, dabbing absently at her sweater with a paper napkin. "So what's the plan?"

"We get him out."

"We?"

"Yes. I've assembled a team of our best people."

She meets his gaze. "I don't play well with others."

"You do now."

"I'll be the one who decides that."

He leans in towards her. "Listen, we don't have time for this prima donna shit. You do what you're told, and there's a good chance we can all walk away from this."

She sits there, motionless. “I take hostages. And then I shoot them. I don’t rescue them.”

“Just shut up and listen, OK? You have a very specific role to play.”

She listens. And knows that she has no choice. That all that she is, all that she has become, hangs on the success of this mission.

“I’ll do it on one condition. I want to be anonymous. I don’t want anyone else on the team to see my face or find out anything about me.”

“Don’t worry, the others feel the same. You’ll wear full-face masks throughout, and communication will be limited to an operational minimum. Afterwards, when the mission’s completed, you’ll be returned separately to where you came from.”

She nods. There’s so much about him that she distrusts, and from which she instinctively recoils. But she can’t, at that moment, find fault with his plan.

“So when do we go in?”

He surveys the café and takes a mouthful of soup. The rain beats harder against the glass frontage.

“Tonight.”

* * *

Niko doesn’t raise his voice, but Eve can hear that he’s upset. Two of his friends are expected for dinner, Chilean Pinot Noir has been bought, and a small but expensive shoulder of lamb is waiting in an oven-proof dish, stuck with cloves of garlic. The subtext of the evening is that Eve will make herself look nice, and wear the St. Laurent scent he bought her, and her prettiest

earrings, and when the guests have gone, they will make slightly drunken love, and things will, one way or another, be OK again.

"I can't believe that it—whatever it is—really has to happen tonight," he says. "I mean, Jesus, Eve. Seriously. You've known about Zbig and Leila coming over for weeks."

He *had* told her that weeks ago, and she had immediately forgotten it, and it hadn't come up again until now, or if it had, she hadn't really been listening. "I'm sorry," she says, conscious of Kenny, who can't help but overhear every word. "I just can't do it tonight. And I can't discuss this on an open line. Apologize to them for me?"

"What am I going to say? That you're working late? I thought all that was finished after..."

"Niko, please. Just tell them whatever you want. You know the situation."

"No, I don't, actually, Eve. I really don't. I have a life, in case you haven't noticed, and I'm asking you, just this once, to do something for me. So make an excuse, do whatever you have to, but be there this evening. If you're not..."

"Niko, I—"

"No, listen to me. If you're not, then we need to think very seriously about whether—"

"Niko, it's an emergency. Someone's life is on the line, and I've been ordered to stay."

Silence, except for the rise and fall of his breathing.

"I'm sorry, I have to go."

As she breaks the connection, Eve catches Kenny's eye, and he looks away. She stands there for a moment, thinking about what she said. This is not the first time that she's avoided the truth with Niko, but it's the first time that she's straight out lied to him.

And for what? Kenny and Lance could handle this just fine without her. In fact, they'd probably prefer to, but something deep inside her, something savage and atavistic, wants to run with the pack. Is it worth it? Turning her life into this furtive twilight, and testing the love of a good man to destruction? Is she onto something with Frank Haleton, or just forging imaginary links to deceive herself into thinking she's making progress?

If they find nothing on Haleton, maybe she'll take some time off. Make things right with Niko, if it's not too late. All the longer-serving officers at Thames House said the same thing: you had to have a life outside. If you didn't want to end up alone, you had to tear yourself away from the sleepless intoxication of secret work. All it offered was an unending series of false horizons. And no closure, ever.

Thinking of Niko at home without her, laying the table, setting out the wine glasses, carefully placing the lamb in the oven, doesn't even make her feel anything, though it does feel like she *should* feel something, and that, at least, makes her feel guilty. She considers calling him back to say that the situation resolved itself and that she's coming home after all, but she doesn't.

"Have you got a girlfriend, Kenny?"

"Not as such. Chat with this girl on Sea of Souls."

"What's Sea of Souls?"

"Online role-playing game."

"So what's her name?"

"Her user name's Ladyfang."

"Ever met her?"

"Nah. Was thinking about pushing for a date, but she'd probably turn out to be really old, or a bloke, or something."

“Doesn’t that bother you at all?”

Kenny shrugs. “To be honest, I haven’t got time for a girlfriend right now.” There’s a brief silence, broken by the buzz of his phone. “It’s Lance. He’s parked up, with eyes on the house. No sign of any occupants.”

“They’re not back from work yet. They’ll probably just go straight to the restaurant. He’ll be coming from Thames House. Her firm’s based out at Canary Wharf. But we can’t count on that. Our clock starts at eight, when they meet the others at Mazeppa.”

“I’ll ring my mum. Tell her not to wait up.”

* * *

The forward operating base is a disused farmhouse two miles northwest of Fontanka. The assault team is gathered in a rectangular outbuilding housing a rusting ZAZ hatchback and an assortment of mud-caked agricultural implements. Temporary spotlights illuminate two long trestle tables bearing maps, architectural plans and a laptop computer. Metal boxes containing weaponry, ammunition and equipment are stacked on the earth floor. It’s 10 p.m., local time. Beyond the farmyard wall, silhouetted against the darkening sky, Villanelle can see the rotors of a Little Bird military helicopter.

In addition to Raymond, the team numbers five. Four assaulters, of whom Villanelle is one, and a sniper. All five are wearing black Nomex coveralls, body armor, and close-fitting balaclava masks. Villanelle has no idea of the identity of the others, but Raymond is conducting the final briefing in English.

The building in which Konstantin is being held, they learn,

stands on grounds of half a dozen acres. Photographs show an ostentatious three-story palazzo with pillars, balustrades and a steeply pitched tile roof. A chain-link fence surrounds the estate; entry is by means of a guarded electronic gate. To Villanelle, the place looks like a fortified wedding cake.

The assaulters can expect a fight. According to intelligence gained by surveillance, there's a permanent armed security detail of seven men attached to the house, of whom up to three, at any one time, are patrolling the exterior. Given Yevtukh's reputation, and the probability that most are ex-military, they're likely to mount a strong resistance.

Raymond's plan is simple: a surgical strike of such savagery and intensity as to leave the hostage-takers incapable of coordinated response. As the assault team clears the house, the sniper will seek targets of opportunity. Speed will be of the essence.

Villanelle looks around her at the other masked figures. The Nomex suits and body armor give them all the same bulky profile, but the sniper has the body-mass of a woman. They will be known to each other only by their call signs. The assaulters are Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta; the sniper is Echo.

With the tactical briefing completed, the assaulters move to the weaponry boxes. After some thought, Villanelle arms herself with a KRISS Vector submachine gun, a Glock 21 handgun, several magazines loaded with .45 ACP rounds, and a Gerber combat knife. Then from one of the trestle tables she takes a fiber-optic scope and viewer, and the helmet carry-bag marked with her call sign, Charlie. Slipping the scope into a thigh pocket, she takes the helmet outside into the darkened farmyard to check the intercom and night-vision goggles. Around her, there are brief illuminations as the other three assaulters test weapon-mounted torches and laser sights.

Lifting off the ballistic helmet, she watches them. There's a tall guy, Delta, with dark-skinned hands, who's shouldering a heavy combat shotgun. Bravo is a wiry figure of medium height, wholly anonymous, and Alpha is bullish and compact. Both are carrying short-barreled Heckler & Koch submachine guns and multiple bandoliers of ammunition. All three are, without question, male, and she's aware of them checking her out in return, eyes expressionless behind their face masks. Half a dozen paces away, the sniper, armed with a Lobaev SVL rifle and night-scope, is measuring crosswind vectors with a velocity meter.

Inside the farmhouse, the team finalizes communications and radio procedure. The voices of the other assaulters are unrevealing; all speak fluent English, although with differing accents. Alpha sounds Eastern European, Bravo is definitely southern-states American, and Delta's first language is probably Arabic. Echo, the sniper, has said nothing.

And to these faceless strangers, Villanelle muses, I have to entrust my life. Fucking hell. She wonders if Konstantin means anything to the rest of them.

Smoothing out the maps and architectural plans, Raymond beckons to them.

"OK. Last run-through, then we go. I'd have liked to wait and hit the house some time before dawn tomorrow morning, but we can't risk leaving the hostage there that long. So listen up."

As he speaks, Villanelle is aware of the sniper, Echo, standing beside her. Their eyes meet, and she recognizes the slate-gray gaze of Nadia.

Yet again, Villanelle feels her bearings shift. Nadia naked and supine beneath her is one thing, Nadia hefting a high-precision rifle quite another. Is she there merely to take out the guards, or

is she part of some unfathomably devious plan of Raymond's?

The two women regard each other for a moment, expressionless.

"Nice gun," Villanelle says.

"It's my favorite for this kind of work. Chambered for .408 Chey-Tac." Nadia works the Lobaev's soundlessly smooth bolt action.

"Good hunting," she says, clapping Nadia on the shoulder.

Nadia nods, and a minute later climbs into the SUV which will take her to her firing position.

The minutes creep past. Villanelle fits the ear cups of her helmet, adjusts her microphone boom, and tightens her chinstrap. Finally, a signal from Echo informs Raymond that she is in position and ready. Raymond nods at the four assaulters, and they make their way through the darkened farmyard to the matte-black Little Bird. The pilot is waiting in the unlit cockpit, and readies the craft for take-off as the assaulters take their places on the outboard fuselage platforms. Seating herself on the starboard platform, with the KRISS Vector slung across her chest, Villanelle clips on the retaining harness. Next to her, Delta is holding the shotgun across his knees. His eyes narrow, and they exchange wary nods.

There's a muted roar as the Little Bird's engine engages, followed by the accelerating *whump-whump* of the rotors. The craft shudders, Delta extends a gloved arm, and he and Villanelle bump fists. For now, whatever the future might hold, they're a team, and Villanelle forces her apprehensions to the back of her mind. The Little Bird lifts a few meters and hovers. Then the ground falls away as they climb into the night sky.

The helicopter approaches the villa upwind, then angles in fast, skimming over the chain-link fence before dancing in the

air a meter above the lawn to the east of the main entrance. Releasing their harnesses, the assaulters jump down, weapons leveled, and seconds later the Little Bird lifts and swings away into the darkness.

As they spring for the cover of the side of the house, high-intensity security floodlights bathe the area in dazzling white. Two figures race towards them across the driveway. There's a wet smack, then another, and both go down on the gravel. One writhes like a pinned insect, and the other lies still, all but decapitated by the silenced .408 sniper round.

"Nice shooting, Echo," murmurs Bravo, his southern drawl pin-sharp in Villanelle's earphones, and with a series of aimed shots, begins to knock out the LED floodlights mounted on the lawn and the front of the building. Alpha runs to the rear corner of the building to perform the same operation there. Villanelle watches and waits. Muted by the helmet's noise-suppression system, the shots sound distant and unreal.

With only the far wall of the house still spotlit, the western portion of the grounds is thrown into sharp relief. Villanelle risks a quick glance round the angle of the building and feels the air ripple as a round passes her face. The shooter must have betrayed his position, because Villanelle hears, once again, the meaty thwack of a sniper round finding its target. In her headphones, Nadia's voice is calm. "Echo to all players, you are now clear to breach. Repeat, you are clear to breach."

What follows is a study in time and motion. Alpha runs out to the large central front door, places shaped explosive charges against it, and rejoins the others. The front door blows with a deafening *whoomph*, but this is a diversion. The real assault is through a small side door, which Delta blows off its hinges with his shotgun. The assaulters pour through, into the deserted

kitchens.

There's a formal choreography to the house clearance. It's a self-propelling process that cannot and must not be halted. The team moves from room to room, with each member assigned a quadrant, sweeping, clearing, moving on. Villanelle knows the dance well, has rehearsed every step in the killing house at Delta Force's training facility at Fort Bragg. The instructors there knew her as Sylvie Dazat, on secondment from the GIGN, France's National Gendarmerie Intervention Group, and in her final assessment described her as an exceptionally fast learner with instinctive weapon skills, but with a personality so antisocial as to rule her out of any teamwork role. Her hostile behavior had been deliberate. Men make themselves forget women who are unimpressed by them; Konstantin had taught her that. And no one at Fort Bragg remembers Sylvie Dazat.

They're in an anteroom now, full of overstuffed furniture. On the wall is a vast painting of Michael Jackson fondling a chimpanzee. From somewhere in the interior of the building comes the muffled thump of feet on stairs. A security guard edges into view leveling an assault rifle, and Villanelle spins him to his knees with a three-round burst from the KRISS Vector. He balances for a moment, blank-eyed, and falls face down. As she fires a double tap through the back of his skull, spattering the deep-pile carpet with blood, Bravo throws a stun-grenade through the doorway towards the main body of the house.

A tidal wave of sound rolls over Villanelle, punching through her helmet, and Alpha and Brave race past her. As she and Delta follow, leaping over the body of the guard, her ears sing. They're in an oversized hallway, which is hung with a pall of oily smoke from the stun grenade. For a couple of seconds the place appears unoccupied, then there's a fusillade of automatic-

weapon fire, and the assaulters dive for cover.

Villanelle and Delta are crouching behind a large Chesterfield sofa upholstered in turquoise calfskin. Behind them is the main entrance, now open to the night, with the heavy front door sagging on its hinges. To their left, on a marble plinth, is a life-size statue of a ballerina naked except for a thong. A burst of fire rakes the sofa, tearing into the scatter cushions. If we stay here, Villanelle thinks, we're dead. And I really, really don't want to die here, among these criminally ugly furnishings.

Delta points at a gilt-framed mirror reflecting the far end of the hall. In it, a figure is just visible behind a large, ornate desk. As one, Villanelle and Delta rise from each end of the sofa. As she gives covering fire, he blasts the desk with the shotgun. Wood chips fly, and a body pitches heavily to the floor. Five down. There's a movement in the opposite corner, and a rifle barrel shows above a white leather armchair. Bravo smacks a burst into the upholstery, and a mist of blood reddens the zebra-print wallpaper. Six.

Ducking back behind the sofa, Villanelle changes magazines and runs for the stairs. The remaining hostage-taker, she guesses, is waiting on one of the upper floors.

She inches up the stairs, and cautiously brings her eyes level with the first floor. A figure appears in the nearest doorway, she fires, and her head is whipped back with such force that, for a moment, she's certain that she's been shot. She falls to a crouch, her ears ringing, and is steadied by a hand to her shoulder. Pinpoints of light are bursting in front of her eyes.

"OK?" a familiar voice asks.

Villanelle nods, too dazed to wonder why Nadia's there, and reaches a hand to her helmet. There's a deep furrow scored through the armored plastic; a centimeter lower, and it would

have been her skull.

"You both fired at the same time," Nadia says. "And luckily for you, he fired high."

The seventh guard is lying on his back in the doorway. The ragged, sucking sound of his breath indicates a lung shot. With Villanelle covering her, Nadia runs up to him, an automatic in her right hand.

"Where's the hostage?" she asks in Russian.

The guard looks upwards.

"Next floor up?"

The faintest of nods.

"Anyone guarding him?"

The eyes flutter and close.

"No one?"

The reply is an indistinguishable mumble. Nadia leans closer, but all she can hear is the sucking of his chest. Leveling the handgun, she fires a single round between his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Villanelle says.

"The same as you."

"That wasn't the plan."

"The plan has changed. I'm your backup."

Villanelle hesitates for a moment, and then, biting back her doubts, leads Nadia up the last few stairs. At the top, facing her, is a door. Taking out the fiber-optic scope, Villanelle slips the flexible 1mm cable over the carpet and under the door. The tiny fish-eye lens shows a brightly lit room, empty except for a figure trussed to a chair.

Silently, Villanelle tries the door. It's locked. A single round from the KRISS Vector blows out the cylinder, she kicks it open, and she and Nadia burst into the room.

Together, they attend to the figure on the chair. There's a

black cloth bag over his head, stiff with dried blood. Underneath it, Konstantin's face is battered. He has been gagged, and his breathing rattles through a broken nose.

As Nadia removes the gag, Villanelle draws her combat knife and severs the PlastiCuffs binding Konstantin to the chair. He slumps to one side, his bruised and bloodied head thrown back, working his swollen fingers and drawing air into his lungs.

"I know what you're thinking," Nadia tells Villanelle. "You're thinking that you'll never be safe as long as I'm alive, because I know who you really are. You're thinking about killing me."

"This would be the perfect moment," Villanelle agrees.

"You can also see how that puts me in the same position. How I'll never be safe as long as *you're* alive."

"True again."

"Villanelle? Nadia?" Konstantin whispers through lips dark with dried blood. His eyes are nearly swollen shut. "It's you, isn't it?"

Both women turn to him. Neither removes her balaclava.

"I haven't told them anything. You know that, don't you?"

"I know that," says Villanelle. She glances at Nadia, notes the deceptive casualness of her stance, and the tautness of her index finger on the trigger guard of the automatic.

Konstantin's eyes move to Nadia. "I heard what you said. You don't need to fear each other."

Nadia's gaze narrows, but she doesn't speak.

Villanelle genuflects, so that her face is level with Konstantin's, and her body shielded from Nadia by his. Reaching behind her back, she draws the Glock from its holster.

"You don't have to do this, Villanelle."

"Yes, I do. I have to do my job. You understand that. But don't worry, I haven't forgotten what you told me."

"What was that?"

"Trust no one," she says, and placing the barrel of the Glock against his ribs, squeezes the trigger.

* * *

Gaining entry to the Haletons' house is something of an anticlimax. After disabling the burglar alarm with a signal-jammer, Lance lets himself and Kenny in through the front door with a set of skeleton keys. Helpfully, the Haletons have left their lights on, to discourage intruders.

Fifty meters away, Eve waits in the parked car. In the shadowed passenger seat, she's almost invisible, but she can see pedestrians and traffic coming from both directions. She knows what the Haletons look like. She's seen Frank often enough at Thames House, and Penny at a couple of the rather grim drinks parties that the Service feels moved to organize each December. She's confident that she'll recognize them.

She's instructed Lance and Kenny to go straight to the study and concentrate on the computers. To download everything on every drive that they can find, and copy any documents that they think might be relevant with handheld laser scanners. Both men seem to be experienced in this sort of operation; presumably this was what Carolyn meant when she described them as "enterprising."

Eve's mood is switching between acute anxiety and boredom. After what seems like a dangerously lengthy interlude, she sees Kenny sauntering along the pavement towards her.

"We're pretty much done," he says, subsiding into the driver's seat. "Lance wonders if you'd like to take a quick look around."

Confidence, Eve tells herself. Look respectable, press the bell,

march in through the front door. Lance lets her in and hands her a pair of surgical gloves. The front hall is narrow, with a tiled floor and white gloss woodwork. There's a sitting room to the left, and a kitchen beyond the staircase. Eve feels her heart pounding. There's something profoundly shocking, but also invigorating, about trespassing in this way. "Fancy some toast and Earl Grey?" Lance asks.

"Don't joke, I'm starving," says Eve, steadying her voice. "What have you found?"

"This way."

Frank HALETON's office is a neat, rather smug little room, with built-in shelving and bookcases, a desk in the same pale wood, and an ergonomic office chair. On the desktop is a powerful-looking computer with a twenty-four-inch monitor.

"I'm assuming Kenny's already been over that," Eve says.

"If it's on there, we've got it. Plus an external drive and various memory sticks we found in the drawers."

"Is there a safe?"

"Not in here. There might be one somewhere else in the house, but even if we found one, I doubt we'd have time to crack it before they get back."

Eve shakes her head. "No, if there's anything helpful, it's in here. He wouldn't share the kind of information we're looking for with his wife."

"Sensible bloke," murmurs Lance.

Eve ignores him. "What does this room say about him to you?"

"Controlling type. And pretty pleased with himself, I'd say."

The photos, mounted in a group on the wall above the desk, show HALETON with friends in a university dining hall, shaking hands with a U.S. Army general, catching a salmon in a

mountainous river, and posing with his family on holiday. The shelves hold a mix of bestselling thrillers, political memoirs, and titles related to security and Intelligence issues.

Lance's phone buzzes. "It's Kenny. The Haletons are outside. Getting out of a taxi. Time to go."

"Already? Shit. *Fuck.*"

Lance moves fast and silently. Eve follows, her heart pounding so hard she thinks she's going to vomit. In the kitchen, Lance slips the garden door latch, hurries Eve out, and quietly closes the door behind them. They're on soft ground now, some kind of lawn. *Shit.* Why are the Haletons back so early?

"Into the lane," Lance orders. Overhung by bushes, this leads to the road. Eve swings a leg awkwardly over the low fence, thorns tearing at her clothes. Desperately, she wrenches herself free, and Lance follows.

"OK, lie down." He presses a hand between her shoulder blades. The ground is hard, uneven and wet.

"The lights," she hisses, struggling to control her breathing. "We left the fucking lights on."

"They were on when we went in. Chill."

Angry noises from the Haletons' kitchen. A banging of cupboard doors. Utensils slammed onto hard surfaces.

"When I say the word, make for the road," whispers Lance.

"What are we waiting for?"

"Frank. He's still in front, paying the taxi driver."

Eve wills Penny to stay in the kitchen. She doesn't. Eve hears the garden door pushed open, and a thumb flicking at a cigarette lighter. Moments later, she smells smoke. Penny can't be more than a couple of meters away. Rigid with the fear of discovery, Eve barely dares to breathe.

There's the faint sound of the closing front door, and of a

male voice. Eve presses herself even harder into the ground. Her face is inches from Lance's shoe.

"Look, I'm sorry, OK?" The man's voice, much closer now. "But I honestly don't see..."

"You don't see? Well, for a start, you condescending *shit*, you don't *ever* tell me to calm down in front of our friends."

"Penny, please. Don't shout."

"I'll shout as loud as I fucking well like."

"Fine, but not in the garden, OK? We've got neighbors."

"Fuck the neighbors." Her voice drops. "And fuck you, too."

A brief silence, then something flips over the fence, and lands in Eve's hair with a tiny scorching hiss. The kitchen door clicks shut, and Eve claws at the half-smoked cigarette, melting the latex glove and burning her fingers before she finally tears it loose.

"Go," whispers Lance.

Wincing with pain, Eve follows him down the lane to the road. No one seems to be watching as they climb into the car, but she's glad they've got false number plates.

"What's that smell?" asks Kenny, letting out the clutch.

"My hair," says Eve, pulling off the half-melted glove.

"Crikey, I won't ask. I'm assuming we're all going back to Goodge Street?"

"Kenny, we don't have to go through all this stuff tonight," Eve says.

"Maybe, but let's do it anyway. Not like there's anything on the telly tonight that's worth watching."

"Lance?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"Everyone good with pizza?" Kenny asks. "We passed a place on the Archway Road."

* * *

"So, would you have killed me?" Villanelle asks.

"Those were my orders," says Nadia. "If you didn't finish Konstantin off, I was to shoot you, and then him. He was compromised."

"He wouldn't have told them anything."

"You know that, and I know that. But it's not theoretically impossible, so he had to die, and you had to kill him, and I was the backup. That's how they operate, our employers."

"You haven't answered my question. Would you have killed me?"

"Yes."

They're lying, naked, on the Learjet's foldaway bed. They smell of sweat, sex, and gunshot residue. In forty minutes, they will land at Vnukovo airport, southwest of Moscow. Nadia will leave, and Villanelle will continue to Paris via Annecy Mont Blanc and Issy-les-Moulineaux. There will be no official record of her entering France, just as there was no record of her leaving.

She strokes the nape of Nadia's neck. Runs her fingers through her dark hair. "You're really good with that sniper rifle. That running headshot was perfect."

"Thank you."

"You practically decapitated him." There's a hint of awe in her voice.

"I know. That Lobaev's a dream to shoot." Gently, she touches Villanelle's upper lip, and explores it with her fingertips. "I love your scar. How did you get it?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I want to know," says Nadia, reaching between Villanelle's legs. "Tell me."

Villanelle begins to answer, but feeling Nadia's fingers slip inside her, arches her back and sighs, her body's pulse becoming one with the engine-note of the Learjet. She pictures the aircraft racing through the night, and the dark Russian forests far below. Taking Nadia's other hand in hers, she sucks the trigger finger into her mouth. It tastes metallic and sulfurous, like death.

* * *

Back at the Goodge Street office, Eve and Lance stand shoulder to shoulder, squinting at the photographs they've pinned up on the wall. Behind them, Kenny sits with his hands poised, unmoving, above his keyboard.

"Now what?" Lance asks.

She meets his gaze. "We've looked at everything on the external drive and the memory sticks, and everything we downloaded from his hard drive, and it's all clean. We only have this one locked file left, and if we don't crack it, nothing else we did tonight even matters."

Lance shakes his head and twirls a roll-up in his fingers.

Eve looks over at Kenny. "What are you trying?"

"Right now, a series of dictionary attacks. If that doesn't do it, I'm going to try a rainbow table. But that'll take time."

"Which we don't have," says Eve. "We need to figure it out ourselves."

"You think we can guess the password?"

"I think we can certainly try."

"Where do we even start?" says Lance. He jerks a thumb in the direction of Kenny's computer. "This sort of thing isn't exactly my area of expertise."

"My instinct about this guy," Eve says, "is that he considers

himself intelligent enough to create an uncrackable password. He's not really a tech guy, but he'll have researched things like information entropy..."

"Like what?" asks Lance.

"Password strength is measured in entropy bits, which represent the base-2 logarithm of the number of guesses it would take to break it," Kenny explains.

Lance stares. "Sorry... *what?*"

"Right. Sorry. You don't need to know all that," says Kenny. "What Eve means is that Haleton is smart enough to know that the password will have to be obscure, it will have to be long, and it will have to incorporate different types of characters."

"He's arrogant," says Eve. "It won't be something random. The password will mean something to him. Something he thinks no one will ever guess. And I'm willing to bet there's a clue hidden somewhere in his office in plain sight, which is why I wanted you guys to photograph everything. We just have to get into his head."

Lance flips a chair around and straddles it, crossing his arms over the back of it, as Eve pins up the last of the A4 prints. There's a shot of the desktop, showing Haleton's computer, landline phone, Anglepoise lamp, DAB radio and binoculars, as well as miniature busts of Mao Tse Tung and Lenin.

"Communist kitsch," murmurs Lance. "Dickhead."

The shots of the books show copies of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Donald Trump's *Great Again*, political thrillers by John le Carré and Charles Cumming, memoirs by David Petraeus and Geri Halliwell, and two shelves of Intelligence-related titles.

Other photographs are of pictures on the study wall. The students in the university dining hall, Haleton shaking hands

with the U.S. four-star general, the salmon-fishing shots, and the family holiday snaps.

“Remember,” Eve says, as she refills the kettle for another round of tea. “The word or phrase we’re looking for could have up to thirty characters. Think of quotes. Men like Haleton love quotes. It’s a way to show off how well read they are.”

An hour passes, punctuated by speculative bursts of talk, flurries of keystrokes, and the growl of night-traffic on the Tottenham Court Road. Lance slips outside for a roll-up. A second hour passes. Their faces take on a defeated aspect, bags forming under their bloodshot eyes.

“OK, let’s rehash and see where we are.” Eve stands up, stretches, and looks at the others. “Give me your best guesses so far. We only get three attempts at the password before the system locks down, so before we try one, we need to be really sure about it. Kenny, do you want to go first?”

“OK. My best shot is something based on ‘Methinks it is like a weasel.’”

“I don’t get it,” says Eve.

“It’s a quote,” says Kenny. “From *Hamlet*. There’s a copy of *Hamlet* in the bookcase.”

“So?”

“The Weasel Program is also the name of a mathematical experiment by Richard Dawkins. It’s based on the theory that, given enough time, a monkey hitting random characters on a typewriter could produce the complete works of Shakespeare. Dawkins says that even if you just take the phrase ‘Methinks it is like a weasel,’ and a keyboard limited to twenty-six letters and a space bar, it would still take a high-speed computer program longer than the life of the universe to generate the correct phrase, given that there are twenty-seven to the power

of twenty-eight possible combinations.”

“Would Haleton know about this Weasel thing?” asks Lance.

“He might,” says Eve. “And *Hamlet* is definitely the odd one out on that bookshelf. Anything else, Kenny?”

“*Scream If You Wanna Go Faster?*” he suggests, his cheeks flushing.

“That’s not from *Hamlet*,” says Eve.

“No, it’s Geri Halliwell’s second album. My sister owned it. She used to sing ‘It’s Raining Men’ into her hairbrush in front of the bathroom mirror all the time.”

Lance smirks, then offers his own suggestion. “How about *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover...* It’s one of the le Carré titles.”

“That’s good,” says Eve, surprised. “I can see him using that. Either of you have any other thoughts?”

“I don’t actually like any of them,” says Kenny.

“Not even your own ideas? Any particular reason?” asks Eve, massaging her temples.

“They just sound wrong,” says Kenny.

“You don’t think any of them are worth a try?” asks Eve. “In any form?”

Kenny shrugs. “Not if we’ve only got three tries before we’re locked out, no. We’re not there yet.”

“Lance?”

“If Kenny says we’re not there yet, then we keep looking.”

“Sorry, guys,” Eve mutters. “You must be exhausted. I know I am.”

Lance and Kenny look at each other, but neither speaks.

“I haven’t come up with anything better than your suggestions yet. Let’s try shuffling the photos and seeing if anything else jumps out at us,” says Eve.

She does so, and they stare at the A4 pages in silence. A

minute passes, then another. Then, at the same moment, as if by telepathy, both Eve and Kenny place an index finger on the same sheet. It's a photograph of Penny Haleton with the children, Daniel and Bella, in a vast square in front of an ancient, pillared building. Penny is smiling a little fixedly, and the children are occupied with ice creams. In the bottom right-hand corner of the photograph, someone, presumably Haleton, has written "Stars!"

"What?" says Lance.

"Not what. Why?" Kenny replies, and Eve smiles.

"I'm not following," says Lance.

"Why this photo?" says Eve. "All the others are jerk-off shots, chosen to prove how important and successful this guy is. The high-profile acquaintances, the expensive holidays, the salmon fishing, and the rest of it. But this one's just... I don't know. The wife looks stressed, the kids look bored. Why does he call them stars? Why is the photo there?"

They all lean closer. "What a minute," says Eve, her voice low. "Wait a fucking minute...."

"What?" says Lance.

"That square's in Rome, and the building behind them is the Pantheon. You can't see it, but there's a carved inscription on the front of it."

"Yeah, I recognize it. So?"

"Kenny, can you Google 'Pantheon inscription,' and print us an image?"

He reads the caption below the image on the screen aloud as it prints. "*Marcus Agrippa, Lucii filius, consul tertium fecit.* Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, built this when consul for the third time."

Eve snatches the single sheet as it issues from the laser printer.

Beneath the pediment of the building, the inscription is clearly legible:

M·AGRIPPA·L·F·COS·TERTIVM·FECIT

"Now *that* looks like a password," says Lance.

Eve nods. "Kenny?"

"I like it. Nice high entropy."

"So let's try it."

A flurry of keystrokes.

Access denied.

"Try just the letters without the spaces," Eve suggests, leaning over his shoulder.

Kenny does so, then looks up at Eve and awaits further instructions when this, too, proves to be incorrect.

Eve stares at the screen with exhausted eyes. She looks back at the A4 print, at the sunlit square and the family group, and something falls quietly and precisely into place. "Kenny, for the first attempt, you used upper-case letters and periods, right?"

He nods.

"But if you look at the inscription, those aren't periods. They're symbols to mark the ends of the words, so that the inscription's legible."

"Er... OK."

"So try it again, but where you put periods, put stars. Asterisks."

"You're sure?"

"Do it," says Eve.

A flurry of keystrokes, then a moment of silence.

"We're in," says Kenny, releasing the breath he'd been holding.

At the fashion house in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, the anticipation is mounting. Like every haute couture show ever staged, this one is running late. No one is so gauche as to betray actual excitement, but there's an expectancy in the muted laughter, the flickering glances, and the delicate tapping of lacquered nails on iPhones. Villanelle closes her eyes for a moment, dismissing the crowd around her—the socialites overdressed for the press cameras, the fashion professionals in shades of black—and inhales the heady perfume of wealth. The fragrance of the lilies, fuchsias and tuberoses banked on either side of the runway, and entwined with that, the smell of designer scent—Guerlain, Patou, Annick Goutal—on warm skin. And as a top note, the sharper odor of the sweat lending a faint sheen to the foreheads of an audience that has been waiting here, on too-small gilt chairs, for more than forty minutes.

Absently, Villanelle reaches down and takes a rose-petal-flavored Ladurée macaroon from the box on her lap. As she closes her teeth on its crisp outer shell, the lights dim, the shining peals of a Scarlatti cantata fill the space, and the first model swings out onto the runway, wearing a long, crocus-yellow silk coat. She's a vision, but Villanelle doesn't really register her.

What would happen, she wonders, if Nadia were to announce that Oksana Astankova is alive? Would anyone believe her, or care? Who was Oksana Astankova, after all? Some crazy student who cut off a man's penis, and then supposedly killed herself in prison. Old news, long forgotten. Russia's a madhouse these days, and people are being murdered all the time. Why would Nadia speak out? Who would she even tell?

On the runway, immaculately tailored suits give way to embroidered crossover tops and tulle ballet skirts in dusty pink. The stranger next to her sighs appreciatively, and Villanelle selects another macaroon, this one flavored with Marie-Antoinette tea.

The point is not who she would tell, or who would care. The point is that if any element of the Villanelle legend threatens to unravel—if there's so much as a loose thread—then she becomes a liability to her employers. And if that happens, she's dead. Which leads back to the necessity of killing Nadia. But would she be able to get away with it? Konstantin had people everywhere, and it's clear that the organization's reach extends even further than Konstantin's had. She could confide in Raymond, but she doesn't trust him, and he might well decide that it is she, and not Nadia, who has to be eliminated.

A Handel sarabande. Cocktail frocks in silvery gray, furred like unopened petals around the slender bodies of the models. Evening gowns in midnight blue, embroidered with galaxies of diamanté stars.

Shooting Konstantin was bad. The sudden nothingness behind his eyes. Did Raymond fly her all the way there to kill him out of a perverse consideration? Or to deliver a brutal message to Villanelle about the reality of her situation?

What's most concerning is that the crisis in Odesa arose at all. It tells her that while the organization that employs her is more than capable of solving its problems, it's also susceptible to error. Konstantin always gave her to believe that in working for them, he and she were part of something which was both invisible and invulnerable. This episode showed that for all its reach and power, the organization could be hurt. Despite the warmth of the salon, Villanelle shivers.

The lights soften. The fashion show has progressed to the bedroom, to a dreamscape finale with the models swaying and weaving in delicate camisoles, sheer nightdresses, and shimmering organza gowns. The designer steps onto the runway, blows kisses at the audience, and is met by waves of applause. The models retreat, and waiters circulate with trays.

Villanelle inhales the scented air and takes a flute of pink Cristal champagne, sips from it, closes her eyes as the icy wine slides down her throat. She did not sleep well after arriving home the night before, but the champagne has set her body tingling, and her exhaustion falls away, and with it, for now, the doubts and fears of the last twenty-four hours.

Everything will work itself out, she thinks. It always does. And in the meantime, there are plenty of distractions here to stop her from dwelling on Konstantin's death and what this might mean for her.

* * *

"So," says Carolyn Martens. "Frank Haleton. You're sure about this? Because if you're wrong, it won't reflect well on any of us."

"We're not wrong," says Eve.

They're sitting in Carolyn's thirty-year-old Mercedes in an underground car park in Soho. The gray-blue interior is worn but comfortable, and the open windows admit a faint smell of exhaust.

"Tell me what led you to him."

Eve leans forward in her seat. "We were acting on the information given to us by Jin Yeong, who definitely knows more than he's saying. We investigated a large payment made

by someone we haven't identified yet to a Gulf State Account belonging to Tony Kent. It turns out Kent is an associate of Frank Haleton, and when we searched Haleton's house, we found a locked file hidden on his computer. When we cracked the password and opened it, we discovered details of a numbered account in the British Virgin Islands owned by Haleton. We also discovered that a recent deposit of over £12 million was made into this account by Tony Kent, from the account that he controls at the First National Bank of Fujairah. That should be conclusive enough to act on."

"So you want to bring him in?"

"I think we should have a quiet talk with him. We don't mention these accounts and payments to anyone—Revenue, police, whoever. Instead, we leave everything in place. But we turn Haleton. We threaten him with exposure, shame, prosecution, whatever it takes, and we wring him dry. If he helps us, and agrees to let us run him against whoever's been paying him, he gets to keep the money. If he doesn't, we throw him to the wolves.

Carolyn frowns, beating a soft percussion on the steering wheel with her fingers. "If you're right about the people who are paying him..."

"I am right."

She stares through the windscreen at the concrete walls, and the low ceiling with its sprinkler fittings. "Eve, listen to me. There are enough dead people in this story. I don't want you and Frank Haleton adding to their number."

"I'll be careful. But I want this woman, and I'm going to get her. She killed Viktor Kedrin on my watch, she killed Bill, and she's killed God knows how many other people."

Carolyn nods, her expression grave.

"I've got to stop her, Carolyn."

Carolyn is silent for a moment, then sighs.

"You're right. Someone has to. Do it."

* * *

When Eve gets home, Niko is sitting on the sofa, reading a book. He looks tired.

"So," he asks her carefully. "Did you deal with everything you needed to last night? Life and death situation and all that?"

"Yes," she says, perching on the arm of the sofa and kissing the top of his head. "It's all taken care of. For now."

"Excellent," he says, setting his book down on the cushion next to him.

"I'm sorry I've been so distant lately. Really. I'll make it up to you." She reaches out and strokes his chest, her hand trailing down to his stomach before stopping suggestively just above his belt.

"That sounds promising. Perhaps you could start by putting the kettle on?"

"What?" She withdraws her hand.

"I thought we might just start with a cup of tea." He stands up and stretches. "Will it be over soon, this project you're working on?"

Behind his back, she takes the Glock 19 pistol from her waistband holster and transfers it to her bag.

"No," she says. "It's just beginning."

II

No Tomorrow

1

Cruising through Muswell Hill on his carbon-framed bike, his hands resting lightly on the alloy handlebars, Frank Haleton feels a pleasant exhaustion. It's a longish ride from the office to his north London home, but he's made good time. It's something that he would hesitate to confide to his colleagues or his family, but Frank sees himself as the upholder of certain values. The hard cross-town ride satisfies the Spartan in him. Cycling keeps him lean and mean, and, incidentally, looking pretty damn *sportif* in his form-fitting Lycra shorts and tactical-fabric jersey, given that he's going to be forty-eight next birthday.

As the director of D4 Branch at MI5, responsible for counter-espionage against Russia and China, Frank has reached a level of seniority where he can, if he wishes, get chauffeured home in one of the Service's fleet of anonymous, mid-range vehicles. Tempting, of course, status-wise, but a slippery slope. Let the fitness go, and it's all over. Before he knows it, he'll be one of those paunchy old shags propping up the Thames House bar, nursing his Laphroaig and complaining about how much better things were before the fembots in HR took over.

Cycling helps keep Frank in touch. Keeps his ear to the street and the blood racing through his veins. Which is where he

needs it, given Gabi's raging libido. God, he wishes he was going home to her right now, rather than to Penny, with her diet-drained body and her incessant fault-finding.

As if on cue, as he glides the final hundred meters, the "Eye of the Tiger" theme from *Rocky III* kicks in on the Bluetooth player in his cycling helmet. As the big chords punch home, Frank's heart begins to pound. In his mind, Gabi is waiting for him on a king-sized bed in the master cabin of a superyacht. She's naked, except for a pair of fluffy white tennis socks, and her gym-toned legs are invitingly parted.

Then, incomprehensibly, a steel-strong hand grabs his arm and wrenches him to a halt, the bike skidding to the ground beneath him. Frank opens his mouth to speak, but is silenced by a vicious short-arm punch to the gut.

"Sorry, squire. Need your attention." Frank's captor is fortyish, with the features of a well-groomed rat, and smells of stale cigarette smoke. With his spare hand, he removes Frank's helmet and drops it on the fallen bike. Frank writhes, but the grip on his arm is unyielding.

"Stand still, yeah? Don't want to hurt you."

Frank groans. "What the *fuck*...?"

"I'm here for a friend, Frankie, who needs to talk to you. About Babydoll."

The remaining color drains from Frank's face. His eyes widen with shock.

"Pick the bike up. Put it in the back of the vehicle. Then get into the front seat. Do it now." He releases Frank, who looks around him with dazed eyes, noting the elderly white Ford Transit van and the clean-cut young man at the wheel.

Opening the van's rear door, his hands trembling, Frank turns off the helmet's Bluetooth sound-system, which is now playing

“Slide It In” by Whitesnake. He hooks the helmet over the handlebars and loads the bike into the van.

“Phone,” Ratface says, following the demand with a stinging slap that leaves Frank’s ears ringing. Shakily, Frank hands it over. “OK, into the passenger seat.”

As the van pulls out into the traffic, Frank tries to remember the Service capture and interrogation protocols. But suppose this lot *are* the sodding Service, and part of some internal investigation team? They’d have to have gone to the DG to authorize turning over someone of his rank. So who the *fuck*? Could they be hostiles? SVR, perhaps, or CIA? Just say nothing. Take each moment as it comes. *Say nothing.*

The drive takes less than ten minutes, with the Transit van weaving in and out of the rush-hour traffic. They cross the North Circular Road, and then pull in to the car park of a Tesco superstore. The driver selects a bay at the furthest point from the store’s entrance, brings the van quietly to a halt, and switches off the ignition.

Frank sits there, his face the color of raw pastry, staring through the windscreen at the boundary fence. A faint fuel haze rises from the traffic on the North Circular. “Now what?” he asks.

“Now we wait,” says the voice of Ratface behind him.

Further minutes pass, and then a ringtone sounds. Grotesquely, it’s a laughing duck.

“For you, Frank.” From the back seat, Ratface passes him a cheap plastic phone.

“Frank Haleton?” The voice is low, with a tinny electronic twang. Voice-changer, he notes subconsciously.

“Who is this?”

“You don’t need to know. What you need to know is what we

know. Let's start with the big one. That in return for betraying the Service, you've accepted over fifteen million pounds, and parked it in an offshore account in the British Virgin Isles. Do you have any comment to make about that?"

Frank's world contracts to the windscreen in front of him. His heart feels as if it's been packed in ice. He can't think, let alone speak.

"I didn't think so. Let's continue. We know that earlier this year you took over the lease of a three-bedroom apartment in a building named Les Asphodèles in Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera, and that last month you bought a forty-two-foot motor yacht named *Babydoll*, presently moored at the Port Vauban marina. We also know about your association with twenty-eight-year-old Gabriela Vukovic, currently employed by the fitness club and spa at the Hotel du Littoral.

"Currently neither MI5 nor your family knows about any of this. Nor do the Metropolitan Police or the Inland Revenue. Whether that state of affairs continues is up to you. If you want us to remain silent—if you want to retain your freedom, your job, and your reputation—you need to tell us everything, and I mean *everything*, about the organization that's been paying you. Short-change us, hold a single fact back, and you will spend the next twenty-five years in a Belmarsh Prison cell. Unless you die first, obviously. So what do you say?"

The faint drone of traffic. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of an ambulance siren. "Whoever you are, you can go fuck yourself," Frank says, his voice low and unsteady. "Assault and kidnapping are crimes. Say whatever you want to whoever you want. I don't give a shit."

"You see, here's the problem, Frank," the tinny voice continues. "Or maybe I should say, here's *your* problem. If we send a

report to Thames House, and there's an investigation and a prosecution and all that sort of thing, it will be assumed that you've talked to us, and the people who are paying all that money—and fifteen million is a *lot*—will be forced to make an example of you. You'll be dealt with, Frank, and it'll be nasty. You know what they're like. So really, you don't have a choice. There's no bluff to call."

"You haven't the first idea what you're talking about, have you? I may have concealed certain things from my wife and my employers, but having an affair isn't a crime, at least it wasn't when I last checked."

"No, it isn't. But treason is, and that's what you'll be charged with."

"You've got no grounds whatsoever to charge me with anything of the sort, and you know it. This is just a cheap attempt at blackmail. So whoever you are, like I said, go fuck yourself."

"OK, Frank, here's what's going to happen. In five minutes, you're going to get out of that van and ride your bike home. You might want to pick up some flowers for your wife; they've got some very reasonably priced roses at the petrol station. Tomorrow morning, a car will pick you up at your house at 7 a.m. and drive you to Dever Research Station in Hampshire. Your deputy at Thames House has been informed that you will be spending the next three working days there, attending a counter-terrorism seminar. While you're there, you will also, in another part of the station, be privately interviewed about the subjects we've discussed. No one else there will be aware of this, and there will be no outward sign of any break in your usual duties. Dever, as I'm sure you know, is listed as a government secret asset, and is completely secure. If these interviews go

well, which I'm sure they will, you will be free to go."

"And if I say no?"

"Frank, let's not even begin to think about what happens if you say no. Seriously. It would be a total shit-storm. Penny, for a start. Can you imagine? And the kids. Their dad on trial for treason? Let's not even go there, OK?"

A long silence. "You said 7 a.m.?"

"Yes. Leave it any later and the traffic will be impossible."

Frank stares into the hazy twilight. "OK," he says.

Laying the phone on her desk, Eve Polastri exhales and closes her eyes. She can be assertive in the workplace, certainly. She's had to be, as both a woman and a minority, to be taken seriously. Face to face with him, though, she doubts she would have been able to keep up the mocking tone, or to come across as any sort of real threat to him. But with that final "OK," he's effectively conceded his guilt, and if he'll almost certainly be shocked to see her sitting opposite him tomorrow, it won't be anything she can't handle.

"Nicely played," says Carolyn Martens, removing the headphones through which she's been listening to Frank and Eve's conversation, and settling back into the Goodge Street office's least uncomfortable chair.

"Team effort," says Eve. "Lance scared the hell out of him, and Kenny drove like a pro."

Carolyn nods. The head of MI6's Russia desk, Carolyn is technically Eve's employer, although she's an infrequent visitor to the office, and Eve's name is not on any official Security Services personnel list. "We'll give him tonight to meditate on his situation, ideally in the presence of that short-tempered wife of his. Tomorrow you can set about stripping him to the bone."

"You think he'll be there in the morning? You don't think he'll cut and run tonight?"

"No. Frank Haleton may be a traitor, but he's not a fool. If he runs, he's finished. We're his only chance, and he'll know that."

"No chance he'll..." Eve points her hand at her head in the shape of a gun and mimics firing.

"Kill himself? Frank? No, he's not the type. I've known him for years. He's a fellow Oxonian. We weren't there at the same time, obviously, but we have several mutual acquaintances. He's a ducker and diver. The sort who thinks you can sort out any problem, no matter how tricky, over a decent bottle of wine in a good restaurant, preferably on someone else's expense account. He'll tell us what we need to know, and he'll keep quiet about it. Because scary though our people can be, the lot he's betrayed us to have got to be infinitely more so. Any suggestion he's compromised, they'll shut him down straight away."

"With prejudice."

"With extreme prejudice. They'd probably even send your favorite female assassin to do it."

Eve smiles. The phone in her bag vibrates. It's a text from Niko, asking when she's going to be home. She answers eight o'clock, although she knows that her actual arrival time is likely to be at least eight thirty.

Carolyn gives her a long, penetrating look. "I know what you're thinking, Eve. And the answer is no."

"What am I thinking?"

"Wring Frank out, then use him as bait. See what swims up out of the deep."

"It's not the worst idea I've ever had."

"Murder's always a bad idea, trust me, and murder's what it would amount to."

“Don’t worry, I’ll stick to the plan. Frank will be back in the arms of his darling Gabi before you can say full-blown mid-life crisis.”

* * *

Rinat Yevtukh, leader of Odesa’s Golden Brotherhood crime network, is frustrated. Venice, he’s been assured, is more than a city. It’s one of the high citadels of Western culture, and perhaps the ultimate luxury destination. But somehow, standing at the window of his suite at the Danieli Hotel in his complimentary dressing gown and slippers, he can’t quite engage with the place.

Partly, it’s stress. Kidnapping the Russian in Odesa was a mistake, he sees that now. He’d assumed, quite reasonably, that the thing would play out in the usual way. A flurry of back-channel negotiations, a cash sum agreed on, and no hard feelings on either side. In the event, some lunatic chose to take the whole thing personally, leaving Rinat with seven men and the hostage dead, and his house in Fontanka shot to pieces. He has other houses, obviously, and men are easily enough replaced. But it’s all extra work, and, at a certain point in your life, these things begin to take their toll.

The Doge’s Suite at the Danieli is reassuringly luxurious. Winged cherubs disport among candy-floss clouds in the ceiling fresco, portraits of Venetian aristocrats hang from walls shining with gold damask, antique carpets cover the floors. On a side table stands a meter-high, multicolored glass statuette of a weeping clown, bought in a Murano factory that morning and destined for Rinat’s Kyiv apartment.

Katya Goraya, Rinat’s twenty-five-year-old lingerie model girlfriend, is sprawled barefoot across a rococo chaise longue.

Dressed in a Dior crop top and Dussault thrashed jeans, Katya is gazing at her phone, chewing gum, and nodding her head to a Lady Gaga song. At intervals, she sings along, insofar as the chewing gum and her limited English permit. There was a time when Rinat found this endearing; now he just finds it annoying.

“Bad Romance,” he says.

Unhurriedly, her expensively augmented breasts straining against the lacy fabric of her top, Katya removes her earbuds.

“Bad Romance,” Rinat repeats. “Not Bedroom Ants.”

She looks at him blankly, then frowns. “I want to go back to Gucci. I’ve changed my mind about that bag. The pink snakeskin one.”

There’s nothing Rinat wants to do less. Those superior San Marco shop assistants. All smiles until they’ve got your money, and then you might as well be dog shit.

“We need to go now, Rinat. Before they close.”

“You go. Take Slava with you.”

She pouts. Rinat knows that she wants him to come because if he does, he will pay for the bag. If the bodyguard takes her, it will come out of her allowance. Which he also pays for.

“You want to make love?” Katya’s gaze softens. “When we get back from the shop I’ll fuck you up the ass with the strap-on.”

Rinat shows no sign of having heard her. What he really wants is to be somewhere else. To lose himself in the world beyond the gold silk curtains, where afternoon is shading into evening, and gondolas and water taxis are drawing pale lines across the lagoon.

“Rinat?”

He closes the bedroom door behind him. It takes him ten minutes to shower and dress. When he returns to the reception

room, Katya hasn't moved.

"You're just leaving me here?" she asks, incredulous.

Frowning, Rinat checks his reflection in a silvered octagonal mirror. As he closes the door of the suite behind him, he hears the sound, not unimpressive in its own way, of a twenty-kilo Murano glass clown shattering on an antique terrazzo floor.

In the hotel's top-floor bar, it's blessedly quiet. Later it will be thronged with guests, but for now there are just two couples, both sitting in silence. Installing himself on the terrace, Rinat leans back in his chair, and through half-closed eyes, watches the soft rise and fall of the gondolas at their moorings. Soon, he muses, it will be time to leave Odesa. To get his money out of Ukraine and into a less volatile jurisdiction. For the last decade, sex, drugs, and human trafficking have proved themselves the ultimate guilt-edged trifecta, but with new players like the Turkish gangs moving in, and the Russians cracking down hard, the game is changing. The wise man, Rinat tells himself, knows when to move on.

Katya has her gaze set on Miami's Golden Beach, where for less than \$12 million, including bribes to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, you can get a luxury waterfront home with a private dock. Rinat, however, is increasingly of the opinion that life might be less stressful without Katya and her incessant demands, and the last few days have got him thinking about Western Europe. About Italy in particular, which appears to take a relaxed view of crimes of moral turpitude. The place is classy—the sports cars, the clothes, the fucked-up old buildings—and Italian women are unbelievable. Even the shop-girls look like movie stars.

A grave young man in a dark suit materializes at his elbow, and Rinat orders a malt whiskey.

"Cancel that. Make the gentleman a Negroni Sbagliato. And bring me one as well."

Rinat turns, and meets the amused gaze of a woman in a black chiffon cocktail dress, who is standing behind him.

"You are, after all, in Venice."

"I am," he concurs, a little dazedly, and nods to the waiter, who silently withdraws.

She looks out over the lagoon, which shimmers like white gold in the dusk. "See Venice and die, is what they say."

"I'm not planning to die yet. And I haven't seen much of Venice, except the inside of the shops."

"That's a pity, because the shops here are either full of tourist trash, or the same as those in a hundred other cities, except maybe more expensive. Venice is not about the present, Venice is about the past."

Rinat stares. She really is very beautiful. The cold blue gaze, the oblique smile, the whole artfully expensive look of her. Belatedly, it occurs to him to offer her a chair.

"*Sei gentile*. But I'm interrupting your evening."

"Not at all. I'm looking forward to that drink. What was it again?"

She sits, and with a whisper of silk tights, which Rinat does not fail to appreciate, crosses her knees. "A Negroni Sbagliato. It's a Negroni, but with sparkling wine instead of gin. And at the Danieli, *naturalmente*, they make it with champagne. For me, the perfect drink at sunset."

"Better than a single malt whisky?"

A faint smile. "I think so."

And so it proves. Rinat is not an obviously handsome man. His shaved head resembles a Crimean potato, and his handmade silk suit cannot disguise his brutal build. But wealth, however

acquired, has a way of commanding attention, and Rinat is not unused to the company of desirable women. And Marina Falieri, as he learns her name to be, is nothing if not desirable.

He can't take his eyes off her mouth. There's a faint scar on the bow of her upper lip, and the subtle resultant asymmetry lends her smile an equivocal quality. A vulnerability that speaks, quietly but insistently, to the predator in him. She is flatteringly interested in everything he has to say, and in response he finds himself holding forth freely. He tells her about Odesa, about the historic Cathedral of the Transfiguration, where he is a regular worshiper, and about the magnificent Opera and Ballet Theatre, to which, as an enthusiastic patron of the arts, he has contributed millions of rubles. This account of himself, if wholly fictional, is richly and convincingly detailed, and Marina's eyes shine as she listens. She even persuades him to teach her a couple of phrases in Russian, which she repeats with endearing inaccuracy.

And then, all too soon, the evening is over. She has to attend an official dinner in Sant'Angelo, Marina explains apologetically. It will be dull, and she wishes she could stay, but she's on the steering committee of the Venice Biennale, and...

"Per favore, Marina. Capisco," Rinat says, discharging his entire stock of Italian with what he hopes is a gallant smile.

"Your accent, Rinat. *Perfezione!*" She pauses, and smiles at him conspiratorially. "It's not possible, by any chance, that you're free for lunch tomorrow?"

"Well, as it happens, I am."

"Excellent. Let's meet at eleven at the hotel's river entrance. It will be my pleasure to show you something of... the *real* Venice."

They rise, and she's gone. Four empty cocktail glasses stand on the white linen tablecloth, three of his and one of hers. The

sun is low in the sky, half obscured by oyster-pink cirrus clouds. Rinat turns to beckon for the waiter, but he's already standing there, as patient and unobtrusive as an undertaker.

* * *

In the bus, moving at a snail's pace up the Tottenham Court Road, the only person to give Eve a second glance is an obviously disturbed man who winks at her persistently. It's a warm evening, and the interior of the bus smells of damp hair and stale deodorant. Opening the *Evening Standard*, Eve flicks through the news pages and the descriptions of parties and serial adultery in Primrose House, and settles pleasurably into the property section.

There's no question of her and Niko being able to afford any of the living spaces so seductively laid out there. All those Victorian warehouses and industrial units reimagined as fabulous, light-filled apartments. All those panoramic river-views framed in steel and plate glass. Nor, in any real sense, does Eve covet them. She's entranced by them because they're deserted, and not quite believable. Because they serve as the imagined backdrops to other lives she might have led.

She reaches the cramped house that she and Niko live in shortly after eight forty-five, pushes open the door, and follows the smell of cooking to the kitchen. The table, which holds an unstable pile of maths textbooks and a bottle of supermarket Rioja, is laid for two. She makes her way upstairs, where a hissing sound and a tuneless whistling from the bathroom tell her that Niko is in the shower.

"Sorry I'm late," she calls out. "Smells delicious. What is it?"

"Goulash. Can you open the wine?"

Eve has just taken the corkscrew from the drawer when she hears a frantic clicking sound on the floor behind her, and turns to see two substantial animal forms hurtling through the air and landing on the table, sending the textbooks flying. For a moment, she's too shocked to move. The Rioja rolls from the table and smashes on the tiled floor. Two pairs of sage-green eyes watch her quizzically.

"*Niko.*"

He saunters damply down the stairs, a towel round his waist, slippers on his feet. "Darling. I see you've met Thelma and Louise."

She stares at him. When he steps over the widening lake of Rioja and kisses her, she doesn't move.

"Louise is the clumsy one. I expect it was her that—"

"*Niko. Before I fucking kill you...*"

"They're Nigerian dwarf goats. And you and I are never buying milk, cream, cheese, or soap again."

"*Niko, listen to me. I'm going to the off-license, because today has been awful, and all the alcohol we have in the house is now on the floor. When I get back, I want to sit down to your goulash, and a nice bottle of red wine, possibly two, and relax. We won't even mention those two animals on the table, because by the time I return, they will be gone. It will be like they never existed. OK?*"

"Er... OK."

"Excellent. See you in ten minutes."

When Eve returns with another two bottles of Rioja, the kitchen has had a superficial but adequate makeover, there are no goats in sight, and Niko is fully dressed. With a simultaneous lifting and plummeting of her heart, Eve notes that he smells of Acqua di Parma, and is wearing his Diesel jeans. Neither

of them has ever put it into words, but Eve knows that when Niko wears these particular jeans and that cologne after 6 p.m., it's to signal that he's romantically inclined, and would like the evening to end with them making love.

Eve has no equivalent of Niko's sex-pants, as she calls them. No fuck-me shoes or flirty dresses, no lace and satin lingerie. Her work wardrobe is anonymous and utilitarian, and she feels silly and self-conscious wearing anything else. Niko regularly tells her that she's beautiful, but the words don't really mean anything coming from him. She accepts that he loves her—he says so too often for it not to be true—but why he should do so is wholly mysterious to her.

They talk about his work. Niko teaches at the local school, and has a theory that less well-off teenagers, who do all their shopping with cash, are much better at mental arithmetic than richer kids who have been given credit cards.

"They call me Borat," he says. "Do you think that's a compliment?"

"Tall, eastern European accent, mustache... Kind of fits. I'm sure it's meant as a term of endearment. They adore you, you know that."

"They're good kids. I like them. How was your day?"

"Weird. I called someone using a voice-changer."

"Actually to disguise your voice, or for fun?"

"To disguise it. I didn't want the guy to know I was a woman. I wanted to sound like Darth Vader."

"I'm not even going to begin to imagine that..." He looks at her. "I think you'd like the girls. Truly."

"Which girls?"

"Thelma and Louise. The goats. They're very sweet."

She narrows her eyes. "Where are they now?"

"In their house. Outside."

"They have a house?"

"It came with them."

"So you actually bought them? They're permanent?"

"I've run the figures. Nigerian dwarfs give the richest milk of all breeds, and they only weigh about seventy-five pounds fully grown, so they eat the least hay. We'll be completely self-sufficient for dairy products."

"Niko, this is the arse end of Finchley Road, not the fucking Cotswolds."

"Also, Nigerian dwarfs are—"

"Please stop calling them that. They're goats, period. And if you think I'm getting up every morning—or any morning, for that matter—to milk a pair of goats, you're insane."

In answer, Niko gets up from the table, and goes out onto the tiny paved area that they call the garden. A moment later, Thelma and Louise come bounding joyfully into the kitchen.

"Oh God." Eve sighs and reaches for the wine.

After the meal, Niko does the washing-up, then takes himself to the bathroom to freshen up the Acqua di Parma, wash his hands, and run his wet fingers through his hair. When he returns, he finds Eve fast asleep on the sofa, a spoon in one hand and an ice cream tub trailing from the other. Thelma is lying contentedly at her side, and Louise is standing with her forelegs on the sofa, scouring the tub for the last of the melting chocolate chip with a long, pink tongue.

* * *

Rinat Yevtukh has dressed carefully for his morning rendezvous, and after some thought has selected a Versace polo

shirt, raw silk slacks, and Santoni ostrich-skin loafers. A solid-gold Rolex Submariner completes the impression of a man who espouses quiet good taste, but is by no imaginable means to be fucked with.

Marina Falieri keeps him waiting underneath the ironwork canopy of the Danieli's river entrance for half an hour. Two bodyguards in tightly fitting suits lounge behind him, surveying the narrow canal with bored eyes. Katya's vindictive mood has not abated, but has been tempered by the promise of a photo spread in Russian *Playboy*, and perhaps even the cover. Such a thing is by no means within Rinat's gift, but he will cross that bridge when he comes to it. Meanwhile, Katya is safely ensconced in the hotel's hairdressing salon, undergoing a revitalizing treatment involving white truffle essence and pulverized diamonds.

Shortly after eleven thirty, an elegant white *motoscafo* launch swings beneath the low, balustraded bridge and draws up at the hotel jetty. Marina is at the wheel in a striped T-shirt and jeans, her dark hair swinging around her shoulders. She's also wearing—and this Rinat finds unaccountably sexy—soft leather driving gloves.

"So." She raises her sunglasses. "Ready to see *la vera Venezia*?"

"Very much so." Stepping onto the varnished mahogany afterdeck in his new loafers, Rinat teeters for a moment. As the bodyguards move reflexively forward, he lurches into the cockpit beside Marina, placing a heavy hand on her shoulder for balance.

"Excuse me."

"No problem. Those your boys?"

"They're on my security staff, yes."

"Well, you should be quite safe with me." She smiles. "But

you're welcome to ask them along if you'd like to."

"Of course not." Rinat addresses the two men in fast, idiomatic Russian, ordering them to keep an eye on Katya, and to tell her that he is lunching with a business associate. A man, obviously. Not this *devushka*.

The men smirk and withdraw.

"I'm definitely going to learn Russian," Marina says, maneuvering the launch beneath the road bridge. "It sounds like such an expressive language."

Skillfully, she threads a path between the gondolas and the other river traffic, and steers an unhurried southern course past the island of San Giorgio Maggiore and the eastern curve of the Giudecca. As the *motoscafo* noses through the unruffled surface of the lagoon, its 150-horsepower engine carving a pale wake behind them, she tells Rinat about the palaces and churches that they pass.

"So where exactly do you live?" Rinat asks her.

"My family has an apartment next to the Palazzo Cicogna," she says. "The Falieri were originally from Venice, but our principal residence is now in Milan."

He glances at her gloved left hand, curled lightly round the wheel. "And you are not married?"

"I was close to someone, but he died."

"I'm sorry. My condolences."

She opens up the throttle. "It was very sad. I was there when he passed away. I was devastated. But life goes on."

"Indeed it does."

She turns to him and pushes up her sunglasses so that, for a moment, he's caught in her icy blue gaze. "If you look behind you, in that cold-box, you'll find a shaker and some glasses. Why don't you pour yourself a drink?"

He retrieves the ice-frosted shaker and a tall glass. "Can I get you one?"

"I'll wait until we get to the island. You go ahead."

He pours, drinks, and nods appreciatively. "This is... very good."

"It's a limoncello cocktail. Perfect, I always think, for a morning like this."

"Delicious. So tell me about this island we're going to."

"It's called the Ottagone Falieri. It was once a fortification, built to protect Venice from invaders. One of my ancestors bought it in the nineteenth century. We still own it, even though no one goes there anymore, and it's pretty much a ruin."

"It sounds very romantic."

She gives him a veiled smile. "We'll see. It's certainly an interesting place."

They're holding a steady course now. The Giudecca is far behind them; ahead, Rinat can see only gray-green water. The limoncello is creeping through his veins with glacial slowness. He feels, for the first time in as long as he can remember, at peace.

The fortification looms, quite suddenly, out of the haze. Walls of cut stone, and above them a few sparse treetops. Soon, a jetty becomes visible. Tied up to it is another, smaller motor launch, with a black-painted hull.

"I see we have company."

"I asked someone to come ahead with the lunch," Marina says, as if this is the most natural thing in the world.

Rinat nods. Of course. Everything about this woman charms and impresses him. Her unusual beauty, which over the last couple of hours he has had considerable opportunity to examine at close range. Her easy familiarity with wealth. Old-money

wealth, of the kind that doesn't need to proclaim itself, but nevertheless makes its presence felt with unambiguous force. It's not enough to be rich, Rinat knows. You have to be connected, to know the secret signs by which real insiders recognize each other. Insiders like Marina Falieri.

Katya, it's increasingly clear, has to go.

Marina ties up the *motoscafo*, and as they make their way along the sun-bleached planking of the jetty, Rinat hears a faint clanking sound. There are steps built into the wall, and at the top is an octagonal compound, perhaps a hundred meters from end to end. At one extremity are the ruins of a brick and tile building, shadowed by stunted pines. Elsewhere, the ground is rough scrub, quartered by a pathway. At the end of the compound furthest from the steps, a strongly built young woman with dark hair is wielding a pickaxe, swinging it steadily at the stony ground. In her bikini top, military shorts and combat boots, she cuts an unusual figure. As Rinat watches, the woman turns, briefly meets his gaze, drops the pick, and saunters toward the ruined building.

Ignoring her, Marina leads Rinat to a table covered by a white cloth at the center of the compound. At either side of the table is an ironwork garden chair. "Shall we?" she asks.

They sit. Beyond the stone wall, there is no land in sight, just the vast stillness of the lagoon. Behind him, Rinat hears the rattle of a tray. It's the pickaxe woman, with chilled wine and mineral water, antipasti and tiny, exquisite pastries. A faint sheen of sweat covers her muscled body, and her calves and combat boots are dusty.

Marina continues to ignore her, and smiles at Rinat. "Please. *Buon appetito.*"

Rinat tries to swallow a forkful of mortadella, but for some

reason his appetite has deserted him, and he feels mildly nauseated. He forces himself to chew and swallow. Soon the steady clinking of the pickaxe resumes.

"What's she doing, exactly?" His voice sounds distant, disembodied.

"Oh, just some gardening. I like to keep her busy. But let me pour you some of this wine. It's a local Bianco di Custoza, I'm sure you'll like it."

Wine, local or otherwise, is the last thing that Rinat feels like, but politeness compels him to tender his glass. He can hardly hold it steady as she pours. Sweat is running down his face and back; the horizon shimmers and sways. Some still-observant part of him notes that the clinking of the pickaxe has been replaced by the steady, rhythmic thudding of a spade. He tries to drink some mineral water but gags, and regurgitates the wine and mortadella onto the tablecloth. "I'm..." he begins, and slumps back heavily in his chair. His heart is racing, and his arms and chest have started to prickle and burn as if fire-ants were creeping beneath his skin. He claws at himself, panic rising in his chest.

"That sensation's called paresthesia," Marina explains, sipping her wine. "It's a symptom of aconitine poisoning."

Rinat stares at her, his eyes widening.

"It was in the limoncello. In less than an hour, you'll die of either heart failure or respiratory arrest, and looking at you right now, I'm guessing heart failure. Until then you can expect—"

Twisting convulsively in the ironwork chair, Rinat vomits for a second time and then voids his bowels, not silently, into his ivory silk slacks.

"Exactly. And as for the rest, well... I won't spoil the surprise."

Turning, she waves to the other woman. “Nadia, come over here.”

Nadia lays down the spade and walks unhurriedly over. “I’ve pretty much finished digging out that grave,” she says, and after some thought, selects one of the pastries from the box. “Oh my God, *kotik*, these are so good.”

“I got them from that *pasticceria* in San Marco where we had the cream cake.”

“We should go back there.” Nadia glances at Rinat, who has fallen off his chair and is convulsing on the ground, blowflies buzzing around his soiled slacks. “How long till he’s actually dead, do you think?”

Marina wrinkles her nose. “Hmm, half an hour or so? It will be good to get him in the ground. That smell is really ruining my lunch.”

“It is a bit rank.”

“Of course, we could save his life if he tells us what we need to know. I have an antidote for the aconitine.”

Rinat’s eyes widen. “*Pozhaluysta*,” he whispers, tears and vomit streaking his face. “Please. Whatever you need.”

“I’ll tell you what *I* need right now,” says Nadia thoughtfully, selecting another pastry. “I’ve had this tune going round and round in my head all all morning, and it’s literally driving me crazy. *Dada dada dada dada da dadadada...*”

“*Posledniy raz*,” whispers Rinat, agonizedly contracting into a fetal position.

“Oh my God, that’s right! How embarrassing. My mother used to sing along to that song. I bet yours did too, *detka*.”

“To be honest, she didn’t have much to sing about. Unless you count crippling depression and child abuse.” The tip of her tongue flicks to the scar on her upper lip. “But we’re wasting

Rinat's last precious minutes." She crouches down so that she's directly in his line of sight. "I need answers, and I need them fast. If you lie, or hesitate at all, I will let you shit yourself to death."

"The truth. I swear it."

"OK then. The man you kidnapped in Odesa. Why did you take him?"

"We were ordered by the SVR, the Russian secret—"

"I know who the SVR are. Why?"

"They called me in to one of their centers. Told me—" He's racked by another spasm, and a bubble of yellowish drool forms on his lips.

"You're running out of time, Rinat. What did they tell you?"

"To... take that man, Vasiliev. Take him to the villa in Fontanka."

So that was Konstantin's surname. He had always managed to keep this bit of information from her. Or perhaps she'd simply never cared enough to find out. "So why did you do it?"

"Because they... Oh my God, *please*...." His hands claw at his arms and chest as the paresthesia renews its assault.

"Because they what?"

"They... they knew things. About *Zolotoye Bratstvo*, the Golden Brotherhood. That we'd sent girls from Ukraine to Turkey, Hungary, Czech Republic for sex work. They had interviews, documents, they could have destroyed me. Everything I'd—"

"And the SVR interrogated this man, Vasiliev, at your house in Fontanka?"

"Yes."

"Did they get the answers they wanted?"

"I don't know. They questioned him, but they... Oh God..."

He retches, spits bile, and his bladder empties. The smell, and the furious buzzing of the blowflies, intensifies. On the other side of the table, Nadia helps herself to a third pastry.

"They...?"

"They made me keep away. All I heard was one question that they kept shouting at him. 'Who are the *Dvenadtsat*, the Twelve?'"

"Did he tell them?"

"I don't know, they... They beat him up pretty badly."

"So did he talk or not?"

"I don't know. They kept asking this same question."

"So who or what are the Twelve?"

"I don't know. I swear it."

"Bullshit."

He retches again, tears streaming down his cheeks. "*Please*," he whimpers.

"Please what?"

"You said..."

"I know what I said. Tell me about the Twelve."

"All I've heard is rumors."

"Go on."

"They're supposed to be some kind of... secret organization. Very powerful, very ruthless. That's all I've heard, I swear."

"What do they want?"

"How the fuck would I know?"

She nods, her expression thoughtful. "So how old were those girls? The ones the Golden Brotherhood sent to Europe?"

"Sixteen, minimum. We don't do—"

"You don't do kids? How noble of you."

Rinat opens his mouth to answer, but convulses, his back arching upward so that, for a moment, he is supported on his

hands and feet like a spider. Then a foot is planted on his chest, forcing him agonizingly to the ground, and the woman he knows as Marina Falieri pulls off her raven-black wig and removes her blue contact lenses. “Burn these,” she tells Nadia.

Undisguised, she looks very different. Honey blonde hair, and hazel eyes of a fathomless blankness that somehow reminds him of a shark. Not to mention the silenced CZ automatic pistol in her hand. Rinat knows it’s the end, and somehow, with this knowledge, the pain recedes a degree or two. “Who are you?” he whispers. “Who the *fuck* are you?”

“My name is Villanelle.” She points the CZ at his heart. “I work for the Twelve.”

He stares at her, and she fires twice. In the sultry midday air, the suppressed detonations sound like the snapping of dead wood.

It doesn’t take long to drag Rinat to the prepared grave and bury him. It’s a hot and unpleasant task, and Villanelle leaves it to Nadia. Meanwhile, she loads the table, chairs, and remains of lunch into the *motocafé*. When she returns, it’s with a fuel can. She takes off her T-shirt and jeans, soaks them in gasoline, and places them on the fire that Nadia has built, on top of the smoldering remains of the wig.

When Nadia has finished burying Rinat, Villanelle orders her to take off her shorts and bikini top. The clean-up takes the best part of an hour, but eventually the clothes have all been burned, the ashes picked through, and all surviving buttons, studs, and clips thrown in the lagoon.

“There’s a bucket in the boat,” Villanelle says, staring out over the water.

“What for?”

“That.” She gestures at the pungent traces of Rinat’s bodily

fluids.

Finally, she's satisfied, and they go down to the jetty, change into new clothes that Nadia has brought, untie the boats from their moorings, and set off on a northeasterly course. The Venice Lagoon is shallow, with an average depth of ten meters, but there are declivities of more than twice this. Not far from the island of Poveglia, the *motoscafo's* depth-finder indicates that they are passing over just such a drop-off, and Villanelle takes the opportunity to drop the metal table and chairs, the pickaxe, and the spade overboard.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Poveglia was a quarantine station for the crews of ships harboring the plague. In the early twentieth century, it was home to a mental institution where, Venetians say, patients were subjected to sinister experiments. Now abandoned, and reputed to be haunted, the island has a desolate look about it, and tourist craft rarely venture there.

A narrow canal, overhung by foliage, divides Poveglia into two halves. Here, out of sight of any passing vehicle, the two women moor the launches. Under Villanelle's critical eye, Nadia wipes every surface of the *motoscafo* clean with an anti-DNA Erase spray, and then removes the drain plug, and joins Villanelle in the second launch. It takes twenty minutes for the *motoscafo* to slip quietly beneath the water and come to rest on the floor of the canal.

"Someone will find it eventually," Villanelle says. "But this is fine for now. We should go to the hotel. We're supposed to be sisters, yes?"

"Yes, I told them I was picking you up from Marco Polo airport."

"Shouldn't I have luggage?"

"In the locker."

Villanelle inspects the calfskin Ferragamo bags. "So who are we?"

"Yulia and Alyona Pinchuk, co-owners of MySugarBaby.com, a dating agency based in Kyiv."

Villanelle frowns and wrinkles her nose. "Which one am I?"
"Yulia."

Villanelle settles back against the cream leather passenger seat of the launch. "Let's go. We're done here."

* * *

In the restaurant of the Hotel Excelsior on the Lido, Villanelle and Nadia are sipping pink Mercier champagne and eating iced *frutti di mare* from a tiered silver stand. The room, a pillared Moorish fantasia in shades of white and ivory, is not quite full; it's late in the season and the summer crowd has moved on. There's an animated buzz of conversation, nevertheless, frequently interrupted by laughter. Beyond the terrace, indistinct in the dusk, is the lagoon, its surface a shade darker than the sky. There's not a whisper of a breeze.

"You were good today," says Villanelle, spearing a langoustine with her fork.

Nadia touches the back of her hand to Villanelle's warm shoulder. "Thank you for mentoring me, *kroshka*. I'm learning so much. Seriously."

"You're certainly learning to dress better. You still have a long way to go, of course. We will keep working on it. No more cowboy hats, OK? Your face is the wrong shape." She reaches up to place her hand over Nadia's and squeezes it. "You look good tonight, though."

Nadia smiles. In her silk-chiffon dress, with her hair pulled back into a tight bun and her lean, muscular arms, she looks like some mythical goddess of war.

"Do you think they'll be sending you out on your own soon?" Villanelle asks.

"Possibly. The problem is my languages. Apparently I still sound too much like a Russian when I speak English, so they've found me a temporary position as an au pair."

"In England?"

"Yes. Somewhere called Chipping Norton. Have you been there?"

"No, but I know about it. It's full of bored housewives snorting cocaine and sleeping with their tennis coaches. You'll love it. What does the husband do?"

"He's a *politik*. A Member of Parliament."

"In that case, you'll probably have to get him to sleep with you for *kompromat*."

"I'd much rather sleep with you."

Villanelle smiles indulgently. "Who wouldn't? But work is work. How many kids?"

"Twin girls. Fifteen."

"Well, be careful. Try not to hit them, or do it so it doesn't show, at least. The English are sensitive about that."

Nadia gazes into the oyster shell in her hand, lets a single drop of Tabasco fall into the brine, and watches the oyster's tiny convulsion. "I wanted to ask you something. About today."

"Yes?"

"Why did you have to do that whole poison thing? When you had the gun?"

"You think I should have just threatened to shoot him if he didn't talk?"

"Why not? Much easier."

"Think about it. Play it out in your mind." She props an elbow on the table, rests her chin on her hand, and watches as Nadia mulls this over.

Nadia pours the oyster down her throat and gazes out into the soft dusk.

"Because it's a stalemate game?"

"Exactly. You can threaten to kill a man like that if he doesn't talk, but if he says go fuck yourself, what then?" She shrugs. "If you kill him, you don't learn anything."

"How about you shoot him through the hand or the foot, somewhere super-painful but not life-threatening, and tell him you'll do the other one if he doesn't talk?"

"That's a little better, but if you're after the truth, you don't want him in shock from a gunshot wound. People will say *anything* when they're traumatized. If you poison him and tell him there's an antidote—there isn't one for a lethal dose of aconitine, by the way—then he may or may not believe you, but he's still the one choosing, not you. He knows his only chance of survival is to talk. If he stays silent, he definitely dies."

"I don't see how it's any different. Being poisoned seems pretty traumatic, too."

"It's less sudden. It's all in the timing. You have to let the poison do its work so that it's exerting the pressure, not you. In the end he'll be so desperate you won't be able to get him to stop talking. You'll want to shoot him just to shut him up."

* * *

Much later, they're lying in bed. A faint night breeze is agitating the curtain.

"Thank you for not killing me today," Nadia murmurs into Villanelle's hair. "I know you considered it."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I'm beginning to understand how you work. How you think."

"How do I think?"

"Well, let's say, just for the sake of argument, that you shot Rinat, like you did, and then you shot me, and you put both bodies on the boat and blew it up..."

"Go on."

"When the police investigated the explosion, they'd find the remains of Rinat and a woman. And when they talked to people at Rinat's hotel, they'd find out that he left by boat this morning with a woman."

"OK."

"So they'd assume that my remains were that woman's. And that there had been some kind of fatal accident."

"And why would I go to all that trouble?"

"Well, the police wouldn't look for you, because they'd think you were dead. And I really would be dead. The only person who knows who you are. The only person who knows that you used to be Oksana Astankova."

"I'm not going to kill you, Nadia. Really." Not right now, anyway, she thinks.

"But you thought about it."

"Only for a second or two," she lies. She turns to face Nadia so that they are eye to eye, mouth to mouth, breathing each other's breath. "And not seriously. You're going to be a fully fledged soldier for the Twelve soon. They wouldn't be very happy with me if I blew you into little pieces, would they?"

"Is that the only reason?"

"Mmm... I wanted someone to play with." She runs her hand down Nadia's hard belly, her fingertips stroking the warm skin.

"You're so beautiful," Nadia says, after a moment. "I look at you, and I can hardly believe you're so perfect."

"I *am* quite beautiful," she agrees.

"Yet you do such terrible things."

"So do you."

"I'm a soldier, *kroshka*. You said so yourself. I'm built to fight. But you could have any life you want. You could walk away."

"They wouldn't let me just walk away. But even if I could, I wouldn't. I like my life."

"Then you'll die. Sooner or later the Englishwoman will find you."

"Eve Polastri? I want her to find me. I want to play with her."

"You're mad."

"I am not. I like this game. Eve Polastri likes it, too. That's why I like her."

"Is that the only reason?"

"I don't know. Maybe not."

"Should I be jealous?"

"You can be if you want. It won't make any difference to me."

Nadia is silent for a moment. "You never have any doubts? About any of this?"

"Should I?"

"That moment before you pull the trigger. When the target's already dead, but doesn't know it. And then when you close your eyes at night, there they all are. All the dead people, waiting for you..."

Villanelle smiles, kisses Nadia's mouth, and slips her hand between her legs. "They're gone. All of them." Her fingers begin a delicate dance. "The only person waiting for you is me."

"You never see them?" Nadia whispers.

"Of course not," says Villanelle, sliding her fingers inside her.

"So do you ever feel... anything about them?" Nadia asks, moving against Villanelle's hand.

"Nadia, please just shut the fuck up."

They're almost asleep when, half an hour later, a phone starts to vibrate on the bedside table.

"What is it?" asks Nadia dreamily, as Villanelle reaches across her.

"Work."

"Already? We just finished the last job."

Villanelle gets up and begins to dress. "No rest for the wicked. You should have figured that out by now."

2

If Frank HALETON is surprised to see Eve when she collects him from his house, he conceals it well. The car is an eight-year-old VW Golf from the MI6 vehicle pool, smelling of stale air-freshener, and Frank takes his place in the passenger seat without a word. As they drive away, Eve switches on the Radio 4 *Today* program, and they both pretend to listen to it.

Frank remains silent for the duration of the journey to Dever. Initially, Eve reads this as a desperate attempt to assert some sort of authority, given that when she worked at MI5 he was considerably her senior. And then a darker interpretation of his manner strikes her. He's not saying anything because he knows exactly what she's doing here, and so does the organization he works for. In which case, how much else do they know about her? And for that matter, about Niko? At the thought that her husband might be the object of hostile surveillance, and possibly worse, Eve feels a twisting, agonizing guilt. There is no way of avoiding the fact that she's brought this situation on herself. Carolyn would have understood if she had decided to step down after Bill was murdered in Shanghai; indeed, she encouraged her to do so. But she can't, and won't, let go.

In part, it's a desire for answers. Who is the unnamed woman who has carved such a bloody trail through the shadowlands of

the intelligence world? Who are her employers, what do they want, and how have they achieved such terrifying power and reach? The mystery, and the woman at the heart of the mystery, speak to a part of Eve that she's never really explored. Could she herself ever be transformed into someone who acts as her target does? Who kills without hesitation or pity? And if so, what would it take?

The traffic is heavy leaving London, but Eve is able to make up time on the motorway, and it's just after quarter to nine when she takes the slip road signposted "Works Access Only." The road leads through sparse woodland to a steel gateway set into a high chain-link fence topped with razor-wire. In front of the gate is a guardhouse, where an armed military police corporal checks Eve's security pass before nodding her through the gate toward the cluster of low, weather-stained brick buildings that comprise the former government research station. As Eve drives into the car park, she sees half a dozen tracksuited figures running laps of the fenced perimeter. Others, carrying automatic weapons, saunter between the dilapidated buildings.

At the reception block, Eve and Frank are met by a trooper from E Squadron, the Special Forces unit based at the camp. Casting an eye at Eve's pass, he beckons them to follow him. The interview room is at the end of a strip-lit underground corridor. It's minimally furnished and there are no CCTV cameras in evidence. A trestle table holds an electric kettle, a half-full bottle of mineral water, two stained mugs, a packet of biscuits, and a box holding tea bags and sachets of sugar and powdered milk. The room is colder than Eve would have liked, and the air-conditioning gives off a faint, shuddering whirr.

"Shall I be mother?" asks Frank dryly, approaching the trestle table.

"Whatever," says Eve, seating herself in a dusty plastic chair. "I don't have time to waste here, and neither do you."

"Are we observed? Overheard? Recorded?"

"No. Or at least I was told we wouldn't be."

"I suppose that will have to do... Christ, these biscuits must be six months old."

"Ground rules," says Eve. "You lie, deviate from the truth in any way, or jerk me around, the deal's off."

"Fair enough." He pours the mineral water into the kettle. "Milk, one sugar?"

"Do you understand what I just told you?"

"Mrs. Polastri. Eve. I've been conducting tactical questioning sessions for over a decade. I know the rules."

"Good. Let's start at the beginning. How were you approached?"

Frank yawns, lazily covering his mouth. "We were on holiday, about three years ago. A tennis camp, near Málaga. There was another couple there from Holland, and Penny and I started playing regularly with them. They told us that their names were Rem and Gaité Bakker, and that they came from Delft, where he was an IT consultant and she was a radiographer. In retrospect, I doubt that any of that was the case, but I had no reason not to believe it at the time, and we became quasi-friends, in the way that you do on holiday. Going out for meals together, and so on. Anyway, one evening Penny and Gaité went with some of the other wives on a girls' night out—flamenco, sangria, all that—and Rem and I went to a bar in the town. We talked about sports for a bit, he was a big Federer fan, and then we got onto politics."

"So what did you tell Rem that you did for a living?"

"I gave him the standard, non-specific Home Office line.

And inevitably, for a time, we got stuck into the immigration question. He didn't push the politics, though. I think we ended the evening talking about wine, which he knew a lot about, and as far as I was concerned, it was just one of those pleasant, setting-the-world-to-rights-type evenings that happen on holiday."

"And then?"

"And then, a month after we went back home, Rem emailed me. He was over in London for a couple of days, and he wanted me to meet a friend of his. The idea was that the three of us would go to a wine club in Pall Mall, where the friend was a member, and try out a couple of rare vintages. He mentioned, I recall, Richebourg and Echezeaux, which were quite some distance out of my orbit on a Thames House salary, even as a deputy head of section. Did you say you wanted milk and sugar?"

"Yes, thank you," she says absentmindedly. "So how did you feel about him getting back in contact like this?"

"I remember thinking, in an English kind of way, that it was slightly overstepping the mark. That going out for a drink on holiday was one thing, but pursuing the acquaintanceship afterward quite another, even though we'd gone through the motions of swapping email addresses. At the same time, I have to admit that the thought of drinking truly great Burgundy just once in my life was too good a chance to pass up, so I said I'd go."

"In other words, they played you perfectly."

"Pretty much," says Frank, handing her one of the mugs. "And when I got there, I can tell you, I was glad I went."

"So who was the friend?"

"A Russian, Sergei. A young guy, about thirty, incredibly

polished. Brioni suit, flawless English, perfectly accented French to the sommelier, charming as the day is long. And on the table, unbelievably, three glasses and a bottle of DRC.”

“And what’s that, to us lowly commoners?”

“Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. The finest, rarest, and without question the most expensive red Burgundy in the world. This was a 1988, with a list price of around twelve K. I practically fainted.”

“*That* was your price? The chance to drink some expensive wine?”

“Don’t be judgmental, Eve, it doesn’t suit you. And no, that wasn’t my price. That was just the handshake. And good though the wine was, and when I say good I mean sublime, I didn’t feel myself compromised in the slightest, and in the normal course of events, I would’ve happily thanked Rem and Sergei, shaken hands, and never seen either of them again.”

“So what was abnormal about that evening?”

“The conversation. Sergei, if that was really his name, had a grasp of global strategy that you rarely encounter outside the better think-tanks and the higher echelons of government. When someone like that dissects and lays out the issues, you listen.”

“It sounds like he knew exactly who you were.”

“After listening to him for a few minutes, I had no doubt of that. Or that he and Rem were important players in the intelligence world. The whole thing was very fluent, and I was curious to see what the offer would be.”

“You knew there would be an offer?”

“Of some kind. But they didn’t lead with the money, and... well, you can choose to believe this or not, but it wasn’t about that. The money, I mean. It was about the idea.”

"The idea," says Eve flatly. "You're telling me that this had nothing to do with apartments in the south of France, or twenty-something Serbian gym instructors sunning themselves on yachts, or any of that. You're saying that this was about conviction."

"Like I said, you can choose to believe me or not."

"So who's Tony Kent?"

"No idea."

"We already know he was the fixer behind the scenes. He paid you, basically, though he tried very hard to cover his tracks."

"Whatever you say."

"Are you sure? Tony Kent. Think hard."

"I'm completely sure. I was told nothing I didn't need to know. No one was giving out names, I promise you."

"And you're telling me that you believed in this cause of theirs? Seriously?"

"Eve, listen. Please. You know, and I know, that the world's going to hell. Europe's imploding, the United States is led by an imbecile, and the Islamic south is moving north, dressed in a suicide vest. The center cannot hold. As things stand, we're fucked."

"That's how it looks to you?"

"That's how it is, period. Now you might say that the West's loss is the East's gain, and that while we tear ourselves apart, they make hay. But long-term, that's not how it works. Sooner or later, our problems become their problems. The only way that we retain any kind of stability, the only way that we all *survive*, is if the major powers cooperate. I don't just mean through trade agreements or political alliances, I mean actively working as one to impose and protect our values."

"And what are these values, specifically?"

He leans forward on his chair. His eyes meet and hold hers. "Look, Eve. We're alone here. No one's watching, no one's listening, no one knows or gives a shit what we're talking about. So I'm asking you to see sense. You can be on the side of the future, or you can lock yourself into the burned-out wreck of the past."

"You were about to tell me about those values."

"I'll tell you what's been proven not to work. Multiculturalism, and lowest-common-denominator democracy. That's had its day. It's over."

"And in its place?"

"A new world order."

"Engineered by traitors and assassins?"

"I don't consider myself a traitor. And as for assassins, what do you think E Squadron's for? Every system needs its armed wing, and yes, we have ours."

"So why did you kill Viktor Kedrin? Seems like his political philosophy was right up your alley."

"It was. But Viktor was also a drunk with a taste for very young girls. Which would have got out, sooner or later, and tainted the message. This way he's a martyr, tragically slain for his beliefs. I don't know if you've been to Russia lately, but Viktor Kedrin is everywhere. Posters, newspapers, blogs... Dead, he's far more popular than he ever was when he was alive."

"Give me the name of the woman."

"Which woman?"

"The assassin who killed Kedrin on my watch. And Bill Pargrave, among others."

"I have no idea. You'll have to speak to someone from Housekeeping."

A second later, without conscious thought, Eve has unholstered her automatic pistol and is pointing it at Frank's face. "I said don't jerk me around. What's her name?"

"And I told you I don't know." He regards her steadily. "I also suggest you put that thing away before you cause an accident. I'm worth a great deal more to you alive than dead. Imagine the explaining you'd have to do."

She lowers her arm, furious with herself. "And I suggest *you* remember the conditions under which you're sitting here talking to me, rather than under arrest for treason. You're going to tell me the names of all your contacts, and how and when you communicated with them. You're going to tell me what services you performed for them, and what information you passed them. You're going to describe who paid you, and how. And you're going to give me the names of every single member of the Security Services, and anyone else, who has betrayed his or her country to this organization."

"The Twelve."

"What?"

"That's what it's called. The Twelve. *Le Douze. Dvenadtsat.*"

There's a peremptory knock at the door, and the trooper who brought them to the interview room leans in. "Boss has a message for you, ma'am. Can you come up?"

"Wait here," she tells Frank, and follows the trooper up to ground level, where a compact, mustached officer is waiting for her.

"Your husband called," he tells her. "Says you need to get back home, there's been a break-in."

Eve stares at him. "Did he say anything else? Is he OK?"

"I'm afraid I don't have that information. Sorry."

She nods, and fumbles for her phone. The call goes straight

to Niko's voicemail, but moments later he calls her back. "I'm at the house. The police are here."

"What happened?"

"All pretty strange. Mrs. Khan, over the road, saw a woman climbing out of our front room window—completely brazen, apparently, not trying to hide what she was doing at all—and dialed 999. First I knew of it was when a couple of uniformed cops came to the school and picked me up. Nothing's missing, as far as I can tell, but..."

"But what?"

"Just get back here, OK?"

"I'm assuming she got away?"

"Yes."

"Any description, other than 'woman'?"

"Young, slim..."

Eve knows. She just knows. Minutes later, she's driving southwards on the A303, with Frank in the passenger seat. She dislikes the physical closeness, and the faint but cloying smell of his aftershave, but she definitely doesn't want him lurking behind her.

"I'm empowered to make you an offer," he says, as they pass Micheldever service station.

"Make me an offer? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Look, Eve. I'm not sure what your present status is, or exactly which department you now work for, but I do know that it wasn't very long ago that you were in a junior liaison post at Thames House, earning chicken-feed. Public service its own reward, and all that bollocks. And I'm betting things haven't greatly changed. Financially, at least."

"Shit!" Eve brakes hard to avoid a Porsche that has swerved into the slow lane to overtake her on the inside. "Nice driving,

asshole!”

“Imagine, though. Suppose you had a few million banked, so that when the time was right, you and your husband could give up work and slip away to the sunshine. Spend the rest of your life traveling first class. No more cramped flats or crowded tubes. No more endless winters.”

“That’s working out great for you right now, isn’t it?”

“It will do, in the end. Because I know that you’re smart enough to realize that you need me. That the ship of state isn’t sinking, it’s sunk.”

“You seriously believe that?”

“Eve, what I’m suggesting isn’t treasonable, it’s common sense. If you really want to serve your country, join us and help create a new world. We’re everywhere. We’re legion. And we will reward you...”

“Dammit. Right now? Really?” A police motorcycle, blue lights flashing, is growing larger and larger in her rear-view mirror. Eve slows down, hoping the motorcycle will race past, but it swings in front of her, and the uniformed officer indicates with a waving arm that she pull in on the hard shoulder.

As Eve does so, the officer halts in front of her, pulls the powerful BMW bike onto its stand, saunters over, and peers through the driver-side window.

Eve lowers the window. “Is there a problem, officer?”

“Can I see your license, please?” A woman’s voice. The visor of her white helmet reflecting the sunlight.

Eve hands her the license, along with her Security Services pass.

“Out of the car, please. Both of you.”

“Is that really necessary? I’m on my way back to London because there’s been a break-in at my house. You’re welcome

to check with the Met. And I strongly suggest you take another look at that pass.”

“Right away, please.”

“OK. Fine.” Slowly, not attempting to disguise her frustration, Eve climbs out of the car. Traffic races past, terrifyingly close.

“Hands on the bonnet. Legs apart.”

That hint of a not-quite-identifiable accent, unusual in a police officer. Doubt is beginning to enter Eve’s mind now. Expert hands pat her down, take her phone, and unholster the Glock. She hears the faint click of the magazine release, and then feels the pistol replaced. This, Eve realizes with sick certainty, is no police officer.

“Turn around.”

Eve does so. Notes the lean female form in the high-visibility jacket, leather trousers, and boots. Watches as the woman’s hands lift her visor to reveal an intense gaze that betrays no trace of human emotion. A gaze that she has encountered once before. On a busy street in Shanghai, the night that Bill Pargrave was found with his head all but hacked from his body.

“You,” Eve says. She can hardly breathe. Her heart is slamming in her chest.

“Me.” She removes her helmet. Underneath it she’s wearing a Lycra face-mask that conceals all her features except those striking hazel eyes. Lowering the helmet to the ground, she beckons to Frank, who walks over. “Let the VW’s tires down, Frank, and put the car key in your pocket. Then wait over by the motorcycle.”

Frank looks at Eve, smiles, and shrugs. “Sorry,” he says. “I’m afraid you lose this round. We look after our own, you see.”

“You’re a dick-swab, Frank,” snaps Eve.

The woman takes her by the upper arm, leads her away a few

paces, and examines her features as if trying to commit them to memory. "I've missed you, Eve. Missed your face. Missed your hair." With Frank out of earshot, she has reverted to what Eve assumes is her natural accent. Russian, she thinks.

"I wish I could say the same."

"Don't be like that, Eve. Don't be bitter."

"Are you going to kill Frank?"

"Why? Do you think I should?"

"It's what you do, isn't it?"

"Please. Let's not waste precious time talking about him. We meet so rarely." She raises her hand and touches a finger to Eve's face, and as she does so, Eve is dumbfounded to see that she is wearing the bracelet that she lost in Shanghai.

"That's *mine*. Where did you get it?"

"From your room at the Sea Bird Hotel. I climbed in one night to watch you sleep, and I just couldn't help myself."

Eve stares at her, blank-faced. "You... watched me sleep?"

"You looked so adorable, with your hair spread out all over the pillow. So vulnerable." She loops an errant tress behind Eve's ear. "You remind me of someone I used to know. The same beautiful hair, the same sad smile."

"What was her name? What's *your* name?"

"Oh, Eve. I have so many names."

"You know my name. It's only fair to tell me yours."

"It would spoil things."

"Spoil things? You broke into my fucking house this morning, and you're worried that you'll spoil things?"

"I wanted to leave you something. A surprise." She shakes the bracelet on her wrist. "In return for this."

"But now, even though I'm really enjoying this little chat, I have to go."

"You're taking him?" Eve gestures at Frank, who is loitering by the motorcycle, twenty paces away.

"I have to. But can we get one thing clear before I do?"

"What's that?"

She gestures to Eve's top. "Is that a sweater attached to a shirt? Is it two separate pieces? How does it work?"

Eve gapes at her. The question is so random, so out of left field, that she isn't even sure she heard it correctly. "What?"

"I'm just kidding. But we really must do this again. There's so much I want to ask you. So much I have to tell you. So *à bientôt*, Eve. See you soon."

* * *

As they fly along the country roads, the trees and hedgerows still vivid in the early autumn sunlight, Frank feels a profound lightening of spirit. They've come for him, as they always promised they would if he was blown, and now they're going to take him somewhere safe. Somewhere the Twelve's word is the rule of law. It will mean never seeing his family again, but sometimes you have to make sacrifices. In the case of Penny, that sacrifice is not so arduous. And the kids, well, he's given them a first-class start in life. Fee-paying north London schools, skiing holidays in the Trois Vallées, godparents well-placed in the City.

He wasn't expecting a woman to come for him, but he certainly isn't complaining, given what he's seen of this one. She certainly put that Polastri bitch in her place. And what genius to send her in the guise of a traffic cop.

They ride for almost an hour, before stopping by a bridge over a river outside the Surrey town of Weybridge. The woman pulls

the BMW onto its stand, then removes her helmet and jacket, tugs off her face mask, and shakes out her hair. Taking off his own, borrowed, helmet, Frank stares at her appreciatively.

He considers himself something of a connoisseur of the female form, and this one scores highly. The warm blonde hair, sweaty, but nothing he can't work with. The eyes a bit flat and distant when they look at him, but that mouth suggesting whole realms of sexual possibility. The tits? Sweet as apples beneath the tight T-shirt. And what man didn't feel a stirring in his Calvins at the sight of a girl in leather trousers and biker boots? Dressed like that, she has to be up for it. And he is, effectively, a single man again.

"Let's walk," she says, glancing at the BMW's satnav. "The rendezvous for the next stage of your journey is up this way."

A path leads from the road down to the side of the River Wey. The water is dark olive, the current so slow that the surface looks still. The banks are shadowed by trees, and overgrown with cow-parsley. At intervals, narrowboats and barges lie motionless at anchor.

"So where am I going?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Perhaps, if we meet again..." he begins.

"Perhaps what?"

"Bit of dinner? Something like that?"

"Mmm... I don't think so."

They continue along the sun-splashed path, passing no one, until arriving at a broad weir-pool fringed with bulrushes and flag-iris.

Frank looks around him. The river, its waters moving smoothly toward the rushing weir, has the keen, indefinable smell of such places. Mud, vegetation, and rot. There's a

timelessness about the scene that reminds him of his childhood. Of *The Wind in the Willows*, of Ratty, Mole, and Toad. And that chapter he never quite understood: “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn.” Frank is pondering this enigma when a police-issue baton, swung with extreme force, connects with the base of his skull. He pitches almost noiselessly into the river. His half-submerged body hangs there for a moment, and then, as Villanelle watches, begins its inexorable drift toward the crest of the weir, where it is immediately drawn deep underwater. She stands there, imagining his body turning and turning in the vortex, far beneath the glassy surface. And then she holsters the baton, and unhurriedly makes her way back along the path.

* * *

By the time Lance drops her off at her house, Eve is exhausted. She’s also furious, apprehensive, and faintly nauseated from the nicotine smell of Lance’s car. There’s a horrendous conversation with Carolyn still to be had—she’s coming by the office at 6 p.m.—but the most shaming admission that Eve has had to make is to herself. How easily, how effortlessly and contemptuously, she has been played. How naive she has been. How utterly unprofessional.

She should have known, from Frank’s bullish manner, that he had sounded some sort of alarm, and expected to be exfiltrated. Rather than congratulating herself on uncovering his treachery, she should have been expecting precisely the sort of audacious maneuver that had been mounted against her. How could she have been so ill-prepared? And then there’s that surreal encounter on the A303, which has left her shot through with emotions she can’t even begin to define.

So she's in no mood for Niko's hostility when he lets her into the house. "I rang you four and a half hours ago," he tells her, pale-faced with suppressed tension. "You said you'd be here by midday, and it's nearly three."

She forces herself to breathe. "Look, Niko, I'm sorry, but just shut up. You think your day sucked? Trust me, mine's been way worse. I just had to spend an hour beside a busy main road trying to wave down a car so I could get some help because my car keys and my phone were stolen. And that's just the start of it. So just tell me, without being an asshole about it, what's going on."

Niko compresses his lips and nods. "As I told you on the phone, Mrs. Khan reported seeing a young woman climbing out of our window at about ten thirty this morning, and rang the police. Two police officers called round at the school, picked me up, and drove me here. They were obviously taking the whole thing quite seriously, because there was a forensics person waiting outside when we got back. Perhaps they've got our address on file because of your old job at MI5, who knows? Anyway, they went through the house with me, room by room, and the forensics woman did her stuff on the door handles and the front room window and various other surfaces, looking for fingerprints, but she found nothing. She told me the intruder must have been wearing gloves. She'd undone the window lock from the inside, but nothing else had been disturbed, as far as I could see, and nothing taken."

"Thelma and Louise?"

"Fine, just chilling outside. They made a big impression on the cops, as you can imagine."

"And the cops left already?"

"Ages ago."

"So how do they think she got in?"

"Through the front door. They had a close look at the lock and they reckon she picked it. And she disabled the security system like it was nothing. Which makes her a professional, not some teenager looking for phones and laptops."

"Right."

"So... do you have any idea who she might be?"

"I don't know any professional burglars, no."

"Please, Eve, you know what I mean. Is this something to do with your work? Was this woman looking for something specific? Something..." His voice trails off, and then, as she watches, a darker suspicion takes hold. "Was this... *that woman*? The one you were after? Probably still are after? Because, if so..."

She meets his stare calmly.

"Tell me the truth, Eve. Seriously, I need to know. I need you, just this once, not to lie."

"Niko, honestly, I have absolutely no idea who this was. There is nothing to connect this to my work, or to the investigation you're talking about. Do you know how many break-ins were reported in London last year? Almost sixty thousand. *Sixty thousand*. That means that statistically—"

"Statistically." He closes his eyes. "Tell me about statistics, Eve."

"Niko, please. I'm sorry you think I lie to you, I'm sorry someone broke into our house, I'm sorry we don't have anything worth stealing. But this is just some random fucking London event, OK? There *is* no explanation. It just... happened."

He stares at the wall. "Maybe the police will—"

"No, the police won't. Especially if she didn't take anything. They'll log it, and it'll go in the files. Now let me take a look

around, and make sure there's really nothing missing."

He stands there, breathing audibly. Finally, slowly, he bows his head. "I'll make some tea."

"Yes, please. And if there's any of that cake left, I'm starving." Stepping behind him, she puts her arms around his waist and lays her head against his back, attempting to make peace. "I'm sorry. I've really had an awful day. And this just makes it worse. So thank you for dealing with the police and everything. I don't think I could have handled it."

Opening the back door, she smiles as Thelma and Louise come bounding toward her and nose inquisitively at her hands. They really are very hard to resist. On the far side of the wall bordering the tiny patio, there's a drop of some twenty meters to the overground railway track. Its proximity to the line, the realtor explained to them when they bought the place, was the reason that the house was cheaper than others in the area. Eve no longer hears the trains; their rattle and thrum has long been subsumed into the ambient noise that is London. Sometimes she sits out here and watches them, soothed by the ceaselessness of their coming and going.

"When did we last spend a weekday afternoon together?" Niko asks, handing her a cup of tea with a slice of cake balanced on the saucer. "It seems like forever."

"It does," she says, staring out toward the dim, urban horizon. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go on."

"About Russia." She takes a bite of cake.

"Not my area of expertise, but what about it?"

"Have you ever heard of anything or anyone called the Twelve?"

"Just the poem."

“What poem?”

“*Dvenadtsat. The Twelve*, by Aleksandr Blok. He was an early-twentieth-century writer who believed in the sacred destiny of Russia. Pretty crackpot stuff. I read him at university, during my revolutionary poetry phase.”

Eve feels a coldness at the back of her neck. “What’s it about?”

“Twelve Bolsheviks pursuing some mystical quest through the streets of Petrograd. At midnight, as far as I remember, and in a snowstorm. Why?”

“Someone at work today referred to an organization called the Twelve. Some political group. Either Russian, or Russian-connected. I’d never heard of it.”

Niko shrugs. “Most educated Russians would know the poem. There’s nostalgia for the Soviet era all across the political spectrum.”

“What do you mean?”

“That a group calling itself after Blok’s midnight rambles could be of almost any complexion from neo-communist to outright fascist. The name doesn’t tell you much.”

“So do you know where I could... Niko?”

But Thelma and Louise are butting at his knees and bleating for his attention.

Tea in hand, Eve goes through the house. It’s a small place, and although it’s crammed with stuff, mostly Niko’s, it doesn’t look like anything has been moved or stolen. She visits the bedroom last, checking under pillows and in drawers, and paying particular attention to her modest stock of jewelry. She’s furious at the theft of her bracelet, and still can’t begin to process the knowledge that a professional killer broke into her Shanghai hotel room while she slept. Imagining that woman staring at her with those intense, soulless eyes, and perhaps even touching

her, makes her feel faint.

"You looked so adorable, with your hair spread out all over the pillow..."

Eve opens the wardrobe and flips through her dresses, tops, and skirts, sliding the hangers along one by one. And comes to a disbelieving halt. On a shelf with her belts, gloves, and a straw hat from the previous summer is a small package wrapped in tissue paper, which she has definitely never seen before. After pulling on one of the pairs of gloves, she carefully lifts the package, weighs it in one hand, and unwraps it. A dove-gray box bearing the words Van Diest. Inside, on a pillow of gray velvet, an exquisite rose gold bracelet, set with twin diamonds at the clasp.

For several heartbeats, Eve stares. Then, twitching off her left glove, she slips her wrist into the bracelet and snaps the clasp into place. The fit is perfect, and for a moment, languidly extending her arm, she thrills to the look and the delicate weight of it. In the folds of tissue paper, its corner just visible, is a tiny card. The note is handwritten.

SORRY BABY x

-V

Eve stands there, the bracelet on her wrist, the card in her gloved hand, for a full minute. How should she interpret those words? As a flirtatious apology for the theft of her bracelet? For the events that transpired earlier in the day? An implied threat of worse things to come? On impulse, she lowers her face to the card, and detects an expensive, feminine scent. Her hand shaking, she replaces the card in the box, possessed by emotions she can't immediately identify. Fear, certainly, but

an almost stifling excitement, too. The woman who chose that beautiful, feminine object and wrote that message is a murderer. A stone-cold professional assassin whose every word is a lie, and whose every action is calculated to unsettle and manipulate. To meet her gaze, as Eve did just hours ago, is to look into a heart-freezing void. No fear, no pity, no human warmth, only their absence.

Just outside on the patio, talking enraptured nonsense to the goats—the *goats*—is the best and kindest man that Eve has ever known. The man into whose warm body, familiar but still mysterious, she molds herself at night. The man whose unaccountable love for her has no horizon. The man to whom she now lies with such fluency that it's almost second nature.

Why is she so stirred by this lethally dangerous woman? Why do her words cut so deep? That cryptic V is no accident. It's a name, if only a partial one. A gift, like the bracelet. A gesture at once intimate and sensual and profoundly hostile. Ask and I will answer. Call and I will come for you.

How have the two of them locked themselves so inescapably into each other's lives? Could it be that, in some bizarre way, V is reaching out to her? Raising her arm, Eve touches the smooth gold to her cheek. What can this lovely, luxurious object have cost? Five thousand pounds? Six? God, she wanted it. Couldn't she perhaps just not say anything? Now that she's committed herself to a completely unprofessional course of action by unwrapping the thing in the first place, and quite possibly compromising forensic evidence, wouldn't it be easier to just... keep it?

With a flush of shame and regret, she removes the bracelet and places it back in its box. For fuck's *sake*. She's reacting precisely as her adversary wants her to. Falling for the most blindingly

obvious temptation, and personalizing the situation in a completely irrational fashion. How egotistical and delusional, to think that she, Eve, is the object of this V person's affection or desire. The woman is without a doubt a narcissistic psychopath, and attempting to undermine Eve through passive-aggressive taunting. To think otherwise, even for an instant, flies in the face of everything Eve has ever learned as a criminologist and an intelligence officer. She takes a carrier bag from the floor of the wardrobe and stuffs the box, card, and tissue inside with a gloved hand.

"Anything?" Niko calls out from the bottom of the stairs.

"No," she says. "Nothing."

* * *

On the Eurostar, no one takes much notice of the young woman in the black hoodie. Her hair is greasy, her pallor unhealthy, and there's something indefinably dirty about her. She's wearing scuffed black motorcycle boots, and her insolent posture suggests that she might use them on anyone rash enough to approach her. To the middle-aged couple sitting opposite her, working their way through the *Daily Telegraph* cryptic crossword, she's exactly the type of person that makes train travel so unpleasant. Unwashed. No consideration whatsoever for those around her. Forever on her phone.

"Give us another clue," the husband murmurs.

"Thirteen across: 'Eliminate a flock of crows,'" says his wife, and they both frown.

Villanelle, meanwhile, having disabled the location tracker on Eve's phone and read all her disappointingly boring texts and emails, is thumbing through her photographs. Here's Niko, the

Polish asshole with the stupid mustache, in the kitchen. Here's an Eve selfie, trying on new sunglasses, a price tag dangling over her nose (please, Eve, not those frames). Here's another of Niko with the goats (and what the fuck is with those animals, anyway? Are they planning to eat them?). Further back, pictures of Eve and some friends at a karaoke bar. And then there's a whole series of photos of some random man just *eating*. She has no idea who he is, or what that's about.

Looking up, Villanelle sees from the high-rise blocks and graffiti-tagged walls that the train is entering the outer Parisian suburbs. She pockets Eve's phone and pulls out her own to check for any messages from her handler, Raymond. There are none.

Konstantin had always checked in on her after a job was done to make sure everything went well. She suddenly realizes, to her surprise, that she misses him. She misses his stupid face with his stupid beard, and his stupid laugh, and his stupid habit of letting himself into her apartment whether she was there or not, and even his stupid lectures about being cautious and not poking the bear that is Eve Polastri. She swipes at her eyes, refusing to let the tears gathering there fall.

The train is pulling into the Gare du Nord. Emboldened by their incipient arrival, the middle-aged couple look at Villanelle with frank dislike.

"That crossword clue," she says to them. "'Eliminate a flock of crows.' Did you figure it out?"

"Er, no," the husband says. "We didn't, actually."

"It's 'murder.'" She flutters her fingers. "Enjoy Paris."

* * *

"Lance has already given us the general outline, but let's go over it again. Feel free to interrupt if you need to add anything," says Carolyn. An intelligence officer of the old school, she is a tall, thin woman with a penchant for linen suits and overcoats. "You were stopped by a person you thought was a police officer on a motorcycle?"

She, Eve, Kenny, and Lance are sitting in the Goodge Street office. A strip light casts a sickly glow. At intervals, there's a muted rumbling from the Underground station beneath them.

"Right," says Eve. "On the A303 near Micheldever. And I'm pretty sure the uniform and bike were authentic. The shoulder number and the plates both checked out. They belong to a Road Policing Unit of the Hampshire Constabulary."

"Not easy to nick, I would think," says Kenny, leaning back in the computer chair that almost seems a part of him, and absently fiddling with a Rubik's cube.

"Unless you've got someone inside that particular force."

"Lance is right," says Carolyn. "If they've penetrated MI5, then they're certainly going to have people in the police."

They look at each other. Eve's earlier exhilaration is now just a memory. What was I thinking? She wonders. This whole situation is a clusterfuck. There's simply no other word for it.

"So this woman searches you, takes your phone and the ammo clip from your weapon, and gets Frank Haleton to take your car keys and deflate your tires. You and she then have the conversation that you've just described to me, in the course of which you notice that she has a Russian accent and that she's wearing a bracelet that once belonged to you."

"The bracelet was my mother's, and she told me she stole it from my hotel room in Shanghai."

"And you never mentioned to her that you'd been to China."

"Of course not."

Carolyn nods. "So then she gives Frank her spare helmet, and drives off with him on the motorcycle."

"Yes."

"You then manage to wave down a car, borrow a phone, and ring Lance, who collects you in his car and drives you home. You get there at about 3 p.m., at which point you learn of the break-in at your house which took place at around 10:30 a.m."

"No. I already knew about that. My husband had called me. That's why I was driving home early from Dever with Haleton."

"Yes, of course. But there was no sign of anything having been disturbed, or taken from your home?"

"No, nothing disturbed or taken. But this bracelet was left in my wardrobe. Along with the note."

"I suppose there's no way of knowing where the bracelet was purchased?"

"I checked with the company," Eve says. "There are sixty-eight Van Diest boutiques and concessions worldwide. It could have come from any of them. Or it could have been bought online, or even over the phone. We could keep trying to track it down, but—"

"And there's absolutely no doubt in your mind that the woman who broke into your house, and the woman who stopped you on the A303 and abducted Frank, were the same person?"

"None. The whole thing with the bracelets is definitely her style. She must have figured that if she was seen climbing out of my window, and the police were called, there was a good chance that a message would get to me within an hour or so. She'd guess that I would drive straight back to London, bringing Haleton with me, and that would give her enough time to get up to the A303 to intercept us. The timing would be tight, but

not impossible, especially on a police motorcycle.”

“Eve, let’s assume that you’re right, and that this V woman is the one we’ve been dealing with all along. The one who killed Kedrin, Bill, and the rest of them. Let’s further assume that she works for the organization that Frank talked about, the one he said was called the Twelve. We still haven’t answered either of the two key questions. One, how did she know that we were onto Frank? And two, what has she done with him?”

“I think he must have contacted the Twelve himself. He probably had some kind of emergency number, and thought that if he was compromised, he’d be pulled out, like an agent in the field. It’s probably safe to assume she’s killed him already. It’s what she does.”

“Which means—” Carolyn begins.

“Yes. We’ve got a dead senior MI5 officer, a lot of explaining to do, and no other leads. We’re back to where we were after Kedrin, and it’s all my fault.”

“I don’t accept that.”

“I do. I pushed Haleton too hard on the phone when they had him in the van. I didn’t think he would tell his people we were onto him. I mean, what did he think they were going to do? Did he really believe they’d just pull him out and tuck him away somewhere safe to live happily ever after?”

“I listened to your conversation with Frank. We all did. And you handled him fine. The truth is, he was in serious trouble with those people from the moment we identified him, however we played it.”

Without warning, the overhead strip light cuts out, plunging them all into dimness. Lance takes a broom from the stationery cupboard behind the printer, then taps the handle sharply against the fluorescent tube, which flickers for a moment and

then comes back on again. No one comments.

“So what about MI5?” Eve asks Carolyn.

“I’ll handle them. I’ll let them know about the south of France property and the boat and the rest of it. Say we’re not sure who was paying Frank off, but that someone was, big-time. Explain that we questioned him, which they’ll find out sooner or later, and that he did a runner. That way, the whole thing becomes their problem. And when he turns up, which he will—dead or alive, but probably dead, as you say—they’ll shut down the story in the usual way.”

“And we just, what, carry on? Business as usual?” asks Eve.

“Indeed. We carry on. I’ll get a forensics person I can trust on that bracelet and the note. Also, I’m going to have people watching your home round the clock until further notice, unless you and your husband would prefer to move into a safe house.”

“No safe houses. Niko would freak out. He’s already been pushing me to quit so everything can just go back to normal.”

“OK. For the time being, not that. What else have we got?”

“I’m still working on the money-trail,” says Kenny. “And that goes to some seriously weird places. I’m also in contact with GCHQ about the Twelve, and hoping that someone, somewhere, has let something slip. If Haleton knew that name, others must, too.”

“Lance?”

The rodent features sharpen. “I might go and sniff around the Hampshire Constabulary HQ in Eastleigh. Buy pints for a few coppers. Ask about borrowed bikes and uniforms.”

“Just so we’re clear,” Eve says, walking to the window and staring out at the traffic on Tottenham Court Road. “Is the purpose of this unit still to identify a professional assassin? Or are we now investigating what appears to be an international

conspiracy? Because it's starting to feel like we're straying from the original mission."

"First and foremost, I want our assassin found," says Carolyn. "Kedrin was killed on our turf and I need a scalp to give Moscow. Also, this woman killed one of our own, and that I won't have. But it's becoming increasingly clear that if we want her, we're going to have to acquire some understanding of the organization she works for. And the more we see and hear of them, the more formidable a force they appear. But there's got to be a way in. A tiny corner you can unpick. Like, for example, this woman's interest in you."

Lance grins horribly, and stares into space.

Eve looks at him wearily. "Please, whatever it is you're thinking right now, don't share it."

"You must admit, the situation's got honey-trap written all over it."

"Lance, I'm sure you're a fine field agent, but you're a disgusting human being."

"You know what they say, Eve. Old dogs. New tricks."

"Seriously, people," says Carolyn. "What's she saying with this bracelet? What's the message here?"

"That she's in control. That she can drop into my life whenever she wants to. She's saying she's figured me out, and compared to her, I'm a loser. She's saying she can give me anything, even the intimate, feminine, super-expensive things it would never even occur to me to want. It's a woman-to-woman thing."

"Manipulative lady," murmurs Kenny knowledgeably, hunching over his keyboard.

"That's an understatement," says Eve. "But I've been watching her, too. She's been getting more and more reckless, especially

in her dealings with me. Somewhere along the line, she's going to go too far. And then I'll nail her ass."

"I bet you will," Lance snickers.

"Oh, shut up. Not like that."

He nods at the carrier bag holding the bracelet. "Maybe we don't really need to go out looking for her. Perhaps, if we just sit tight, she'll come to us."

Carolyn nods. "I don't like it, but I'm afraid you're right. That said, I think we need to acknowledge that we've turned a dangerous corner here. So full counter-surveillance measures, please. Remember your tradecraft. Eve and Kenny, listen to Lance and be guided by him. If he tells you that a situation smells bad, you walk away."

Eve glances at Lance. He looks sharp and alert, like a ferret about to be slipped into a rabbit-hole.

"Meanwhile, Eve, I'll have a word with the CO at Dever. Ask him to set up a detail to watch your house. You probably won't see much of them, but they'll be there if you need them. Can we get a photofit of this V woman?"

"I can try, but no promises. I just got a quick glance at someone I thought was her in Shanghai, and today she had a Lycra mask on under her helmet, so I really only saw her eyes."

"Well, that's that, then. We're going to watch, and we're going to wait, and when she comes, we're going to be ready."

3

The man sits, ankles crossed, in a carved oak armchair upholstered in emerald silk. He is wearing a charcoal suit, and his blood-red Charvet tie strikes a dramatic note in the muted surroundings of the hotel suite. Frowning thoughtfully, he removes his tortoiseshell spectacles, polishes them with a silk handkerchief, and replaces them.

Villanelle glances at him, swallows a mouthful of vintage Moët et Chandon, and turns her attention to the woman. Seated beside her husband, she has dark eyes and hair the color of summer wheat. She is, at a guess, in her late thirties. Villanelle places her champagne flute on a side table, beside an arrangement of white roses, then takes the woman's slender wrists and draws her to her feet. For a few moments they stand pressed together, the only sound the murmur of the evening traffic in the Place de la Concorde.

Softly, Villanelle's lips brush those of the other woman, and her husband shifts appreciatively in his chair. One by one, Villanelle undoes the half-dozen buttons of the woman's pleated shift dress, which falls soundlessly to the floor. The woman's hands move toward Villanelle's face, but Villanelle gently forces them down: she wants total control here.

Soon the woman is naked, and stands there tremulous and

expectant. Closing her eyes, Villanelle runs her hand over the woman's hair, inhales her scent, explores the soft curves of her body. As her fingers move downwards, she hears herself breathing a long-unspoken name. The years and her surroundings fall away, and once again she is in an apartment in Moscow, and Anna is there, smiling her sad smile.

"Tell her she's a dirty bitch," says the man. "*Une vraie salope.*"

Villanelle opens her eyes. Catches sight of herself in the mirror over the mantel. She frowns. This isn't working for her. The woman whose legs she's parting is a stranger, and her husband's pleasure is repulsive. Abruptly, Villanelle disengages, and wipes her fingers on the roses, scattering the floor with petals. Then she walks out of the suite.

From the taxi, she watches as the illuminated shopfronts of the rue de Rivoli glide past. It's as if she's in a silent film, detached from her surroundings, disconnected from experience and sensation. She's felt like this for a couple of weeks now, since coming back from England, and it worries her, although the worry itself is something vague, something she can't quite bring into focus.

Perhaps it's another delayed reaction to the killing of Konstantin. Villanelle is not given to self-pity, but when you're ordered to kill your handler, who not only discovered and trained you but is also your friend, the closest thing you have to family, even, it's disconcerting. She's only human, after all. She misses him. He castigated her again and again for her recklessness, and his judgments could be brutal, but at least he cared enough to make them. And he valued her. He appreciated just how rare a creature she is, with her unblinking savagery and her incapacity for guilt.

As an assassin for the Twelve, Villanelle has always accepted

that she will never see the organization's grand plan, never be told more of the story than she needs to know. But she's also aware, because Konstantin repeatedly told her so, that her role is vital. That she's more than just a trained killer, she's an instrument of destiny.

Raymond, Konstantin's replacement, has so far failed to give Villanelle the impression that he thinks of her as more than an employee, and not even an especially valued one. He dispatched the kill orders for Yevtukh and Haleton in the usual way, via innocuous-looking postcards with codes leading to encrypted dossiers on a secure website, but he didn't thank her afterward, as Konstantin always did, which Villanelle considers just plain rude. Not even the fun she's having with Eve makes up for the fact that Raymond is shaping up to be a thoroughly unsatisfactory handler.

The taxi draws up to the curb in the Avenue Victor Hugo. Villanelle's Vespa is parked opposite the club where she met the couple. The club's still open, and the lamps flanking the entrance still dimly glowing, but she doesn't give the place a second glance. Rocking the scooter off its stand, she kick-starts the engine and glides unhurriedly into the traffic.

Villanelle doesn't go straight back to her apartment, but heads for La Goutte d'Or. For ten minutes, she threads the narrow streets, her gaze flickering between her wing mirror and the vehicles ahead of her, all senses alert. She varies her speed, pretends to stall at a green traffic light, and at one point, deliberately drives in the wrong direction down a tiny, one-way street. Finally, satisfied that she is not being followed, she turns westwards toward Montmartre, and the building where she lives.

After parking the Vespa on the street, she takes the stairs to

her apartment. She's about to unlock the door when she hears a faint, distressed mewing from behind her. It's a kitten, one of several belonging to her neighbor, Madame Tattevin. Carefully scooping up the tiny creature, Villanelle strokes and calms it before knocking on Madame Tattevin's door.

The elderly woman is effusive in her thanks. She's always liked the quiet young woman from down the hall. She's clearly extremely busy, judging by how often she's away, but she always finds a smile for Madame Tattevin. She's a caring person, unlike so many of her generation.

When all the niceties have been observed, and the other kittens and their mother admired and cooed over, Villanelle returns to her own apartment. Locking the door behind her, she is finally enfolded in silence. The apartment, with its high ceilings and large windows overlooking the city, is spacious and restful. The furniture is an odd but stylish assortment of worn antiques and mid-twentieth century pieces. There's a scattering of minor post-Impressionist paintings which Villanelle has never examined but whose presence she tolerates.

With Konstantin gone, no one ever visits her here. She has no friends to speak of. Her neighbors know her as a generally courteous but distant figure, often absent. Her service charges and property taxes are paid from a corporate account in Geneva, and in the unlikely event that anyone were to investigate this, they would find themselves drawn into a web of front companies and cut-outs so complex as to be effectively impenetrable. But no one has ever done so.

In the kitchen, Villanelle prepares a plate of yellowtail sashimi and buttered toast, then takes a bottle of Grey Goose vodka from the refrigerator and pours herself a double measure. Seating herself at a table in front of the long, north-facing plate-

glass window, she gazes at the glittering city spread out below her, and thinks about the games she'd like to play with Eve. This is precisely the sort of reckless behavior Konstantin was always warning her about. It leads to mistakes, and mistakes get you killed. But what's the point of a game if the stakes aren't high? Villanelle wants to shatter Eve's protective shell and manipulate the vulnerable being inside. She wants her pursuer to know that she's been out-thought and outplayed, and to witness her capitulation. She wants to own her.

Equally importantly, Villanelle wants a new assignment. Something more demanding than bread-and-butter kills like Yevtukh and Haleton. She wants a well-protected, high-status target. A really challenging set-up. It's time to show Raymond, and more importantly, Eve, just how good she is.

Flipping open the laptop on the kitchen counter, she opens the homepage of an innocuous-looking social media account, and posts an image of a cat wearing sunglasses. Raymond's tradecraft, she's discovered, often takes a surprisingly sentimental turn.

* * *

Three days after his abduction on the A303, Frank Haleton is found dead by National Trust volunteers, who are removing a fallen tree from a weir pool on the River Wey. Brief notices appear in the local papers, and the finding of Weybridge Coroner's Court is death by misadventure. The victim, it is reported, was a Home Office employee who may have been suffering from some form of early dementia. He appeared to have gotten lost, fallen into the river, struck his head on a rock or other hard surface, lost consciousness, and drowned.

“Obviously our killer didn’t make it look too much like murder,” says Carolyn, when she visits the Goodge Street office on the evening of the inquest. “But I’m guessing Thames House had to call in a few favors to get that result.”

“I knew she was going to kill him,” says Eve.

“It did always look probable,” Carolyn admits.

“But didn’t Haleton tell you he was authorized to try and recruit you?” asks Lance. “Wouldn’t the Twelve have let that play out?”

“Whatever they told him, I doubt they believed he could actually pull it off,” says Eve. “They sent V right away, which to me says they decided to kill him the moment he signaled he’d been compromised.”

“Poor bloke,” says Kenny, reaching for a bag of Tangfastics.

“I don’t feel sorry for him at all,” says Eve. “He must have been the one who blocked me when I requested police protection for Viktor Kedrin. He personally enabled that murder.”

“So let’s just run through where we are now,” says Carolyn, laying her coat over Eve’s desk, and pulling up a chair. “As usual, stop me if I make any unfounded assumptions, or if you want to add anything.”

The others make their own seating arrangements beneath the strip light’s sepulchral glow.

Leaning back in her chair, Carolyn crosses one leg over the other and steeples her fingers. “While at MI5, Eve identifies a series of murders, apparently committed by a woman, of prominent figures in politics and organized crime. The motive for the murders is unclear. Viktor Kedrin, a controversial Moscow activist, comes to give a talk in London, and when Eve requests protection for him, she is blocked by a superior, whom we may reasonably assume to have been Frank Haleton.

Kedrin is duly murdered, and as a consequence of his death, Eve is dismissed from MI5. It's probably Frank, once again, who engineers this.

"A Chinese People's Army hacker is killed in Shanghai, reportedly by a woman. Eve and Bill Pargrave share intel with Jin Yeong, who returns the favor by providing evidence that a multimillion-pound payment has been made by a Middle Eastern Bank to one Tony Kent. Jin clearly knows more than he's letting on, and lo and behold, when we investigate Kent, we discover that he's an associate of Frank Haleton.

"While Eve and Bill are in Shanghai, Bill is murdered. We're not sure why, but possibly to intimidate Eve. We know that the woman who signs herself V was in Shanghai at the time, as she later produces a bracelet she stole from Eve's hotel room there.

"Investigation of Frank Haleton shows that he is being paid huge sums by an unknown source. We confront him, and he tells Eve of the existence of a covert but rapidly growing organization named the Twelve, and attempts to recruit her, apparently having been given the green light to do so. In other words, he has contacted the Twelve to tell them he has been compromised. Their actual intention, however, is to kill him, which they do."

"Query," says Lance, dropping tobacco into a cigarette paper and beginning to roll. "Why do they, the Twelve, let Haleton try to recruit Eve? And in doing so, tell her so much about the organization?" He licks the paper and places the cigarette behind his ear. "Why don't they tell him to stall? Standard resistance to questioning?"

"I asked myself the same thing," says Eve, "And I think it's because they knew Haleton wasn't an idiot. If they'd told him to stall, he'd suspect they were planning to kill him, and he'd

cut and run. If they gave him a specific job to do—recruiting me—he’d think they trusted him. Which gave them time to get their killer, V, in place. And at the end of the day, how much did he actually tell me about the Twelve? How much did he even know? A couple of names, which are definitely false. Some vague stuff about a new world order.”

“I think Eve’s right,” says Carolyn. “Frank was always a pragmatist, never an idealist. They recruited him because they needed a senior desk officer in MI5, and whatever he might have told Eve, it would have been the money that he went for, not the ideology. People like Frank don’t change horses at this stage of their career.”

“The thing that stood out to me,” Eve says, “was Haleton saying that Kedrin was killed to turn a liability into a martyr. We know their methods are completely ruthless, but now we also know that Kedrin’s vision is basically the same as theirs. A world dominated by the alliance of hard-right—or what they’re calling ‘traditionalist’—Eurasian powers led by Russia.”

“I agree,” says Carolyn. “And that squares with what we know about the rise of nationalism and identity politics in Europe. That it’s being skillfully mobilized and massively funded by parties we can’t identify, but suspect to be Russian.”

“Are we talking official Kremlin policy?” Kenny asks.

“Unlikely. In today’s Russia, the people you read about in the papers and see on TV are mostly figureheads. The real power-players move in the shadows.”

* * *

Villanelle hunches into her down jacket as the Super Puma helicopter circles the marine platform. Rain flurries wash the

windscreen and, in the sea below, heavy waves rear and fall.

“Going in to land now,” the pilot tells her, and she gives him a thumbs-up, removes her headset, and grabs her rucksack.

They touch down, the helicopter rocking in the gale-force wind, and Villanelle jumps out and swings her pack onto her back. The rain lashes her face, and she has to lean into the wind as she runs head-down across the platform deck. Raymond, a stocky figure in a reefer jacket and submariner’s sweater, gives her a cursory glance and beckons her through a white-painted steel door. As he swings it shut behind her, the sound of the roaring wind is muted a degree or two. Villanelle stands there, expectant, rain dripping from her nose.

The platform, some ten miles east of the Essex coast, is one of five built in the Second World War to protect the North Sea shipping lanes. Known as Knock Tom, it originally consisted of an anti-aircraft emplacement supported by reinforced concrete towers. After the war, the anti-aircraft platforms were allowed to fall into disrepair. Three of the five were eventually demolished, but Knock Tom passed into private hands. Its present owner is the Sverdlovsk-Futura Group, a company registered in Moscow. SFG have undertaken extensive reconstruction of Knock Tom, and the former gun deck now holds three freight containers that have been converted into offices and a dining unit. The support towers have been divided into living quarters accessed by a vertical steel ladder. Following Raymond, Villanelle climbs downward past a humming generator room and into a concrete-walled cell furnished with a bunk bed and a single chair.

“In the office in ten?” Raymond says.

Villanelle nods, drops her pack, and hears the door close behind her. The room smells of corrosion, and the bedclothes

are damp, but of the sea beyond the windowless concrete walls, she can hear nothing. Somehow, Knock Tom is perfect for Raymond. It's exactly the sort of remote and brutally functional setting in which she's always imagined him, and for a moment she wishes she'd brought something wildly inappropriate to wear—a hot pink Dior tulle dress, perhaps—just to annoy him.

He's waiting for her at the top of the ladder. As they cross the platform deck to the containers, Villanelle looks out over the churning gray sea. The desolation of it makes her think, unexpectedly, of Anna Leonova. She hasn't seen her former teacher since she was arrested for murdering her husband, but when she remembers her, as she finds herself doing more and more lately, it's with a sadness that nothing and no one else has ever made her feel.

"I like this view," Raymond tells her. "It's so indifferent to human activity."

"Are we alone?"

"There's no one here except you and me, if that's what you mean."

The shipping container housing the office is surmounted by a steerable microwave antenna. The only link, Villanelle guesses, to the world beyond the waves. The interior is frugal but well-appointed. On a metal desk are a laptop, a satphone, and an Anglepoise lamp. A wall-mounted unit holds electronic hardware and several shelves of charts and maps.

Raymond motions Villanelle to a leather-upholstered chair, pours them both coffee from a cafetière, and seats himself behind the desk.

"So, Villanelle."

"So, Raymond."

"You're bored of routine actions like the Yevtukh and Halleton

jobs. You feel it's time you moved to the next level."

Villanelle nods.

"You've contacted me to request more complex and demanding work. You think you've earned it."

"I know I have."

"Well, I applaud your keenness, but I'm not sure that I agree. You're technically adept, and your weapons skills are good, but you're reckless, and your judgment's often questionable. You're sexually promiscuous, which I don't give a shit about, but you're indiscreet, which I do. Your fixation on the MI6 agent Eve Polastri, in particular, leads you to ignore the very real problems that she and her team could cause us. And cause you."

"Eve won't give us any problems. I just keep an eye on her so I can know what she knows, but she has no idea what's really going on."

"She found out about Frank Hallett. And she's not going to go away. I know her type. On the outside disorganized, but inside sharp. And patient. Like a cat watching a bird."

"I'm the cat here."

"You think you are. I'm not so sure."

"She has a husband. She doesn't actually like him, but she thinks she does. That makes her vulnerable. I can manipulate her."

"Villanelle, I warn you. You've already killed her deputy. You threaten her husband, whether she likes him or not, and she will unleash hell. She won't rest until you're laid out on a mortuary slab."

Villanelle looks up, considers a facetious response, meets Raymond's level gaze, and decides against it. "Whatever."

"Whatever indeed. As you will have calculated, I haven't

brought you here for the pleasure of your company. I have a mission for you, if you want it.

“OK.”

“It’s important, but it’s dangerous. You won’t be able to afford any mistakes.”

The tip of her tongue touches the scar on her upper lip. “I said OK.”

He regards her with fastidious distaste. “Just for the record, I’m not attracted to promiscuous women.”

Villanelle frowns. “Should I care?”

* * *

Eve’s phone rings when she’s walking out of the office to pick up a sandwich for lunch. It’s Abby, her contact at the Metropolitan Police Forensics Laboratory in Lambeth. With encouragement from Carolyn, Abby has fast-tracked the analysis of the Van Diest bracelet.

“Do you want the good news or the bad?” Abby asks.

“Bad.”

“OK. We performed a tape-lift on the bracelet and the card, but found no extractable DNA. No hairs, no epithelial cells, nothing we could use.”

“Shit.”

“Not even that. Sorry.”

“The card?”

“Again, nothing. Gloves worn, I’d guess. I sent a copy on to graphology.”

“Any luck with the perfume?”

“We tried. It’s possible to identify the compounds in commercially produced fragrances using gas chromatography and

mass spectrometry, but you have to have an adequate sample, which we didn't here. So no luck there."

"You said there was some good news?"

"Well." Abby pauses. "I did find one interesting thing."

"Go on."

"A flake of pastry, almost invisible, caught in a fold of the tissue paper."

"What kind of pastry?"

"I sent it for analysis. There were traces of vegetable oil, vanilla essence, confectioner's sugar. But there was something else, too. Grappa."

"That Italian firewater? Like brandy?"

"Exactly. So I put all these ingredients together and did a search. And came up with something called *galani*. They're fried pastries, flavored with grappa and vanilla and dusted with confectioner's sugar. A speciality of Venice."

"Well, that's definitely something. Thank you."

"There's more. The Van Diest jewelry boutique in Venice is in Calle Vallaresso, at the eastern end of Piazza San Marco. Three doors down is a small, very expensive *pasticceria* called Zucchetti, specializing in guess what?"

"Abby, you are a fucking genius. I owe you one."

"You do. Bring me back a box of *galani* from Zucchetti and we'll call it square."

"Deal."

* * *

"The target," says Raymond, "is Max Linder. Do you know who he is?"

She shakes her head. "I've heard the name, but that's it."

“Franco-Dutch political activist and media celebrity, twenty-eight. Gay, but nevertheless a figurehead for the extreme right, with a huge following in Europe, especially among young people. Looks like a pop star, and believes, among other things, that the obese should be put in labor camps and sex offenders guillotined. Some of what he says makes sense. His worldview is, overall, not so very different from ours. But Linder is also a Nazi, and Nazism is a problematic brand, discredited on so many levels, and that’s an association we do not need. In fact, it could really damage us.”

“You said the job would be dangerous.”

“Linder is aware that he has enemies. He’s accompanied, everywhere he goes, by a praetorian guard of ex-military types. Security is always tight, and there’s invariably a heavy police presence at events he attends. That’s not to say that it’s impossible to kill him. It’s never impossible, there’s always a way. The problem is getting away with it.”

“Do you have any ideas? I assume you’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

“We have. Next month Linder is going to a mountain hotel in Austria called the Felsnadel, high above the snowline in the High Tauern. He goes there every year with a group of friends and political associates. It’s a luxury place, designed by some famous architect or other, and you can only get in and out by helicopter. Linder considers it safe enough to stay there without bodyguards. He’s booked the whole hotel for his guests for several days.”

“So how do I get in?”

“A week from today, one of the hotel’s service team is going to contract an illness that will require her hospitalization. The agency in Innsbruck that provides their staff will send a

replacement.”

“Me.”

“Correct.”

“Do you want me to kill everyone in sight, or just Linder?”

“Just Linder will be fine. It’s a personality cult. Eliminate him, and the movement will wither away.”

“And how will I get out again?”

“That’ll be up to you to improvise. We can get you in there, but we can’t guarantee to get you out.”

She smiles, intrigued by the challenge.

“I thought you’d like it. In the other office, I’ve got maps, a floor-plan of the hotel, and detailed files on Linder and everyone else we think is going to be there. How you kill him is up to you, but I’ll need a full list of supplies and weaponry before you leave here. Bear in mind that you’ll be expected to present yourself at the heliport with a single suitcase or bag which will certainly be searched and X-rayed, and cannot exceed ten kilos in weight.”

“OK. I’m hungry. What’s for lunch?”

“There’s food waiting for you in the other office. I assume you’re not a vegetarian?”

* * *

On her way home, Eve picks up half a dozen duck breasts, fennel, and a large tiramisu from Sainsbury’s in the Tottenham Court Road. New neighbors have moved in opposite them, and, rather wildly, Eve has asked them to dinner, telling Niko that “they look very nice.” What this supposed niceness actually boils down to is that they’re youngish, the husband, Mark, is moderately good-looking, and the wife—was her name Maeve,

Mavis, Maisie?—has a highly covetable black Whistles coat. To make up numbers, Eve has invited Niko's friends Zbig and Leila. It will be an interesting and sophisticated evening, she tells herself. Six adults from diverse backgrounds and walks of life exchanging informed opinions over home-cooked food and cleverly chosen wine.

With a flash of apprehension, as she's sitting on the bus, it occurs to Eve that the Maeve, Mavis, Maisie person might be a vegetarian. She doesn't *look* like a vegetarian. When Eve met her she was wearing pumps with little gilt snaffles, and surely no one owning shoes like that has ever been a vegetarian. And the husband, Mark. He does something in the City, so is surely a carnivore.

Niko's home on time, for once. He tends to hang about at school most days, giving unofficial coding and hacking classes in the IT room, and teaching the science club how to make miniature volcanoes out of vinegar and baking soda. But today he's busily peeling potatoes at the sink, and leans back to give Eve an over-the-shoulder kiss as she comes in.

"I've fed the girls," he tells her. "I've given them extra hay to keep them busy."

"Can we give them those potato peelings?"

"No, potato peel contains solanine, which is harmful to goats."

She puts her arms around his waist. "How do you know these things?"

"Urban Goat Forum."

"Sounds like a porn site to me."

"You should see LondonPigOwners.com."

"Pervert."

"I wasn't deliberately searching for it. It just came up on the screen."

"Sure it did. Did you buy wine?"

"Yes. White in the fridge. Red on the table."

When they've put the potatoes and fennel in the oven to roast, Eve goes outside onto the patio, where Thelma and Louise nibble affectionately at her fingers in the fading light. Despite her initial misgivings, Eve has grown very fond of them.

Zbig and Leila arrive at eight o'clock on the dot. Zbig's an old friend of Niko's from Krakow University, and Leila is his girlfriend of several years' standing.

"So what's new?" Zbig asks them. "Are you doing anything next week, for half-term?"

"We were thinking of going up to the Suffolk coast for a couple of days," Niko says. "It's wonderful at this time of year. No crowds. We've even found someone to goat-sit Thelma and Louise."

"What do you do there?" asks Leila.

"Walk. Look at seabirds. Eat fish and chips."

"Catch up on your love life?" Zbig suggests.

"Maybe even that."

"Oh, shit," says Eve, her heart plummeting. "The potatoes."

Niko follows her to the kitchen. "The potatoes are fine," he tells her, glancing into the oven. "What is it really?"

"Next week. I'm really sorry, Niko. I have to go to Venice."

He stares at her. "You're not serious."

"I am serious. It's already booked."

He turns away. "Jesus, Eve. Couldn't you, just once, just fucking *once*..."

She closes her eyes. "I promise you, I..."

"So could I come too?"

"Um, yes, I guess." She feels her eyelids flutter. "I mean, I'll be busy with work stuff, and Lance will be there, but we can

still—”

“Lance? Human cockroach *Lance*?”

“You know perfectly well who I mean. It’s work, Niko. I don’t have a choice.”

“You do have a choice, Eve.” His voice is almost inaudible. “You can choose to spend your life chasing shadows, or you can choose to have a real life, here, with me.”

They’re staring at each other, beyond words, when the doorbell sounds. Mark precedes his wife. He’s wearing strawberry-colored trousers and a Guernsey sweater and carrying an enormous bottle of wine. A magnum, at least.

“Hi guys, sorry, got lost crossing the street.” He pushes the bottle at Niko. “Ritual offering. Think you’ll find it’s fairly decent.”

Eve recovers first. “Mark, how lovely. Thank you. And Maeve... Maisie... I’m terribly sorry, I’ve forgotten your—”

“Fiona,” she says, with a mirthless flash of teeth, shrugging off the Whistles coat.

As Niko introduces them to the others, Eve feels a sick sense of things left unresolved. Leila raises an eyebrow, detecting that something is amiss, and Eve beckons her into the kitchen and gives her an abridged version of events as she takes the duck breasts out of the marinade and lays them, hissing, in a heated pan.

“My boss is ordering me to go to Venice,” she says untruthfully. “It’s this important, last-minute thing I can’t get out of. Niko seems to think that I can just tell her to go to hell, but I can’t.”

“Tell me about it,” says Leila, who knows what Eve does, although not in detail. “I’m constantly pulled in two directions. Justifying my work to Zbig is more stressful than actually doing it.”

"That's *exactly* how I feel," says Eve, giving the pan an irritable shake.

Mark, they discover when they rejoin the others, is a compliance manager. "The youngest the bank's ever had," says Fiona. "Top of his training cohort."

"Gosh," says Leila faintly.

"Yup, the *enfant terrible* of regulatory compliance." Mark swings round to face her. "So where do you hail from?"

"Totteridge," says Leila. "Although I grew up in Wembley."

"No, but where do you come *from*?"

"My grandparents were born in Jamaica, if that's what you mean."

"That's amazing. We went there on holiday two years ago, didn't we, darling?"

"Yes, darling." Fiona flashes her teeth again.

"A resort called Sandals. Do you know it?"

"No," says Leila.

Dizzy with the ghastliness of it all, Eve introduces Zbig, more or less forcefully, to Fiona. "Zbig lectures at King's," she tells her.

"That's nice. What about?"

"Roman history," says Zbig. "Augustus to Nero, basically."

"Did you see *Gladiator*? We've got the DVD at home. Mark loves the bit where Russell Crowe chops the guy's head off with the two swords."

"Yes," says Zbig. "That certainly is a good bit."

"So do you get asked on TV programs and stuff?"

"I get the odd request, yes. If they need someone to compare the U.S. president to Nero, or to talk about Severus."

"Who?"

"Septimius Severus, the first African Roman emperor. He

invaded Scotland, among other good works.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not. Septimius was the man. But tell me about yourself.”

“I’m in PR. Mostly political.”

“Interesting. What sort of people are your clients?”

“Well, I’m basically working full-time with the MP Gareth Wolf.”

“I’m impressed. Quite a challenge.”

“How do you mean?”

Frowning, Niko holds his wine glass up to the window. “He means in light of Wolf’s persistent lying, his rapacious self-interest, his open contempt for those less fortunate than himself, and his all-round moral vacuity.”

“That’s very much a glass-half-empty perspective,” Fiona says.

“What about that expenses scandal?” asks Zbig.

“Oh, that was blown out of all proportion.”

“Like Wolf’s girlfriend, after the boob-job he claimed as a legitimate parliamentary expense,” says Leila, and Niko laughs.

“He’s done amazing things for trade with Saudi Arabia,” Fiona says, dropping her handbag onto the sofa and pouring herself another glass of wine.

“I bet you’re good at your job.” Eve smiles at her.

“I am,” says Fiona. “Very.”

Eve scans the room. Why do we put ourselves through this torture? she wonders. Dinner parties bring out the worst in everyone. Niko, usually the gentlest of men, is looking positively vengeful, although obviously this is mostly to do with her going to Venice for half-term week instead of spending it on the windy Suffolk coast with him. Mark, meanwhile, is explaining at extraordinary length to Leila, whose jaw is

set rigid with boredom, exactly what it is that a regulatory compliance manager does.

"You had that break-in not too long ago, didn't you?" Fiona asks Niko. "Was anything taken?"

"Nothing, as far as we could tell."

"Did they catch the guy?"

"It was a woman. And no, not yet."

"Was this woman Caucasian?" asks Mark.

From the corner of her eye, Eve sees Zbig lay a hand on Leila's arm. "According to Mrs. Khan... have you met the Khans?"

"Not yet, no."

"Well according to her, it was an athletic young woman with blonde hair."

Mark grins. "In that case, I'll leave my windows open."

Feeling a vestige of sympathy for Fiona, Eve is just about to speak to her when she sees Leila pointing urgently. Pushing through the guests and into the kitchen, she grabs the smoking pan containing the duck breasts, and to a crescendo of sizzling, balances it on the sink.

"Is everything OK?" asks Leila.

"The duck certainly isn't," says Eve, levering up one of the blackened breasts with a spatula.

"Edible?"

"Barely."

"Well, don't worry. Zbig and Niko and I already know you can't cook to save your life, and you're never going to see that dreadful couple again. At least I hope you aren't."

"No, and I honestly have no idea why they're even here now. I saw them leaving their house one morning, right after they'd moved in, and I felt like I should say something friendly. But then my mind went blank, and I panicked, and suddenly I heard

myself asking them over for dinner.”

“Eve, honestly.”

“I know. But right now I need you to help me make this duck look presentable. Maybe if we put the charred side down, and surround it with vegetables?”

“Is there some gravy?”

“There’s this sort of creosote stuff in the pan...”

“No good. Have you got any jam? Marmalade?”

“I’m sure we have at least one of those things.”

“Right. Heat it up and pour it on. The duck’ll still be like shoe leather, but at least it’ll taste of something.”

Moving from the kitchen to the dining table, a loaded plate in each hand, Eve and Leila discover the others arranged as if in a classic film-still. Beyond them, framed by the open patio door, stands the diminutive figure of Thelma. On the sofa, very much aware that the eyes of all present are upon her, Louise is nervously evacuating her bladder into Fiona’s handbag.

* * *

“Well, that went well,” says Niko a couple of hours later, pouring the last of the Romanian red wine into his glass and downing it in a single swallow.

“I’m sorry,” Eve tells him. “I’m a terrible wife. And a worse cook.”

“Both true,” says Niko, putting down his glass, placing an arm round her shoulder, and drawing her to him. “Your hair smells of frazzled duck.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I quite like it.” He holds her for a moment. “Go to Venice next week, if you really have to.”

"I do really have to. I don't have a choice."

"I know. And Lance, I'm sure, will prove the ideal traveling companion."

"Please. You don't think—"

"I don't think anything. But when you get back, it ends."

"What ends?"

"All of it. The conspiracy theories, the chasing after imaginary assassins, the whole fantasy."

She shrugs his arm off. "This isn't a fantasy, Niko. This is real. People are getting killed."

"If that's true, all the more reason to leave it to those who are trained to deal with that kind of stuff. Which, by your own admission, you're not."

"They need me. This woman we're after? The only person who's even *close* to figuring her out is me. And OK, maybe it's going to take some time, but I *will* get her."

"What do you mean, 'get her'?"

"Stop her. Take her out."

"Kill her?"

"If it comes to that."

"Eve, do you have any idea what you're saying? You sound completely deranged." He stands up and begins pacing around the room, all the anger from before suddenly resurfacing. "Look, I don't want to be the boring dick husband type. I don't want to stand between you and what you want to do with your life, but it is actually my job to stand in the way of something that puts it in danger."

"No. We're making progress."

"Oh, good. Mm. How many more people have to die before you complete this level?"

"Wow," she says, furrowing her brow, unsure of how to react

to his uncharacteristic hostility.

"Yeah, wow," he responds, laughing humorlessly.

"Why are you *so* angry?"

"I'm not angry, I'm scared! I don't want to wake up to a phone call or a knock at the door and someone telling me you've been stabbed by a mugger or drowned in a boating accident or whatever bollocks cover story they come up with this time."

He sinks down onto his haunches in front of her and rubs his hands down his face. "Damn it, I don't want to shout at you."

"No, I think you should."

"What?"

"Shout at me. Come on."

"Why, to make you feel better?"

"No, to make *you* feel better!"

"It doesn't make me feel better! You, alive, at home, without scary ladies breaking into our house makes me feel better!"

"She will *keep* breaking in and she will *keep* hurting people until *I* catch her, OK? I have to find her. She *wants* me to find her."

"Jesus! Do you want me to hold back your cape a little bit so you can go down on yourself a bit more?"

"What?"

He's leaning in to shout directly in her face now. "You're not saving the world, honeybunch! You're getting off on sniffing out a psycho!"

She shoves him, knocking him backwards onto his ass.

He gets to his feet and turns to leave the room. "You don't want that in your life, whatever that is. Trust me." After a moment, though, he pauses, takes a deep breath to calm himself, then turns back around. "Look, it's OK. Let's just... Er... Apologize and go to bed and forget all of that happened."

“I can’t,” she says flatly. “I have to pack.”

Villanelle has been studying Linder, and deciding how to kill him, for twenty-four hours now. She's beginning to understand her target, despite the thicket of disinformation with which he has surrounded himself. All the interviews he has given propagate the same fictions. The humble beginnings, the fervent identification with the classical ideals of valor and duty, the self-taught political philosophy, the passionate identification with the "true" Europe. This mythology has been skillfully fleshed out with invented detail and anecdote. Linder's childhood obsession with Leonidas, the Spartan king who died facing overwhelming odds at Thermopylae. His overcoming of school bullies with his fists. His lifelong persecution for his political beliefs by left-wing intellectuals, and for his sexual orientation by homophobic conservatives and religious bigots. In fact, as a memorandum attached to his file dispassionately notes, Linder comes from a well-off liberal background, and is a failed actor who turned to fascist politics as an outlet for his extreme racist and misogynist tendencies.

"Good luck," says Raymond, holding out his hand. "And good hunting."

He winces as she grips his hand much harder than necessary. "I don't need luck. I have talent. I am sensational. You'll see."

As always, now that she is in play, Villanelle is serene. There's a sense of things falling into place, as if impelled by gravity. All leading up to the kill, that moment of absolute power. The dark rapture flowing into every vestige of her being, filling and possessing her utterly.

Seated at his desk, her requisition list in front of him, Raymond watches as Villanelle waits on the platform deck, a slight figure against the bruise-gray sky. The helicopter materializes, touches down for a moment, and is gone, swinging away on the wind. He stares after it. He can still feel the imprint of her hand in his, and from a desk drawer, he takes a small bottle of sanitizing gel. God knows where her fingers have been.

* * *

It's raining as Eve and Lance cross the Piazza San Marco in Venice. Eve is carrying a plastic Sainsbury's bag with the Van Diest bracelet and packaging inside it. The paving stones shine in the watery light. Pigeons rise and fall in desultory flocks.

"Looks like we've brought the weather with us," says Lance. "How was your breakfast?"

"Good. Lots of strong coffee with bread and apricot jam. Yours?"

"Same."

Eve has never been to Venice before, and left the hotel at 7 a.m. to explore. She found it beautiful but melancholy. The vast, rain-washed square, the wind-roughened expanse of the lagoon, the waves slapping at the stone quays.

Flanked by Balenciaga and Missoni, the Van Diest boutique is on the ground floor of a former ducal residence. It's an elegantly

appointed space, with dove-gray carpets, walls faced in ivory silk, and glass-topped jewelry cases picked out by discreet spotlights. Eve has made an effort with her clothes and hair, but feels herself wilting before the expressionless gaze of the assistants. Lance's presence doesn't help. Dressed in a horrible simulacrum of casual wear, and looking more rodent-like than ever, he's staring about him open-mouthed, as if awed by the gold and the gemstones. Never again, Eve tells herself. The man is a total liability. Approaching one of the assistants, she asks to speak to the *direttrice*, and an elegant woman of indeterminate age materializes.

"Buongiorno, signora, how can I help?"

"This bracelet," says Eve, taking it from the bag. "Is it possible to tell if it was bought at this store?"

"Not without a receipt, signora." She examines the bracelet with a critical eye. "Did you want to return it?"

"No, I just need to know when it was purchased, and if anyone can remember making the sale."

The woman smiles. "Is this a police matter?"

Lance steps forward, and wordlessly shows her an Interpol identity card.

"Prego. One minute." The manager examines the bracelet, and touches the screen of the terminal on the desk. A further dance of her fingers and she looks up.

"Yes, signora, a bracelet of this design was bought here last month. I cannot guarantee it is the same one."

"Do you remember anything about the person who bought it?"

The woman frowns. Peripherally, Eve can see Lance examining a sapphire necklace and drop earrings. The assistants watch him uncertainly, and he winks at one of them. What a pig, Eve

thinks.

"I do remember her," the manager says. "Mid twenties. Dark hair, very attractive. She paid cash, which is not unusual for Russians."

"How much did it cost?"

"Six thousand, two hundred and fifty euros, signora." She frowns. "And there was something strange. She was very... *come si dice, insistente*—"

"Insistent?"

"Yes, she wouldn't touch the bracelet. And when I wrapped it up and put it in a carrier bag, she wanted that bag to be put in a second bag."

"She was definitely Russian?"

"She was speaking Russian with her companion."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, signora. I hear it spoken every day."

"Can you describe the companion?"

"Same age. Maybe a little shorter. Medium length hair, brunette. Strong, but lean. She looked like a swimmer or a tennis player."

"Do you have security camera footage of these women?"

"I can certainly look for you, and if you give me an email address, I can send you anything we have. But it's a month since the sale, and I'm not sure we keep the footage that long."

"I see. Well, here's hoping you do." Eve questions the manager for a further five minutes, gives her one of the Goodge Street email addresses, and thanks her.

"That bracelet, signora. It could have been chosen for you."

Eve smiles. "Goodbye for now."

"*Arrivederci, signora.*"

As they step outside into a squall of rain, Eve turns to Lance.

“What the fuck were you playing at in there? Jesus. I’m trying to get some answers out of that woman, and you’re acting like Benny Hill, ogling those women and... For fuck’s sake, Lance, did you honestly think you were helping?”

He turns up his collar. “Here’s Zucchetti. Let’s go in and grab a coffee and some of those pastries.”

The *pasticceria* is an intoxicating place, the air warm with the scent of baking, the counter an array of sugar-dusted pastries, golden rolls and brioches, meringues, macarons, and millefeuilles.

“So,” says Eve, five minutes later, her mood softened by a plate of *galani* and the best cappuccino she’s ever drunk.

Lance leans forward over the tiny table. “When V bought the bracelet, the woman with her was almost certainly her girlfriend. Or at least *a* girlfriend.”

Eve stares at him. “How do you know?”

“Because once I’d convinced those shop assistants that I was a gormless idiot who didn’t speak a word of Italian, they started to chat to each other. And they all remembered V and her friend. One of them, Bianca, speaks Russian, and usually deals with the Russian customers, but she didn’t on this occasion because V also spoke perfect English, so your chum Giovanna looked after her.”

“Go on.”

“According to Bianca, the two women were having a lovers’ tiff. V was telling the girlfriend off for eating in the shop, and the girlfriend was pissed off because V was buying a pretty bracelet for the ‘*angliskaya suka*,’ and she couldn’t understand why.”

“You’re sure? For the ‘English bitch’?”

“That’s what Bianca said.”

"So you speak fluent Italian? You could have mentioned that before."

"You didn't ask. But that's not all. The shop assistants all assumed that we were here to investigate some rich Ukrainian guy who's gone missing."

"We don't know anything about that, do we?"

"First I've heard of it."

"Did they mention a name?"

"No."

Eve looks out at the rain-blurred expanse of the piazza. "Let's suppose," she says, licking the last of the sugar-powder from her fingers, "that V was in Venice at the same time that this unnamed Ukrainian went missing..."

"I'm already supposing it."

"I owe you an apology, Lance. Really, I'm—"

"Forget it. Let's ask the staff here if they remember two Russian women buying pastries a month ago, which they won't, and then let's get out of here. I need a smoke."

Outside, the air is vaporous and the sky bruise-dark. As they cross the piazza, Eve feels a creeping discontent, which seems to relate to the two women buying the bracelet together. Who was that other woman, the one who called her a bitch, and what was her role in all this? Was she really V's lover?

Eve feels a flush of shame. It couldn't really be *jealousy* she's feeling, could it? She's embarrassed to even ask herself the question. She loves Niko and misses him, in spite of their recent fight. He loves her. Right?

To be gazed at while you slept, though.

The bracelet.

The sheer, dazzling effrontery of it.

The *questura*, or central police station, of Venice is in Santa Croce, on the Ponte della Libertà. It has a river entrance, with blue-painted police launches moored at its jetty, and a rather less picturesque street entrance, fortified by steel security barriers and guarded by agents of the Polizia di Stato.

It's 5:30 p.m., and Eve and Lance are sitting in the waiting area, waiting to speak to the *questore*, the local chief of police. To arrange this has taken numerous phone calls, and now that they have an appointment, it turns out that Questore Armando Trevisan is "in conference." Hunching forward on the slatted wooden bench, Eve stares through the armored glass of the entrance doors at the traffic. The rain stopped at midday, but she can still feel the dampness in the air.

A lean figure in a dark suit appears from a corridor, his purposeful air disrupting the somnolent atmosphere of the place. Introducing himself in English as Questore Trevisan, he leads them to his office, a monochrome space dominated by filing cabinets.

"Please, Mrs. Polastri and Mr..."

"Edmonds," says Lance. "Noel Edmonds."

They seat themselves opposite his desk. Trevisan opens a folder, removes a photocopied head shot, and hands it to Eve.

"You want to know about our vanished Ukrainian? Well, so do we. His name is Rinat Yevtukh, and last month he was staying at the Danieli Hotel with a young woman named Katerina Goraya and several bodyguards. We were alerted to his presence, and details of his background, by colleagues in AISE, our external security agency."

"He was known to them, then?" Eve asks.

“Very much so. Based in Odesa, where he was the head of a gang involved in drugs, prostitution, people-smuggling, and the usual related activities. Very wealthy, very powerfully connected.”

From the folder, Trevisan takes a second document. His movements are economical, and there’s an alertness about him that tells Eve that this is a kindred spirit, an ally. A man who will only be satisfied by the truth. “Here’s the timeline of Yevtukh’s stay here in Venice. The usual tourist activities, as you can see, and always accompanied by Miss Goraya. A gondola tour, a visit to Murano, shopping in San Marco, et cetera. And then, on this morning here, and without the knowledge of Miss Goraya, he leaves in a *motoscafo*, a motor launch, with a woman whom he had met in the hotel bar the evening before.”

Eve and Lance exchange glances.

“According to the waiter, the woman ordered the drinks in Italian but spoke English to Yevtukh. Both fluently. She looked, according to the waiter, like a film star.”

“Any particular film star?”

“I think he meant more in a general way, but he did help us create an e-fit.”

Trevisan slides another photocopy across his desk. Eve forces herself not to grab it, but the image is wholly unrevealing. The heart-shaped face, shoulder-length hair, and wide-set eyes have a blank, generic look. The subject could be any age between twenty and forty.

“We made this portrait three days after the waiter served her in the bar. It’s the best he could manage. Yevtukh’s bodyguards saw her briefly on the morning of his disappearance, but they were even less help. She was wearing large sunglasses, apparently, and they couldn’t even agree on the color of her

hair.”

“Witnesses,” says Lance, shaking his head.

“Indeed, Mr. Edmonds, witnesses. To continue, this woman meets Yevtukh at the river entrance to the hotel the next morning, and they leave together in the *motoscafo*. When Yevtukh doesn’t reappear that night, the bodyguards think their boss is enjoying a romantic assignment, and say nothing to Miss Goraya, but the following morning she goes to see the hotel manager and makes a big *furor* and the manager calls us. At that point the bodyguards agree to tell the truth.”

Initially, Trevisan tells them, Yevtukh was considered a low-risk disappearance, and the investigation a formality. And then someone at the *questura* matched the description of a *motoscafo* stolen from a marina in Isola Sant’Elena with the bodyguards’ description of the vessel they had seen outside the hotel, and a full-scale search was set in motion. A helicopter overflight of the lagoon revealed the *motoscafo* sunk in the Poveglia Canal, but of Yevtukh, not a trace. And there the inquiry stalled.

“So what do you think happened?” asks Eve.

“Initially, I thought that this was a story of a rich man and his lovers. But the stolen *motoscafo*, and its deliberate sinking, changed my mind. And now, Mrs. Polastri, here you are from MI6 in London, confirming that this is indeed no simple disappearance.”

“Signor Trevisan, do you mind if I make a suggestion?”

“Please do.”

“I may be able to help you move this investigation forward, but I need you to keep our conversation confidential. Please don’t mention it to anyone, from your service or mine.”

“Go on.”

“Yevtukh is dead. I’m sure of that. The woman he met in

the bar, the one who took him out in the motor launch the next day, is almost certainly a professional assassin that we've been pursuing. Multilingual, but probably Russian. We don't know her name, but we know she was in Venice with another woman, also probably Russian, and possibly her lover. They went shopping in San Marco two days earlier, and visited the Van Diest boutique, the Pasticceria Zucchetti, and other shops in the area. Both are highly CCTV-aware, and the assassin is very good at altering her appearance. We think she's slim, of slightly above average height, with high-cheekboned features and blonde hair. Eyes probably hazel, but she wears contact lenses a lot. Also hairpieces and wigs. The other woman has been described as sporty-looking, with medium-length brown hair, but for all we know, that could be a wig, too."

"You're sure of this?"

"I'm sure. And the two of them must have stayed somewhere locally, either together or separately. Yevtukh didn't disappear until two days after their San Marco shopping trip."

"We can certainly see if we can find any record of them." Trevisan looks at her intently, and Eve is suddenly conscious of her appearance, and, in particular, of the ugly nylon sockettes showing around the edges of her shoes. For years now she has sought others' approval of her professional competence, giving little or no thought to how they actually see her. But being here in Venice, seeing how Italian women carry themselves, and how they take pleasure in themselves as elegant, sensual beings, makes her want to be appreciated for more than the sharpness of her mind. She would like to walk through San Marco and feel the swirl of a beautifully cut skirt, and the breeze from the lagoon in her hair. Those shop assistants in Van Diest, this morning. They were dressed, it seemed, entirely for their own

pleasure and enjoyment. Their clothes whispered secrets that endowed them with confidence and power. In her damp rain jacket and jeans, Eve doesn't feel confident or powerful at all. She feels frizzy-haired and clammy beneath the arms.

The conversation winds down. "Your English is excellent. Where did you learn it?" Eve asks, as Trevisan ushers them to the entrance.

"In Tunbridge Wells. My mother was English, and we spent every summer there when I was a child. I used to watch *Multi-Coloured Swap Shop* on BBC1 every Saturday, which is why I'm so honored to meet Noel Edmonds in person."

Lances winces. "Ah."

"Please, I understand professional discretion. Mrs. Polastri, I'm glad we were able to help each other. Officially, as you requested, this meeting never took place. But it has been a great pleasure."

They shake hands, and he's gone.

"Seriously?" says Eve, as they step out into the moist dusk. "Noel Edmonds?"

"I know," says Lance. "I know."

On the way back, they catch a *vaporetto*, a water-bus. It's crowded, but Eve's feet are sore and it's a relief not to be walking. The *vaporetto* takes them the length of the Grand Canal. Some of the waterside buildings are illuminated, their reflections painting the broken surface of the water with gold, but others are shuttered and unlit, as if guarding ancient secrets. In the half-dark, there is a sinister edge to the city's beauty.

Lance rides the *vaporetto* all the way to San Marco, but Eve gets off at the stop before, and walks up toward the Fenice opera house, and a tiny boutique that she spotted earlier in the day. In the window is a beautiful scarlet and white Laura Fracci crêpe

wrap dress, and she can't resist a closer look. The boutique looks terrifyingly expensive, and part of her hopes that the dress doesn't fit, but when she tries it on, it's perfect. Barely glancing at the price, she hands over her credit card before she can change her mind.

It occurs to her to look in at the Van Diest store, to find out if they've found any CCTV footage of the two women. They haven't, she learns, as the video was deleted two days ago. Seeing her disappointment, the manager looks thoughtful.

"There was another thing about the woman who bought the bracelet that I remember," she says. "Her scent. I always notice scent, it's my passion. My mother used to work at a perfume shop, and she taught me to recognize the... *ingredienti*. The sandalwood, cedar, amber, violet, rose, *bergamotto*..."

"So do you remember what scent this woman was wearing?"

"I didn't recognize it. It certainly wasn't one of the usual designer brands. Freesia top note, I think. Base notes of amber and white cedar. Very unusual. I asked her about it."

"And?"

"She told me what it's called, but I can't remember the name. I'm sorry, I'm not being very helpful."

"You are. Really. You've been a great help. If you remember the name of the scent, or anything else about them, you can speak to Questore Armando Trevisan at the police station in Santa Croce, and he'll pass the information on to me."

"Certainly. Or I could just contact you directly. Can I have your name? And perhaps your mobile phone number?"

Eve tells her, gazing wonderingly at the jewelry in the cases. A collar of incandescent sapphires and diamonds. A necklace of emeralds like a cascade of green fire.

The manager pauses, pen in hand. "I can see you admire fine

jewelry, Signora Polastri.”

“I’ve never actually looked at pieces like this up close before. I see why people want them so much.”

“May I make a suggestion? I’m going to a reception tonight at the Palazzo Forlani. It’s the launch of Umberto Zeni’s new jewelry collection. I was going to take my sister, but her daughter’s ill. You’re welcome to join me, if you’re free.”

“Are you sure?” Eve asks, taken aback.

“Of course I’m sure. It would be my pleasure.”

“Well... Why not? I’ve never been to a party in a palace before.”

“Perhaps you could wear your bracelet?”

“I could, couldn’t I?”

“In that case, *è deciso*. Palazzo Forlani’s on the Dorsoduro. Cross the Accademia Bridge and it’s a hundred meters or so on the left. Say you’re with Giovanna Bianchi from Van Diest. I’ll be there from nine o’clock.”

“Thank you, Giovanna. I’ll see you there.”

She extends her hand. “*Allora, a dopo*, Signora Polastri.”

“Call me Eve.”

“*A dopo*, Eve.”

Back at the hotel, she sits on her bed with her laptop, encrypting her report on Yevtukh Rinat and the probable involvement in his disappearance of V and her Russian friend, lover, whatever. When she’s dispatched it to Kenny at Goodge Street, she calls Lance’s room. There’s no answer, but a couple of minutes later he knocks at her door, and when she opens it, he’s carrying beer bottles and an enormous pizza.

“The restaurants round here are all tourist rip-off joints,” he tells her. “So I went for the takeaway option.”

“Great. I’m starving.”

For the next half-hour, they sit in front of the small balcony

drinking cold Nastro Azzurro and eating pizza topped with sliced potatoes, rosemary, and Taleggio cheese.

"That was probably the best pizza I've ever eaten, and I've been to New York *and* Chicago," says Eve, when she can manage no more.

"You have to put up with a lot as a spy," Lance says. "But I draw the line at crap food."

"I never knew you cared."

"Funny old world, isn't it? Mind if I have a smoke on the balcony?"

"Go ahead. I should probably call my husband."

She finds her phone in her bag, but when she attempts to call, there's no answer, just his familiar voicemail greeting: "Hey, it's Niko. Leave me a message, then text me to tell me you have because I always forget to listen to them."

She hangs up. She considers texting him, but what is there to say, really?

She's still staring at the phone when Lance comes back into the room, trailed by a whirl of cigarette smoke.

"So what's the plan?" she asks him, grateful for the excuse to put off dealing with Niko a little longer.

"Phoned someone earlier. Bloke I used to work with in Rome who's moved up here. Thought I might have a word with him about our disappeared Ukrainian."

"When are you meeting him?"

"Half an hour. Bar near that police station we were at earlier. What about you?"

"Going to some sort of reception thing with Giovanna from the jewelry shop. The security footage was wiped, but I think she has more to tell us."

"I'm sure she does."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"You're smirking, Lance."

"That's not a smirk, it's a facial tic. I'm very sensitive about it."

"Look, you were good this morning. Really good. And that pizza was delicious. But if you're going to smirk whenever I mention another woman's name, this isn't going to work."

"No, I see that."

"Fuck off, Lance."

"Absolutely. Right away."

Ten minutes later, Eve has changed into the Laura Fracci dress, pinned her hair into a passable French twist, and is stepping out into the dusk with the rose gold bracelet on her wrist. The day's rain has sharpened the air, which smells of dampness and drains. Crossing the piazza, she threads her way westwards, past lingering groups of tourists, to the Accademia Bridge. Halfway across the bridge, she stops, entranced by the view. The darkening canal, the illuminated waterside buildings, and, at the distant mouth of the lagoon, the dome of Santa Maria della Salute. Almost too much beauty to bear, and all of it dying. We all are, a voice in her head whispers. There's no tomorrow, there's only today.

Looking out over the glimmering canal, poised between the upstream and the downstream of her life, Eve considers her adversary. All she's seen of her is her eyes, but the eyes are enough. I am death, that gaze seemed to say, and if you're not intimate with death, can you ever feel truly alive?

From such a challenge, Eve now knows, there's no retreating, no walking away. Wherever it leads, she has to follow, and if she has to lie to Niko, or fight with him every time she tells

the truth, then so be it. A seaward breeze flickers up the canal, flattening the soft folds of the dress to her thighs, and her phone vibrates in her bag.

It's Giovanna. She'll be there in ten minutes.

* * *

In her narrow room on the first floor of the Gasthof Lili in Innsbruck, Villanelle is sitting cross-legged on her bed in front of a laptop, scrolling through architectural blueprints of the Felsnadel. The hotel, a futuristic slice of glass and steel wrapped around a frozen Tyrolean crag, is Austria's highest. It stands on a ledge, some two and a half thousand meters above sea level, on the eastern flank of the Teufelskamp mountain.

Villanelle has been prowling the building in her imagination for hours now, testing possible entry and exit points, memorizing the layout of the guest quarters and the kitchens, noting the whereabouts of storerooms and service areas. For the last thirty minutes, she's been examining the fittings and locking mechanisms on the triple-glazed windows. Details like these, Konstantin impressed on her, can mean the difference between success and failure, between life and death. It saddens Villanelle to think that, somewhere along the line, Konstantin himself neglected some key detail.

She yawns, baring her teeth like a cat. She always enjoys the preparatory phase of an operation, but there's an overload point. A moment when the plans blur, and the words on the screen start to run together. In addition to researching the mission, she's been studying German, a language she picked up a few years ago during her training, but hasn't used since. She will not be required to pass herself off as German at the Hotel

Felsnadel; her cover story is that she's French. But she will be required to speak it, and it's an operational necessity that she understands everything that she hears.

These and other preparations are mentally tiring. Villanelle is less susceptible to stress than most people, but when she's faced with long periods of waiting, a familiar need tends to make itself known. Locking down the laptop so that any attempt to log in will cause total data-erasure, she stands and stretches. After a quick shower, she dresses in jeans and a plain white T-shirt and fastens her hair into a loose braid. She doesn't bother to put on any makeup before going out.

Herzog-Friedrich-Strasse is pretty in the fading light, its illuminated buildings framing the distant mountains like a stage set. But it's cold, with an insistent wind whistling through the narrow streets, and this cuts straight through Villanelle's lightweight down jacket as she hurries toward the Schlossergasse and the golden glow of the Brauhaus Adler. Inside, noise levels are high, and the air warm and beery. Edging round the throng, Villanelle notes a group of tourists with their backs to the bar. Judging from their manner of dress, they are American, or perhaps Canadian. One woman in particular catches her eye, and Villanelle watches for a minute or two as she pulls back her thick, curly hair, and tries to engage the man next to her in conversation. He barely acknowledges her, and seems more interested in what the other men in the group are saying. After a minute, she gives up, leaning on the bar and staring at the ice melting in her drink. Villanelle strolls up to the woman and greets her with a confident grin.

Not even ten minutes later, she takes the woman by the hand and leads her out of the main entrance, then turns into a side street, and again into a narrow alley behind the bar. Halfway

along the alley is a shadowed space between two overspilling refuse bins. Above the further of these, an extractor fan vents kitchen exhaust through a dirty grilled.

The woman gasps as Villanelle pins her up against the wall. "I haven't done anything like this before," she says.

"Me neither. Take your hair down."

"OK. It's a bit... I didn't wash it." As soon as she pulls out her hair tie, Villanelle pushes her hands away and runs her own fingers through the other woman's hair, shaking it loose.

"My husband might notice I'm gone. We're only supposed to be here with the tour group for another hour before we head back to the hotel, so..."

"I love your accent," says Villanelle.

"Thank you?" She laughs nervously. "What are you doing in Innsbruck?"

"I'm just killing time until my friends turn up. You are so sexy!" Villanelle grabs her by the collar and leans in close so that their lips nearly touch.

"Oh my! What are we doing?"

"I don't know!" says Villanelle, and this time they both laugh.

Villanelle presses up against her, nudging her legs apart with her knee. The woman's bag starts to slide down her arm as she unzips her coat.

"No, no, keep your coat on," says Villanelle. "Keep your bag on your shoulder."

"Oh. Are we not—"

"Your clothes are too nice." She frowns slightly.

"Oh."

"I'm going to call you Eve, OK?" Her face lights up again.

"Um. OK. Why?" The abrupt mood changes are giving her whiplash.

"It's just a little, uh, biblical fantasy thing."

"Oh. OK. Do you want me to call you Adam?"

"No, no. That's... That's OK." Villanelle smiles reassuringly. "You ready?"

"Oh, God. OK!" As Villanelle leans in and kisses her, she thrusts her hips forward involuntarily, her body craving more contact.

A few seconds later, Villanelle terminates the kiss. They stand nose to nose. "Now I am going to hide, and you are going to find me," she says, and she darts off, leaving the tourist behind, bewildered and slack-jawed.

* * *

The Palazzo Forlani is at the eastern end of Dorsoduro. The street entrance, through which Eve arrives, is nondescript. There's a poorly lit cloakroom staffed by dark-suited attendants and supervised by an unsmiling figure who looks as if he might have once earned his living as a boxer. Beyond them, two young women in identical black moiré cocktail dresses sit at an antique desk, checking the names of new arrivals on a printed list.

Eve approaches them. "*Sono con Giovanna Bianchi.*"

They smile. "OK, no problem," one of them says. "But my friend needs to fix your hair."

Eve raises a hand and encounters a bobby pin swinging from an errant tress. "Oh God. You don't mind?"

"Come," says the friend and, beckoning Eve to a chair, swiftly and expertly reworks her coiffure. As she's inserting the final pin, Giovanna arrives.

"Eve. You look stunning... *Ciao, ragazze.*"

"*Ciao, Giovanna.* Just fixing a little hair emergency here."

"My French twist came adrift," Eve explains.

Giovanna smiles. "That's why you should always go Italian."

A curtain parts, and they move from the twilight foyer into a warm blaze of illumination. The street entrance to the palazzo, Eve realizes, is in fact the back entrance, like a stage door. They're in a wide, stone-floored atrium, thronged with guests, at whose center is a rectangular space concealed by hanging drapes imprinted with the Umberto Zeni logo. Opposite Eve and Giovanna is the much grander and more ornate canal entrance, dominated by an arched portal through which the gleam of water is visible. As Eve watches, a motor launch draws up, and two guests step out onto a jetty, and are ushered inside by a doorman.

Around her, the crowd ebbs and flows. She can smell perfume, face-powder, candle wax, and the faint, muddy tang of the canal. It's an intoxicatingly strange scene, a collision of the antique and the dazzlingly fashionable. Eve feels poised, *soignée* even, but she can't imagine actually talking to anyone here. There's a nucleus of ageless men in dark suits and heavy silk ties, and women whose lacquered hair and ornate designer gowns are clearly chosen to intimidate rather than to attract. Circling around these figures, like pilot fish around sharks, is a retinue of socialites and hangers-on. Lizard-like designers with implausible tans, gym-toned young men in ripped jeans, willowy models with wide, vacant eyes.

"And that's Umberto," says Giovanna, swiping two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter's tray, and nodding toward a tiny figure dressed from head to toe in leather fetish-wear. "An interesting crowd, don't you think?"

"Very. And very much not my world."

"So what is your world, Eve? Forgive me for asking, but you

come into my shop with this man who shows me identification from Interpol and then pretends to be *un cretino* while he eavesdrops on my assistants' conversations—oh, yes, I saw him—and then you ask me about a bracelet that was bought by a woman who came into the shop with her girlfriend, but which you are now wearing? *Per favore*, what is going on?"

Eve takes a deep swallow of her champagne, and turns her wrist so that the diamonds glitter. "It's a long story."

"Tell it to me."

"We're investigating this woman for a series of crimes. She knows I'm after her, and she sent me this bracelet to insult and intimidate me."

"How so?"

"Because she knows it's the sort of thing I could never afford, and could never imagine myself wearing."

"Nevertheless, Eve, you are wearing it."

Their conversation is interrupted by a dimming of the lights. Then, to a deafening burst of industrial metal music, and whoops and applause from the onlookers, the curtains at the center of the atrium rise, and spotlights illuminate the tableau within. Rising from the floor is a massive concrete column, into which a white Alfa Romeo sports car appears to have crashed at speed. The car, wrapped around the column, is a total wreck. Two passengers, one male, one female, have been thrown through the windscreen, and are sprawled on the car's crumpled bonnet.

At first Eve thinks that these are horribly life-like, or perhaps death-like, dummies. Then she sees that they are breathing, and real. Belatedly, she recognizes the famous boy-band singer and his supermodel girlfriend. Shane Rafique, dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans, is lying face down. Jasmin Vane-Partington

is on her back, one arm outflung, her breasts exposed by her ripped blouse.

Where there might have been blood and torn flesh, however, there are jewels. Jasmin's forehead is not studded with fragments of windscreen glass, but enclosed in a tiara of diamonds and blood-red garnets. A string of Burmese rubies snakes down her belly like a fatal gash. Tourmalines glitter in Shane's hair and a topaz necklace cascades from his mouth. Vermilion gemstones spatter the car's bodywork.

As cameras flash, the music plays, and the applause rises and falls, Eve stares open-mouthed at this glittering *tableau mort*.

Giovanna smiles. "So what do you think?"

"It seems like kind of an extreme way to sell jewelry."

"People want extremes here. They get bored very easily. And the fashion press will adore it. Especially with Jasmin and Shane."

After ten minutes, when the photo flashes have subsided, and Umberto Zeni has made a short speech of which Eve understands not a single word, the curtain descends on the crashed Alfa Romeo and the celebrity corpses. Unhurriedly, the guests begin to make their way up a worn stone staircase, past faded tapestries, to the first floor. Eve and Giovanna join them, collecting fresh glasses of champagne en route.

"Having fun?" asks Giovanna.

"Yes. Even more than I was expecting. I don't know how to thank you."

"Finish your story."

Eve laughs. "Maybe, one day." For the first time in months, perhaps years, she is having a fabulous time that she won't have to account for. She feels an airy rush of elation, and floats up the staircase, weightless.

The galleries set around the stairwell swiftly fill with noise and people. Everyone seems to know Giovanna and she's soon surrounded by an excitable clique, exchanging observations in rapid-fire Italian. Fluttering her fingers in a vague, see-you-in-a-minute gesture, Eve drifts away. Taking a third glass of champagne, she winds purposefully through the crowd, smile in place, as if she's just caught sight of an acquaintance. She's always felt like an outsider at parties, torn between the desire to be swept along on a tide of conversation and laughter, and to be left alone. The essential thing, she's found, is to keep moving. To stand still, even for a moment, is to present a vulnerable profile. To announce yourself a target for every cruising shark.

Adopting a connoisseurial attitude, she examines the art on the paneled walls. Allegorical scenes from Greek mythology hang next to vast contemporary paintings of skulls; eighteenth-century Venetian aristocrats cast a jaundiced eye over explicit life-size photographs of a couple having sex. Eve supposes she should know the names of the artists in question, but isn't quite interested enough to find out. What strikes her forcibly is the sheer, bludgeoning force of the wealth on display. These art objects are not here because they are beautiful, or even thought-provoking, but because they cost millions of euros. They're currency, pure and simple.

Moving on, she finds herself in front of a gilded porcelain sculpture, again life-size, of the late Michael Jackson holding a chimpanzee. One push, Eve muses. One good, strong shove. She imagines the crash, the gasps, the shocked silence.

"La condizione umana," says a voice beside her.

She glances at him. Registers dark hair and aquiline features. "I'm sorry?"

"You're American. You don't look American."

"English, actually."

"You don't look English, either."

"What do you mean?" She expects a comment on her race, and is surprised when one doesn't come.

"It's your clothes, your hair, your *sprezzatura*."

"My what?"

"Your... attitude."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Turning to face him, she meets amused brown eyes. Notes the broken nose and the sensual, deeply incised mouth. "You, on the other hand, could be nothing but Italian."

He grins. "I'll take that as a compliment. My name is Claudio."

"And I'm Eve. You were saying?"

"I was saying that this sculpture represents the human condition."

"Seriously?"

"Of course seriously. Look at it. What do you see?"

"A pop singer and a chimp."

"You want to know what I see?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"*Dio mio*. You look at me with those beautiful eyes and you bust my balls." Her hair has started to come undone again, despite the best efforts of the girl at the entrance to contain it, and he reaches out to tuck a loose strand behind her ear.

The same beautiful hair. The same sad smile...

"I apologize," he says. "I've overstepped."

"No, it's fine." She touches his shirt sleeve, feels his arm warm beneath. "Sorry. I was just... thinking of someone."

"Someone special?"

"In a sense. But go on. Tell me what you see."

"Well, I see a man so lonely, so detached from his fellow

humans, that his only companion is this monkey, Bubbles. And eventually, even Bubbles moves on. He can't live in this fantasy."

"I see." Eve lifts her champagne flute to her mouth, but it's empty. She realizes that she is quite drunk, and that this doesn't matter. Perhaps it's even a good thing.

"This sculpture is Michael Jackson's dream. A golden forever. But it takes us back to the reality of his life, which is grotesque and sad."

They stand for a moment in silence.

A wave of melancholy sweeps over Eve as she teeters dizzily on her heels.

"Your glass is empty," he says.

"It should probably stay that way."

"As you wish. Come and see the view from the balcony." He takes her hand, which makes Eve's heart lurch, and leads her through the gallery to a marble-floored expanse hung with baroque mirrors. A projection screen is mounted on one wall, showing, on repeat, a video prequel to the Umberto Zeni installation, in which Shane Rafique and Jasmin Vane-Partington are shown running from a bank vault, laden with stolen jewelry, leaping into the white Alfa Romeo, and roaring away.

Like Giovanna, Claudio seems to know everyone, so their progress is stately, with much waving and greeting and air-kissing. An animated group is gathered round Umberto Zeni, who is explaining, in English this time, that dying in an automobile crash is the contemporary equivalent of Catholic martyrdom. As if to illustrate his point, a waiter is offering round a tray of petits fours shaped like sacramental objects. There are frosted pink sacred hearts, spun-sugar crowns of thorns, candied angelica crucifixion nails. Most exquisite of all

are the tiny marzipan hands with red jelly stigmata.

"Divine, no?" says Umberto.

"Very," says Eve, biting off a mouthful of marzipan fingers.

Finally, they reach the balcony, which is grand and spacious, and fronted by a carved balustrade, against which several guests are already leaning. Normally Eve hates cigarette smoke, but at this moment, with the night darkening the Grand Canal and Claudio's arm around her shoulder—how did that get there?—she couldn't care less.

"I'm married," she says.

"I would be very surprised if you weren't. Look upward."

She turns, and leans back against the balustrade. Above them, weathered by age and affixed to the building's facade, is a crest carved from stone.

"The coat of arms of the Forlani family. Six stars on a shield, surmounted by a doge's crown. The palace dates from 1770."

"Impressive. Does the family still live here?"

"Yes," he says, turning back to face the canal. "We do."

She stares him. "You? You... own this?"

"My father does."

She shakes her head. "That must be... interesting."

Half turning to her, he runs a finger down her cheek. "It is what it is."

She looks back at him. The sculpted features, their perfection at once marred and confirmed by the broken nose. The crisp whiteness of the linen shirt against his skin, with the cuffs rolled just so high up his tanned forearms. The elegant musculature displayed by jeans that look ordinary enough, but undoubtedly cost many hundreds of euros. The nonchalant absence of socks, and the black velvet loafers embroidered with what, on inspection, turns out to be the Forlani family crest.

She smiles. "You're just a tiny bit too good to be true, aren't you? And you aren't quite as young as you'd have me believe, either." She mirrors his gesture, running a finger across his cheekbone. The champagne and the glamorous surroundings have made her uncharacteristically flirtatious. "How many other women have you brought out here? Quite a few, I bet."

"You're a scary woman, Eve. I haven't even kissed you yet."

"I'm sure that would be lovely, but it's not going to happen."

"Seriously?"

She shakes her head.

"That's a pity, Eve. For you and for me."

"And yet somehow I think we'll both survive, one way or another. And now I have to find my friend."

Looking into the interior, she sees Giovanna moving toward them. "And here she is. Claudio, this is—"

"I know who it is. *Buona sera*, Giovanna."

"*Buona sera*, Claudio." There's a moment's silence.

"I should go," Claudio says. He bows, with just detectable irony, to both of them. "*Arrivederci*."

"Well," says Giovanna, watching him disappear into the crowd. "You don't waste any time. And as it happens, neither do I. I have some news for you."

"I'm listening."

"I was talking to the Contessa di Faenza, a big customer of mine. And I realized that the woman standing next to her was wearing the scent I told you about. The one the Russian who bought your bracelet..."

"Oh my God. Go on."

"Well, the contessa is talking to me about some prêt-à-porter show she's been to in Milan, and I see the other woman walk away. Obviously I can't just follow her, but I watch her, and

remember what she's wearing, and five minutes later, when the contessa finally lets me go, I set off in search of her."

"And?"

"I can't find her. I look everywhere, on both floors, but she's disappeared. And then I go into the Ladies', and there she is, standing in front of the mirror, actually putting on the scent. So I walk behind her, and check that it's the one I remembered, and it is."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely sure. Freesia, amber, white cedar... So I tell her how much I like it, we get talking—her name's Signora Valli, it turns out—and I ask her what her scent is called." She hands Eve a folded slip of paper. "I wrote the name down this time, to make sure."

Eve opens the paper and stares at the single word written there. There's a moment of ferocious clarity, as if ice water is racing through her veins. "Thank you, Giovanna," she whispers. "Thank you so much."

* * *

Back in her hotel room, Villanelle strips off her clothes and climbs into bed. The Canadian tourist was an entertaining distraction for a little while, but ultimately left her feeling unfulfilled. Now that she's alone, she slips a hand between her legs and closes her eyes. Her thoughts wander, dissolving into refracted images which, quite suddenly, coalesce into the figure of Eve Polastri. She imagines Eve's face between her thighs, Eve's eyes looking up at her, Eve's tongue scouring her. She cleaves to this image until, with Eve's name on her lips, she comes.

As she drifts off to sleep, the image of Eve dissolves into that of Anna Leonova. Anna, to whom all the blood-trails lead. Anna who, in another life, showed Oksana Astankova what love could be, and then denied it to her forever.

* * *

Four hundred miles away, Eve is sitting on the side of her hotel bed in a T-shirt and jersey shorts. Her feet are on the terrazzo-tiled floor and her head is in her hands. She's pretty sure she's going to be sick. She closes her eyes. Immediately, her equilibrium goes into free fall, and she staggers toward the window, bile rising in her throat. A desperate fumble with the shutters, a glimpse of the canal rocking dark and greasy below, and she's clutching the rail of the balcony, and vomiting, far from silently, into a moored gondola.

5

It's late afternoon, and an animated buzz and the clink of glassware rises from the departure lounge at Flugrettungszentrum, Innsbruck's heliport, as Max Linder's invited guests talk, laugh, and sip Pol Roger champagne. Those present are not the entire contingent of guests; some were flown up to the Felsnadel earlier in the day, others will follow tomorrow, and the atmosphere is one of high anticipation. In far-right circles, Linder is known as a witty, generous, and imaginative host. To be invited to one of his mountain retreats is not only to be identified as one of the elite, it is to be guaranteed a spectacularly good time. Max, everyone agrees, is *fun*.

No one pays much attention to the slight figure with the scrappy ponytail standing by the plate-glass exit door. Her passive demeanor and her cheap clothes and luggage clearly identify her as a person of no consequence, and she speaks to no one. When she arrived at the heliport an hour ago, she identified herself to the Felsnadel Hotel representative as Violette Duroc, a temporary room attendant sent by a local personnel agency. The hotel representative glanced at a clipboard, crossed her name off a list, and made it clear to her that although she was to be flown up to the Felsnadel with the hotel guests, fraternizing with them was strictly *verboten*.

If Villanelle is invisible to her fellow travelers, they are not invisible to her. Over the course of the last fortnight, she has researched most of them in considerable depth. The highest-status person in the room is probably Magali Le Meur. As the recently elected leader of France's Nouvelle Droite party, and an advocate of pan-European nationalism, Le Meur is regarded as the future of the country's far-right tendency. In the flesh, her broad, raw-boned features look older than on the posters slapped en bloc onto every derelict wall and motorway bridge in France. She probably wouldn't wear that thousand-euro Moncler coat to address her party's rank and file, Villanelle reflects. Or that Cartier diamond watch. Would she be amusing in bed? Unlikely. Nice eyes, but that thin, intolerant mouth told another story.

Le Meur touches her glass to that of Todd Stanton, formerly a CIA psy-ops officer, more recently an expert in the harvesting and manipulation of online personal data. Often described as the dark cardinal of the American far-right, Stanton is widely believed to be the architect of the Republican Party's recent electoral victories. Today, he's wearing a wolfskin coat, which does little to flatter his corpulent frame or to distract from his florid complexion.

Beyond them, by the bar, three men and a woman circle each other warily. Leonardo Venturi, a tiny, wild-haired figure sporting a monocle, is an Italian political theorist and the founder of Lapsit Exillis, described on its website as "an initiatory guild for aristocrats of the spirit." Venturi is explaining the guild's mission in exhaustive detail to Inka Järvi, the statuesque leader of Finland's Daughters of Odin. Adjacent to them, not quite part of their conversation, are two Britons. Richard Baggot, a paunchy figure with a crocodile grin, is the

leader of the UK Patriots Party, while pencil-thin Silas Orr-Hadow is an upper-caste Tory whose family have furnished England with several generations of fascist sympathizers.

The other three figures Villanelle doesn't recognize. They weren't on her list of probable Felsnadel guests, or she would certainly have remembered them. There's an imperious, pantherine woman with a severe bob of dark hair, who flicks a briefly curious glance at Villanelle, and two sharply handsome men. All are probably in their late twenties, and are outfitted in black uniforms with a distinctly military edge.

"Are you Violette?" a voice asks at her side.

"Yes."

"Hi, I'm Johanna. I'm from the agency, too." She has close-set eyes, freckles and a substantial bust zipped into a pink quilted jacket. She looks like Khriusha the Pig, a puppet character from a TV series Villanelle watched as a child in Perm. "Have you ever worked at the hotel before?"

"No," says Villanelle. "What's it like?"

"Amazing place, but the money's shit, as you've probably found out. And the manager, Birgit, is a real *arschfotze*. You have to work like a slave or she's on your tits the whole time."

"What about the guests?"

"Really fun. And some quite..." She giggles. "I worked here last year when Max's party came. There was a fancy dress party on the last night and it was crazy."

"So how long are you going to be working up there this time?"

"Just a couple of weeks. I'm temporarily replacing an African girl. Obviously they couldn't have an immigrant up there with these guests, so they laid her off."

"Without pay?"

"*Natürlich*. Why would they pay her if she isn't working?"

“Right.”

“See, Violette, the thing about Max Linder’s guests is that they like traditionally minded staff. Girls they can relate to. Some of the men can get quite frisky.” She glances downwards at her chest with a suggestive smile.

“So who are those three? They look younger than most of the people here.”

“The band, Panzerdämmerung. They played up there last year. Weird music, super-dark, super-loud, not really my thing. But the two brothers, Klaus and Peter Lorenz. *Total geil.*”

“And the woman in the leather coat and the boots?”

“Is the singer, Petra Voss. Apparently...”—Johanna lowers her voice to a whisper—“she’s a lesbian.”

Villanelle feigns surprise. “Oh my!”

Departure is announced, and the guests make their way through the glass doors to the helipad where the Airbus helicopter is waiting. Villanelle and Johanna leave last, and then have to edge past the other passengers to reach their seats at the back of the aircraft.

“Don’t I remember you from last year?” Richard Baggot asks Johanna as she passes, and when she smiles and nods, reaches across and pats her bottom. “Looks like I’ll be needing room service, then.” He turns to Villanelle. “Sorry, love. Prefer a little more flesh on the bone, if you get my drift.”

Todd Stanton grins, Silas Orr-Hadow looks appalled, and the others ignore Baggot altogether. As she buckles herself into her seat, Villanelle entertains a brief fantasy of leaning forward and garroting the Englishman with his golf club tie. One day, she promises herself, and glances at Johanna, on whose pink features a dimpled smirk has appeared.

The helicopter takes off with a roar and a shudder. Beyond

the Plexiglas window, the sky is steel gray. Soon they are above the snowline, and climbing. Gazing out at the face of the Teufelskamp, at the precipitous crags and blue-white ice fields, Villanelle feels a prickling anticipation. To those present, she is menial, not worth a second glance, barely even fuckable. But inside herself, she can feel the demon of her fury coil and uncoil. With the tip of her tongue, she touches the pale knot of scar tissue on her upper lip, feels its throb echoed in her chest and in the pit of her stomach.

The helicopter swings upward and rounds a vertical spur. And there, like a crystal set into the black rock face, is the hotel, and in front of it, a horizontal shelf marked out with lights as a landing area. The passengers applaud, gasp, and crane toward the windows.

“What do you think?” asks Johanna. “Amazing, no?”

“Yes.”

They touch down, the door opens, and frozen air blasts into the interior of the Airbus. Climbing out after Johanna, Villanelle steps into a flurry of wind-blown snow, and follows the other guests into the hotel, pulling her cabin bag behind her.

The entrance hall is spectacular, its plate-glass walls affording a breathtaking view of the darkening massif. A hundred feet below, clouds stream past, carried on the racing wind. Above are silhouetted peaks, and the glitter of the stars.

“Johanna, come with me. And you must be Violette. Quickly now, both of you.”

The speaker is a severely dressed woman in her forties. Without introducing herself, she leads them at a fast clip through a side door and into a service corridor leading to the staff quarters at the back of the hotel. She deals with Villanelle first, briskly pushing open a numbered door into a small, low-

ceilinged room containing twin beds. A pale young woman in a tracksuit and woolen beanie is lying on one of these, asleep.

“Get up, Maria.”

Blinking, the young woman jumps nervously to her feet, pulling off the beanie.

“Violette, you’re in here with Maria. You’re both on duty for dinner tonight; Maria will tell you the house rules, and where to find your uniform. She’ll also explain your room-service duties for tomorrow. Understood, Maria?”

“Yes, Birgit.”

“Violette?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, *Birgit*.” She regards Villanelle intently. “You’re not going to be trouble, are you? Because I swear, try anything on with me—*anything*—and you’ll regret it. Won’t she, Maria?”

“Yes, Birgit,” Maria says. “She will.”

“Good. I’ll see you both in an hour.” She starts to leave and then switches back. “Violette, show me your fingernails.”

Villanelle holds out her hands. Birgit examines them frowningly.

“Teeth.”

Villanelle complies.

“How did you get that scar?”

“A dog bit me. Birgit.”

Birgit stares at her suspiciously. “Wash your face before you appear in the restaurant.” She leans toward Villanelle, her nose wrinkling. “And your hair. It smells.”

“Yes, Birgit.” Villanelle and Maria watch as the manager leaves the room, followed by the still-smirking Johanna.

“Welcome to the insane asylum.” Maria smiles wearily.

“Is she always like that?”

"Sometimes worse. I'm not kidding."

"Fuck."

"*Tak*. And you're stuck here now. That's your bed. And the bottom two drawers are yours."

Maria is Polish, she tells Villanelle. There are men and women from at least a dozen countries employed at the Felsnadel, and although spoken German is a requirement, the staff usually speak English among themselves.

"Watch out for Johanna. She pretends to be really friendly, and on your side, but anything you tell her goes straight back to Birgit. She's a spy."

"OK, I'll remember. So what are these house rules?"

Maria recites a litany of fetishistically precise regulations. "Hair always to be worn braided, with plain steel pins," she says in conclusion. "No makeup, ever. Max Linder hates makeup on women, so no foundation, lipstick, anything. And no perfume. The only thing you're allowed to smell of is disinfectant soap, and you have to use that regularly. Birgit checks."

"She's employed by the hotel?"

"God, no. She's employed by Linder, to make sure that everything runs the way he likes it. She's a fucking Nazi, basically, like him."

"So what happens if you break the rules?"

"First time, she cuts your pay. After that, I don't know, and I don't want to find out. There are stories that she whipped a girl once for wearing mascara."

"Wow. That's quite sexy."

Maria stares at her. "Are you serious?"

"I'm joking. Where's the bathroom?"

"Through that door. There's usually not much hot water, especially by this time. Your soap's in the top drawer. I'll fill

you in about tonight when you get back. And Violette..."

"What?"

"Don't make trouble. Please."

* * *

It's just after 6 p.m., London time, when Eve and Lance walk into the Goodge Street office, carrying their overnight bags. They've taken the Underground from Heathrow, which was slow, but not as slow as battling through the rush-hour traffic in a taxi.

Kenny swivels his chair to face them. On the floor beside him is a small tower of foil takeaway cartons. He stretches lethargically and yawns, like an inadequately exercised cat. "Good flight?"

"Had worse." Lance drops his bags and noses the air. "Did something die in here while we were away?"

"Sorry..." says Kenny, sweeping crumbs off his desk and attempting to stuff the cartons into his overflowing bin.

"How are you, Kenny?" Eve asks.

"Not bad. Tea?"

"Yes, please."

"Lance?"

"Yeah, go on."

Eve resists the urge to open the streaming window and let a little air into the curried fug of the office. She's anxious for Kenny to do two things: to find out everything possible about Rinat Yevtukh, the Ukrainian who went missing in Venice, and to launch a worldwide search of recent internet traffic for the name, or codename, Villanelle. Both undertakings are likely to be complex, but experience has taught Eve that there's no wall

Kenny can't scale, given enough time.

"How have things been going here?" she asks him.

"Same," Kenny says, moving toward the sink and flipping a tea bag into each of the mugs on the draining board.

"What the lady means is, did you miss us?" says Lance.

"Been keeping myself busy. Didn't really notice you weren't here, to be honest."

Lance unzips his overnight bag and pulls out a package, which he throws to Kenny.

"What's this?"

"Souvenir of Venice, mate. Just to show we were thinking about you slaving away while we were living the dream."

"Nice one."

It's a gondolier's red and white striped T-shirt. Eve darts a grateful look at Lance; never once did it occur to her to pick up anything for Kenny.

"So what have you been busy with?" she asks Kenny, when the tea has been circulated.

"I've been chasing Tony Kent."

"Anything new?"

"Bits and pieces."

"Spill."

Kenny swivels back toward his screens. "OK, background. Kent is an associate, friend, whatever, of Frank HALETON, now dead. The money that the Twelve used to pay HALETON was routed via Kent, and the original source for this information is that document provided to you in Shanghai by Jin Yeong of the MSS, the Chinese Ministry of State Security. Sound right so far?"

Eve nods.

"Open source intelligence on Kent is hard to find. Basically,

his online presence has been scrubbed. Not a whisper on social media, and highly selective bio-data. Enough detail not to look deliberately redacted, but nothing that leads anywhere.”

In her pocket, Eve’s phone vibrates. Without looking, she knows it’s Niko. Kenny glances at her, wondering if she’s going to take the call, but she ignores it.

“Even so, I’ve been able to join up one or two of the dots. Kent is fifty-one years old. No kids, two divorces.”

“Any chance we can contact the ex-wives?”

“Yes, one now lives in Marbella, in Spain, and the other runs a Staffordshire bull-terrier rescue center in Stellenbosch, South Africa. I rang them both, saying I was trying to get in touch with Tony. The first one, Letitia, was so drunk she could hardly speak, even though it was only eleven o’clock in the morning. She said she hadn’t seen Kent in years, had no idea how to contact him, and if I saw him to tell him to go and—I quote—‘fucking throttle himself.’ Ring a bell, Lance?”

“Loud and clear. Last time I saw my ex she said much the same thing.”

“Heh. Anyway, the South Africa one, Kyla, was perfectly friendly but said that she was bound by law from discussing her ex-husband with anyone, which I took to mean that she’d signed a non-disclosure agreement as a condition of her divorce settlement. So not much help there. Anyway, back to Kent. He grew up in Lymington, Hampshire, and was educated at Eton College. As, it turns out, was Frank Haleton.”

“They weren’t there together, were they?” Eve asks.

“Yes, Kent was Haleton’s f... well, he was like his personal servant, and had to clean his shoes and make him tea and warm his bog seat in the winter.”

“Seriously?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Wow. I knew those places were weird, but...” She blinks. “How did you find all this out?”

“I asked Carolyn to run both names through the Security Services vetting records, and both were on file.”

“Haleton, obviously. But why Kent?”

“After Eton, Haleton goes to Oxford, takes the Civil Service exam, and is headhunted by MI5. Four years later, Kent goes to Durham, and after graduating, tries to join Haleton at Thames House, but fails selection.”

“Any idea why?” Eve asks.

“Put it like this: one of the assessors ended his evaluation with the words ‘Sly, manipulative, untrustworthy.’”

“Sounds like the ideal candidate,” says Lance.

“The MI5 selection panel don’t think so. They bin him, and the following year, he goes to Sandhurst, and is commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Royal Logistics Corps. Serves two tours of duty in Iraq, leaves the army in his late twenties, and from that point onwards things get hazy. I found only two very brief press references to his activities over the next decade. One describes him as a London-based venture capitalist, one as an international security consultant.”

“Which can mean pretty much anything,” Eve says.

“Yeah, well. Turns out that Kent owns no residential or commercial property in London, and a search at Companies House reveals that he holds no directorships, executive or non-exec, of UK-registered companies. So given the Twelve connection, I start looking for Russian interests. I don’t speak Russian fluently, but a lot of the international registries are in English, including the database of the Federal State Service for Statistics. Anyway, I discover that Kent’s a partner in a

private security company named Sverdlovsk-Futura Group or SFG, based in Moscow. He's also a partner in an offshoot of the company, SF12, which is registered in the British Virgin Islands."

"Any idea what these companies do?"

"Well, this is the point at which my lack of Russian becomes a problem. I'm learning the language via the MI6 online course, but I'm nowhere near fluent. So Carolyn puts me in touch with a Russian-speaking investigator from the City of London Economic Crime department, a guy called Sim Henderson. And what Sim tells me is that private security companies, known as *Chastnye Voennye Kompaniy*, or ChVKs, have become the go-to option for Russian military activities abroad. Official and deniable. Under the Russian constitution, any deployment of ChVK personnel must be approved by the upper house of parliament. But here's where it gets interesting. If the company's registered abroad, Russia and its parliament are not legally responsible."

"And the offshoot company, whatever it's called... you said it's registered in the BVI?"

"Exactly."

"So on the one hand you've got the official company, with a turnover of..."

"A hundred and seventy million dollars, give or take. SFG handle everything from security for hospitals, airports, and gas pipelines to military adviser contracts."

"All transparent and above board?"

"Basically, yeah. I mean, this is Russia we're talking about, so they're almost certainly paying a hefty percentage to the Kremlin for the privilege of staying in business, but... yeah."

"And meanwhile, the not-so-official, foreign-registered

arm—”

“SF12.”

“SF12, yes, is off doing whatever...”

“Exactly. Whatever weird dark-side shit it feels like.”

* * *

Max Linder has specified that, for the duration of his private gathering, the female catering staff of the Felsnadel should wear the uniform of the Bund Deutscher Mädel, the female equivalent of the Hitler Youth. Accordingly, Villanelle is wearing a blue skirt, a short-sleeved white blouse, and a black neckerchief secured by a leather woven knot. Her hair, still damp from her tepid shower, is in braided pigtails. She’s holding a circular tray of cocktails.

There are perhaps twenty guests in the dining hall, which is set with a single long table. Apart from those she arrived with, Villanelle recognizes a number of prominent far-right figures from Scandinavia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Russia. Most have entered into the spirit of the occasion. There are polished boots, cross-straps, and daggers hanging from stable-belts. Magali Le Meur has a forage cap pinned to her blonde up-do, while Silas Orr-Hadow is sporting lederhosen and white knee socks.

“So what have we here, *fräulein*?”

Her smile tightens. It’s Roger Baggot, in a loud tweed suit.

“Cocktails, sir. This is a Zionist, this is a Snowflake, and this is an Angry Feminist.”

“What’s in this one?”

“Mostly crème de menthe and Fernet Branca.”

“So why’s it called an Angry Feminist?”

“Probably because it’s difficult to get it to go down, sir.”

He roars with laughter. “Well, you’re a sharp little piece of work, aren’t you? What’s your name?”

“Violette, sir.”

“I take it you’re not a feminist, Violette?”

“No, sir.”

“Glad to hear it. Now please point me to where I can get some decent beer. We’re in fucking Germany, after all.”

“Over there, sir. And for the record, sir, until the establishment of the Fourth Reich, we’re in fucking Austria.”

Baggot retreats, grinning bemusedly, and at that moment, to loud whoops and applause, Max Linder enters the dining hall. It’s Villanelle’s first sight of the man she has come to kill, and she takes a long, hard look. Elegant in a high-buttoning Bavarian *trachten* jacket, his platinum-blond quiff shining in the spotlight, Linder looks less like a politician than a member of a fascistically inclined boy band. His smile reveals orthodontically perfect teeth, but there’s something avid about it, too. A twist to the lips that suggests a hunger for the extreme.

They sit down to dinner, Linder taking the head of the table. As the courses come and go—lobster thermidor, roasted boar with juniper, crêpes Suzette flambés, Dachsteiner and Bergkäse cheese—Villanelle and the other serving women pour the accompanying wines and spirits. As she does so, Villanelle catches fragments of the diners’ conversations. Max Linder is sitting next to Inka Järvi, but spends much of the meal talking across her to Todd Stanton.

“Can you guarantee the result?” Linder asks Stanton.

The American, his face flushed, drains his etched crystal glass of Schloss Gobelsburg Riesling, and indicates to Villanelle that he wants it refilled. “Look, Max, the population of Austria is eight and three-quarter million. Four and three-quarters of

those use the same social media platform. Mine that data, and you'll know more about those dumb motherfuckers than they know about themselves."

"And the cost?" Inka Järvi interjects, as Villanelle pours Stanton's wine.

"Well now..." Stanton begins, but at that moment Villanelle sees Birgit beckoning to her from the other end of the room.

Birgit tells Villanelle that she is to take part in a ceremony in front of the hotel at the meal's conclusion.

"So what does it involve?"

"Whom are you addressing, Violette?"

"I'm sorry. What does it involve, *Birgit*?"

"You'll see. Wait in the entrance hall after the meal."

"No problem, Birgit. Where's the staff toilet, by the way? I need to—"

"You should have gone earlier. Right now, you need to return to the guests."

"Birgit, I've been holding it for an hour and a half."

"I'm not interested. Exercise some self-control."

Villanelle stares at her, then slowly turns and walks back to her place. Stanton, his face by now flushed a livid mauve, is still talking across Inka Järvi to Linder. "I said, dude, think about it. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as a musical. Give me one motherfucking reason why not."

* * *

On the bus going home, squashed into her seat by an obese man who smells of old chips and beer, Eve attempts to organize her thoughts. Beyond the rain-streaked windows, Warren Street tube station and Euston Road intersection pass in an

illuminated blur, so familiar that she only half sees them. She's left Kenny with instructions to find out all he can about Rinat Yevtukh, and to search the darkest reaches of cyberspace for any mention of Villanelle. She feels a rush of exhilaration. It's good to be back. Venice is already a dream, and now she's going home to Niko. And the goats.

"I'm sorry," she says, wrapping her arms around his chest as soon as she walks in the door. "I'm so, so sorry."

"For what?"

"I don't know. Being a shit wife. Leaving you here while I ran off to Venice. Everything."

"You're here now. Hungry?"

He's made a stew. Ham hock, Polish sausage, porcini mushrooms and juniper berries. Two cold bottles of Baltika beer stand next to the casserole dish. It's a lot better than anything she had in Venice. "I spent half a day in the main police station, and it only occurred to me afterward that that's where I should have asked where to go to eat. Cops always know."

"How was it with Lance?"

"How was it? You mean working with him?"

"Working with him, hanging out with him..."

"Better than I expected. Street-smart but socially dysfunctional, like a lot of older field agents." She tells him the Noel Edmonds story.

"Smooth."

"Yeah, I just wanted to..." She shakes her head.

They sit in silence for a minute, each lost in their own thoughts. "I missed you," he finally says, placing a hand high on her thigh.

"I'm pretty wiped out. Why don't we just watch TV in bed? You choose something. I'll clean up."

"I suppose I could settle for that. Will you put the girls to bed? I think they missed you."

Thelma and Louise bleat and snicker as Eve orders them off the sofa and dispatches them to their quarters. Hearing the heavy clomp of Niko's footsteps upstairs, she remembers Claudio's neat, tanned feet in the velvet loafers embroidered with the Forlani crest. Claudio, she reflects, would not see the point of the goats at all.

Taking her phone from her bag, she runs a search for "Villanelle, perfume" and is directed to the website of Maison Joliot, in the rue du Faubourg St. Honoré in Paris. The perfumery has been owned by the same family for many generations, and its most expensive range is named Poésies. It comprises four fragrances: Kyrielle, Rondine, Triolet, and Villanelle. All come in identical vials, the first three with a white ribbon at the neck. The fourth, Villanelle, has a scarlet ribbon.

Gazing at the screen, Eve is possessed with a sudden and unexpected longing. She's always thought of herself as a fundamentally cerebral person, contemptuous of extravagance. But, gazing at the tiny image on the screen, she feels her certainties shifting. Recent events have taught her that she is not as immune to luxury and the purely sensual things of life as she once thought. Venice at nightfall, the weightless caress of the Laura Fracci dress, the touch of a six-thousand-euro bracelet on her wrist. All so seductive, and all in some essential sense so corrupt, so cruel. Villanelle, she reads, was the favorite scent of the Comtesse du Barry. The perfume house added the red ribbon after she was guillotined in 1793.

"Niko?" Eve calls out. "You know how you say you love me?"

"I may at some point have mentioned something to that effect, yes. Why?"

“There’s something I’d really, really like. Some perfume.”

* * *

At the Felsnadel Hotel, the meal is in its terminal stages, with bottles of Cognac, Sambuca, Jägermeister, and other spirits circulating. Leonardo Venturi, his tiny hands cradling a balloon glass of Bisquit Interlude Reserve brandy, is explaining his personal philosophy to Magali Le Meur. “We are the descendants of the grail knights,” he says, glaring at her breasts through his monocle. “New men, beyond good and evil.”

“And new women, perhaps?”

“When I say men, I mean women too, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

In the entrance hall, Birgit issues Villanelle and the other serving women with floor-length black cloaks and long-handled combustible torches. Villanelle has asked once again to be allowed to go to the toilet, and has once again been refused. Sympathetic glances from her fellow staff members suggest that they’ve been victims of the same obsessively controlling behavior.

Ordering them outside onto the snow-covered plateau in front of the hotel, Birgit positions the serving women in lines of six on either side of the helicopter landing pad. This has now been swept of snow and converted into a music stage, with speaker-towers to left and right. At the front of the stage is a microphone stand, at the rear a drum-kit bearing the Panzerdämmerung logo.

When the twelve women are in place, Birgit walks to each of them in turn and lights the wicks of their torches with an electronic gas lighter. “When the guests come out, lift the

torches up in front of you, as high as you can,” she orders them. “And on pain of dismissal, do not move.”

It’s piercingly cold, and Villanelle pulls her cloak around her. The burning oil in the torches sputters faintly in the frozen air. Ice particles swirl on the wind. Finally, the guests saunter out of the hotel, warmly wrapped in coats and furs, and Villanelle raises her flaming torch in front of her. The guests arrange themselves on either side of the stage and then Linder appears, picked out by a spotlight, and marches to the microphone.

“Friends,” he begins, raising his hands to silence the applause. “Welcome to Felsnadel. I can’t tell you how inspiring it is to see you all here. In a minute the band are going to start playing, but before they do, I just want to say this. As a movement, we’re gathering speed. The dark European soul is awakening. We’re creating a new reality. And that’s in great part due to all of you. We’re winning supports every day, and why? *Because we’re fucking sexy.*”

Pausing, Linder acknowledges the cheers of his guests.

“What woman, and what sensible man, doesn’t fancy a bad-boy nationalist? Everyone wants to be us, but most people just don’t dare. And to all those sad liberal snowflakes out there, I say this. *Watch out, bitches.* If you’re not at the high table with us, tasting the glory, you’re on the menu.”

This time the whoops and cheers are deafening. As they finally die away, Linder steps to one side of the stage and the three members of Panzerdämmerung enter from the other. As Klaus Lorenz slips his arm through the strap of a bass guitar, and Peter Lorenz takes his place behind the drums, Petra Voss walks to the microphone. She’s dressed in a white blouse, calf-length skirt, and boots, and carrying a blood-red Fender Stratocaster guitar slung like an assault rifle.

She starts to sing, her fingers picking softly at the strings. The song is about loss, about forgotten rituals, extinguished flames, and the death of tradition. Her voice hardens, and her guitar-playing, underlined now by Klaus Lorenz's bass, takes on a steely resonance. She doesn't move or sway, but just stands there, motionless except for the dance of her fingers. For a long moment, she stares straight at Villanelle, expressionless.

Villanelle stares back, and then turns her attention to the guests, who stand rapt in the flickering torchlight. Max Linder is watching them, too. His gaze scans the group dispassionately, noting their reactions to the spectacle that he has created for them.

On the drums, Peter Lorenz has been maintaining a ticking backbeat, but now he ramps up the pace. A recorded track of a political speech, ranting and incoherent, counterpoints Petra Voss's edgy, insinuating guitar. The drums continue to build until all other sound is annihilated. It's the sound of battalions marching through the night, of lands laid waste, and as it reaches a climax and stops dead, a starburst of spotlights pierces the darkness, illuminating the surrounding mountain peaks. It's an awesome sight, ghostly and desolate in the ringing silence. The guests burst into applause, and Villanelle, taking advantage of the diversion, extinguishes her torch and slinks off to the toilet.

* * *

Eve and Niko doze through most of the TV show they're watching in bed. Opening her eyes to discover the end-titles rolling, Eve reaches for the remote control. For several minutes, she lies there in near-darkness, her thoughts vague, as Niko

snores beside her.

Claudio. Suppose she'd let him kiss her. How would it have gone from there?

The kiss itself would have been brief and efficient. A formal statement of his intention and of her acquiescence. He would have taken her somewhere in the palazzo, into some suggestively appointed chamber for which he always carried the key. There would be few words and no wasted time. He would be a serial womanizer with a well-worn routine, refined by scores or perhaps hundreds of such encounters. The choreography would be fluent and the narrative arc conventional, proceeding to a showy money-shot for which she would be expected to display gasping and incredulous gratitude. He would be back in his clothes within minutes, his handmade loafers barely cooler than when he kicked them off. She would be left with a crumpled dress, the musky taint of his cologne, and sticky breasts.

Nevertheless, as Niko's breath hitches briefly, then slows again to an even rise and fall, her hand steals down her belly, and she finds herself shockingly ready. But it's not Claudio, or Niko, who's waiting behind her closed eyes, but a much more imprecise figure, all contradictions. Soft skin over coiled muscle, a killer's fingers, a rasping tongue, hazel eyes.

I climbed in one night to watch you sleep.

Eve rolls onto her her hand, her fingers wet. Fear and desire fold into each other in successive waves until her shoulders and neck rise, her forehead presses the sheet, and the breath leaves her body in a long, ebbing sigh.

After a while, she turns onto her side. Niko is watching her, his gaze unblinking.

6

Eve slips from the bed before Niko wakes. When she emerges from Goodge Street Underground station, the pavement is still shining from the night's rain, but the sky is washed with a thin sunlight. The office door, to her surprise, is unlocked; she enters hesitantly.

"Kenny. It's not even eight yet. How long have you been here?"

"Er, all night."

"Again? That's way beyond the call of duty."

He blinks and runs a hand through his hair, which is desperately in need of a wash. "Yeah, well. Kicked off the search into that guy Yevtukh, and one thing led to another."

"Find anything useful?"

"Yeah, I'd say so."

"Good. Hold that thought. I'm going down to the café."

"We've got instant. And tea bags."

"That kettle is disgusting. What do you want?"

"An almond croissant and a latte. And perhaps a shortbread finger."

She waves him off as he reaches for his wallet. "My treat."

She's back five minutes later. It's clear that Kenny is fading. His eyes gleam with exhaustion. "Eat," she says, placing his

order in front of him.

Kenny takes a large bite of the croissant, showering his shirt with crumbs, then washes it down with a gulp of coffee. "OK, Yevtukh. Basically the guy's your typical Sov-bloc gang boss. Or was. Headed up an outfit called the Golden Brotherhood, based in Odesa. Usual stuff. Sex trafficking, people-smuggling and drugs. The Ukrainian police also have him down for at least a dozen murders, but have never been able to get anyone to testify against him."

"All old news so far."

"OK, but you probably don't know what happened earlier this year. According to a file sent to the Europol database, there was a major shoot-out at a luxury property Yevtukh owned in a place called Fontanka, about fifteen kilometers outside Odesa. By the time the local cops got there, the house was pretty much wrecked, and eight people were dead. It was obviously gang-related, so at that point the investigation was handed over to the Ukrainian Criminal Police, who handle serious and violent crime."

"Was Yevtukh implicated?"

"Not directly. He was in Kyiv at the time, seeing his family, but it was his foot-soldiers who died at Fontanka."

"Do we know who was responsible for the attack?"

"This is where it gets weird. One of the people found dead at the house had nothing to do with Yevtukh. He was somebody his men had been holding prisoner. He'd already been beaten up pretty badly before he was shot, and the police couldn't identify him right away. So they sent a photograph, fingerprints, a DNA sample, the whole lot to the interior security service in Kyiv, and they knew who he was straight away. His name was Konstantin Vasiliev. He was an ex-head of operations at Directorate S in

Moscow.”

“That goes way beyond weird. You know what Directorate S is?”

“I do now. It’s the espionage and agent-running wing of the SVR.”

“Exactly. And its Operations Department is like our E Squadron. A special forces team. They mostly execute deniable and deep-cover operations overseas.”

“Assassinations, for example.”

“For example.”

Kenny stares into the middle distance, almond filling oozing from his croissant.

“Anything else interesting in that Europol report?”

Kenny shakes his head. “Fraid not. No one seems to be able to work out what an ex-Russian spymaster was doing locked in a Ukrainian gangster’s house in Odesa. It doesn’t make any sense. Or none that I can see, anyway. We should ask Carolyn. Bet she knew this Vasiliev bloke.”

The door opens and they both look around. It’s Lance, an unlit roll-up between his lips.

“Morning Eve, Kenny. Looking a bit rough round the edges, mate, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Kenny shrugs and takes a deep swig of coffee.

“He’s been up all night,” Eve says. “And he’s dug up some interesting information about Yevtukh. Listen to this.” Briefly, she fills Lance in.

“So if Vasiliev was SVR, why would a scumbag like Yevtukh want to go anywhere near him, let alone lock him up and torture him? I’d have thought the last thing someone like that would want to do is make enemies of the Russian secret service.”

“Vasiliev was *ex*-SVR,” Kenny says. “He’d been out for a

decade.”

“Doing what, do we know?” asks Lance.

“Stop. We’re coming at this from the wrong angle. Both of you shush a minute while I think.” Eve stands there, motionless. “OK. Let’s ignore what Vasiliev was doing, or not doing, in Yevtukh’s house in Odesa for the time being. Let’s focus on V, and quite possibly her girlfriend, making Yevtukh disappear in Venice. Why is she, or why are they, doing that?”

“Contract hit?” Lance suggests.

“Probably. But why? What’s the motive?”

Lance and Kenny shake their heads.

“What if it was revenge?”

“Revenge for what?” Kenny asks.

“For the killing of Vasiliev.”

Silence for a heartbeat. “Bloody hell,” Lance murmurs. “I see where you’re going with this.”

“I don’t,” says Kenny, rubbing his eyes.

“OK, so, Vasiliev headed up the Operations Department of Directorate S, a bureau Russia won’t even admit exists. But we know it does actually exist. He ran a worldwide network of operatives pulled from secret units in the Russian military and trained as deep-cover spies and assassins. Imagine what kind of man Vasiliev must have been, to reach a position like that. Imagine what kind of experience he must have had. And then imagine what happened when he left the SVR ten years ago, armed with all that knowledge and experience.”

“He went into the private sector,” says Lance.

“That would be my guess. Recruited by an organization in need of his very specific skill set.”

“The Twelve, for instance?”

Eve nods. “It would explain the link between him and our

assassin.”

“You sure we’re not making false connections?” Lance says. “Joining imaginary dots to convince ourselves we’re moving forward?”

“I don’t think so,” Eve says. “But I need to talk to Carolyn. If anyone knows anything about Vasiliev, she does. And clearly everything is leading back to Russia. Sooner or later, we’re going to have to go there ourselves.”

Lance grins. “Now you’re talking. Proper old-school intelligence work.”

“Cold this time of year, though,” Kenny says. “And I’m not too keen on snow.”

“You might like it more if you didn’t wear shorts *every single day*,” Eve points out.

“I like to let my legs breathe.”

Lance claps him on the back. “Just put some trousers on for a few days, mate. You’d love Moscow. Fit right in.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s wall-to-wall geeks. Lots of metalheads, too. They’ll like you just fine. Fellow fringes of society types and all.”

“I’ve never actually been abroad,” Kenny says.

“Never?” Eve asks.

“Well, I was going to go to prison in America at one point, but that fell through.”

“What actually happened with all that? I’ve read the file, but...”

Kenny looks slightly embarrassed. “When I was seventeen, I was in this hacker collective. We never met face to face, but we’d chat online. We had some pretty advanced tools, and basically we’d hack anything we could, especially U.S. corporate and government sites. We didn’t do it because we were like,

anarchists or anything, but just for the challenge of it. Most of us it was just dares and showing off and stuff. Anyway, we had sort of an unofficial leader, La-Z-boi, who used to direct us to sites, especially foreign government sites. And I will honestly never know how we didn't figure this one out, it's so obvious, but La-Z-boi worked for the FBI, and took us down. Everyone went to prison except me."

"How come you didn't?" Lance asks.

"I was underage."

"What, so you just got off scot-free?"

"Not quite. I was released on bail. Had to live at home with my mum, which is where I lived anyway, but under curfew, which was fine since I never went out, and with no access to the Internet, which was the real punishment."

"And that's when MI6 came knocking?" Eve asks.

"Basically, yeah."

She nods. "I'll call Carolyn to set up a meeting. We need to find out everything we can about Vasiliev."

* * *

Even if it's only a means to an end, Villanelle takes little pleasure in her work at the hotel. She and the other room attendants are required to rise at six thirty, eat a hurried breakfast of cheese, bread, and coffee in the kitchen, and then start vacuuming the public spaces of the hotel. When this is complete, the morning room-cleaning shift begins.

There are twenty-four guest bedrooms at Felsnadel, and Villanelle is responsible for eight of them. She is expected to start cleaning each room at the end furthest from the door, so that no detail is missed. Every surface—dressing tables, desks,

televisions, headboards, wardrobe doors—is to be dusted or wiped down. Wastepaper baskets are emptied, and anything on the desks or bedside tables tidied. Beds are then stripped and neatly remade with fresh sheets and pillowcases. In the bathrooms, where room staff are required to wear rubber gloves at all times, cleaning is carried out from top to bottom, starting with mirrors. Baths, shower stalls, and toilets are cleaned and sanitized, towels and toiletries replaced. The suite and its carpets are then vacuumed.

Some rooms require more work than others, and all are revealing of their occupants. Magali Le Meur's room is chaotic, with towels, bedclothes, and used underwear strewn over every surface. Her dressing table holds a carton of menthol cigarettes and a half-empty bottle of Peach Amore Schnapps. The bathroom floor is sodden, the toilet unflushed.

Silas Orr-Hadow's room, by contrast, looks barely touched. He's made his own bed, folded and put away all his clothes, and left the bathroom exactly as he has found it. On the desk, every book, paper, and pencil is aligned and squared off. On his bedside table is a photograph of an anxious-looking bespectacled boy, recognizably Orr-Hadow himself, holding the hand of a uniformed nanny. Beside it are two well-thumbed hardback books: *Winnie the Pooh* and *Mein Kampf*.

By the time Villanelle reaches Roger Baggot's room, her eighth and last, she's in a vengeful mood. The place reeks of cologne, and when Villanelle strips the bed, she discovers a woman's crumpled thong, which she guesses to be Johanna's, and a used and knotted condom. When the room is finally presentable, Villanelle allows herself to sink into one of the calfskin-upholstered chairs. If the work is unpleasant, and at times revolting, Villanelle is at least conscious that her room-

attendant duties afford her some badly needed privacy. Maria is a friendly enough roommate, but her depressive character irritates Villanelle, as does her snoring.

The morning briefing with Birgit has also yielded a single, salient fact: the whereabouts of Linder's room. He's on the first floor, in a spacious suite overlooking the rest of the hotel. None of the rooms that Villanelle services is on the first floor. Killing her target is going to require careful timing.

For Linder's guests, the pace of life at Felsnadel is leisurely. There is an extended breakfast offered in the dining room until eleven o'clock. Following this, drinks are available outside on the terrace, where reclining chairs, warmed by infrared heaters, are placed to take advantage of the view of the High Tyrol. The sky is a hard, pure blue, against which the snowy ridge-line of the Granatspitze massif shimmers like a blade.

Inside, a series of informal talks is underway. As Villanelle enters the reception area to report to Birgit that her rooms have all been cleaned, the tiny Italian fascist Leonardo Venturi is holding forth to half a dozen admirers.

"Then, finally, the old order will fall," he declaims. "And a new golden age will come into being. But this will not be painless. For the new Imperium to be born, the roots of the old must be cut away without pity."

"Without what, old chap?" asks Orr-Hadow.

"Without *pity*. Without mercy."

"Sorry, thought for a moment you said without PT."

"What is PT?"

"Physical training. At my prep school, we had it every day. The instructor was an ex-military policeman, and if you didn't do your press-ups properly you had to report for a cold shower. And he'd jolly well watch to make sure you stood there for a full

five minutes, too. Marvelous old boy. Sorry, you were saying?”

But Venturi has lost his train of thought, and in the brief hiatus, Villanelle makes her way across the reception area to the desk.

Birgit looks up, her expression frosty. “Room Seven. A complaint. You need to go straight away and deal with it.”

“Yes, Birgit.”

Room Seven is Petra Voss’s. When Villanelle knocks on the door and opens it with her pass key, Petra is lying on the bed, smoking. She’s wearing jeans and an ironed white shirt.

“Come over here, Violette. That is your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Petra stares at her. “You’re quite a piece of work in that uniform, aren’t you? Quite the Aryan cutie-pie.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. Bring me something I can use as an ashtray.”

In response, Villanelle reaches forward and takes the cigarette from Petra’s mouth. She walks over to the window, opens it, admitting a blast of cold air, and throws the cigarette out into the snow.

“So. You don’t approve of me.”

“You’re a guest. Obey the rules.”

Petra smiles. “Actually, I’m not a fucking guest. I’m paid to be here. A lot.”

“Whatever.”

“Such attitude from the maid.” Languidly, Petra swings her legs from the bed, and stands so that she is eye to eye with Villanelle. Very slowly and deliberately, she draws Villanelle’s black neckerchief through its woven leather knot. “But then, I’m your type, aren’t I?”

Villanelle considers. According to the hotel schedule, the

afternoon's guest entertainment is an hour-long helicopter flight through the high peaks of the Tyrol and Carinthia, hosted by Linder. It's due to depart from the landing strip at 2 p.m. She's got, perhaps, an hour.

"You might be," she says.

* * *

"Konstantin Vasiliev," says Carolyn. "How strange to hear his name after all these years."

She and Eve are sitting at a window table in a restaurant called the Purple Penguin by Charring Cross. Eve is drinking tea, and Carolyn is staring without enthusiasm at a plate of shepherd's pie.

Eve smiles. "You're wishing you hadn't ordered that now, aren't you?"

"I panicked. *Embarras du choix*. Konstantin's dead, you say?"

"Apparently, yes. Killed under unexplained circumstances, near Odesa."

"Sadly appropriate. His life was a series of unexplained circumstances." She looks out the window for a moment, then takes up her fork and determinedly addresses her meal. "So what's his death got to do with our inquiry?"

"He was killed in the house of a Ukrainian gangster named Rinat Yevtukh. A real piece of shit."

"As they so often are. Go on."

"Last month Yevtukh vanished off the face of the earth while on holiday in Venice, after taking off in a motor launch with an unknown, and apparently glamorous, young woman. We know our target was in Venice at the same time, and I'm wondering if she killed Yevtukh as some sort of punishment for Vasiliev's

death.”

“That presupposes a connection between her and Vasiliev. Is there any reason to think that such a connection exists?”

Eve sips her tea and lowers her cup to her saucer. “Not yet. But bear with me. We know that our assassin—who we’re calling Villanelle, by the way, and I’ll explain why in a minute—was in Venice. We know that she’s employed by the Twelve, the organization Frank Haleton told us about.”

“Whoever they might be.”

“Yes. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Vasiliev worked for them, too.”

“Yes, I can see that if you suppose that, you can construct a revenge motive. But just because he and this woman both had a connection to, um...”

“Yevtukh.”

“Exactly, to Yevtukh, it doesn’t mean to say that they knew each other. Equally, just because she happened to be in Venice at the same time as him, it doesn’t mean she...”

They fall silent as an elderly woman with a walker passes very slowly by their table.

Once she’s gone, Eve swallows the last of her tea, and leans forward. “Of course she killed him, Carolyn. He went off with her and never came back. The whole thing has her name written all over it.”

“And what is her name again?”

“I’m pretty sure that the name she uses professionally, or as a codename or whatever, is Villanelle.”

“How did you arrive at that?”

Eve explains.

Carolyn puts down her fork. “You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

"This woman leaves you a card, sprayed with her scent and signed V. You discover that she uses a scent called Villanelle, so you conclude that she calls herself the same thing. That's guesswork, not a logical consequence of the known facts. And the same is true of the connection between the woman—"

"Villanelle."

"All right, then, if you insist, between Villanelle and Konstantin. You want it to be so, so you deduce that it is so. My personal opinion is that we should pursue the Sverdlovsk-Futura line of inquiry that you outlined in your report. Follow the money, in other words."

"Of course. We should do that. But I need you to trust me on this, because I'm starting to understand her and how she operates. She comes off as reckless when she does things like giving me that bracelet, but she's actually taking very calculated risks. She guessed that I'd follow her to Venice, sooner or later, and that I'd figure out that she'd killed Yevtukh. That's all part of her plan. It's all a game to her. Knowing I'm there, just a couple of steps behind her, is fun for her. She's a psychopath, remember? Emotionally and empathetically, her life is a flatlining blank. What she wants is to *feel*. Killing gives her a rush, but only a temporary one. She's good at it, it's easy, and the thrill is diminishing each time she does it. She's looking for something to jack up the excitement. To know that her wit and her artistry and the sheer horror of what she's doing are appreciated. That's why she's drawing me in. That's why she told me her name, using the perfume. She likes giving me these perverse little puzzles. It's intimate and sensual and hyper-aggressive, all at the same time."

"Assuming that this is true, why you?"

"Because I'm the one going after her. I'm a source of danger

to her, and that excites her. Hence the provocations. All that erotic bait-and-switch."

"Well, it's clearly working."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's calling all the shots."

"That's fair. I'll admit she's been fucking with my head. But now I'm suggesting that we get ahead of the game. Let me go to Russia. Maybe Villanelle and Konstantin Vasiliev have no connection, and their lives don't intersect at all, but let's just look and see what we find. Please. Trust me on this."

Carolyn is expressionless. For perhaps half a minute, she stares out of the window at the busy street below. "We share a birthday. Shared, I should say."

"You and Vasiliev?"

"Yes."

"Were you the same age?"

"No, he was a couple of years younger. He fought as a conscript in the Soviet-Afghan War. Served under Vostrotin and was wounded, quite badly, at Khost. Won a medal, a good one, which must have brought him to the attention of someone with a bit of pull, because a couple of years later he turned up at the Andropov Academy. That's the finishing school for spies outside Moscow. It used to be run by the KGB, but by the time Konstantin left they'd become the SVR."

"So this was all... when?"

"Khost was in 1988, and Konstantin graduated from the Academy in, I'd guess, 1992. One of Yevgeny Primakov's brightest and best, by all accounts. There was a posting in Karachi and then another in Kabul, which is where I met him. He was very clever, very charming, and I'd guess completely ruthless."

"He was declared?"

"Yes, diplomatic cover. So he was on the circuit. But he had fast-track SVR written all over him. And he knew exactly who I was, too."

The waitress, name-tagged "Agniezka," appears at the table. "All done?" she asks, nodding at Carolyn's abandoned shepherd's pie.

"Thank you, yes."

"Didn't like it?"

"No. Yes. Just... Not hungry."

"You want a feedback form?"

"No, thank you."

"I'll give you one anyway. You're welcome."

"Why, in a free world, would you choose to have a tongue piercing?" Carolyn asks when Agnieszka has gone.

"I have no idea."

"Is it a sex thing? Because I don't see how it would do anything but get in the way."

"Really, I don't know. Can we get back to what you were saying about Vasiliev?"

"I'll tell you a story about him. We met at a reception at the Russian embassy—this was in Kabul—and after directing me to the best vodka, we got to talking. In his younger days, he was quite attractive, and obviously clever, and laughed at my jokes despite how atrocious my Russian was at the time. It was all done with a very light touch. Toward the end of the evening I told him I'd love to see him again but just couldn't face the paperwork, and he laughed and gave me another glass of Admiralskaya.

"Anyway, I reported the encounter in the usual way, and the next day I got a couriered message from Konstantin. He

remembered that I'd said I liked bird-watching, and wondered if I'd like to go on a short drive with him outside the city. So I logged the approach, and a couple of days later, I met Konstantin in Dar-al-Aman Road outside his embassy, where two vehicles turned up with Afghan drivers and half a dozen wild-looking locals armed with AKs. We drove out of the city on the Bagram road, past the airport, and half an hour later we turned off in the middle of nowhere, drove round a low hill, and there were all these parked vehicles, and tents, and the smoke from fires. There were thirty or forty people there. Arabs, Afghans, tribespeople, and a team of heavily armed bodyguards. So I asked Konstantin, rather nervously, what the hell was this place? And he said, don't worry, it's all fine, look closer.

"And that's when I saw these lines of perches, and on them, these superb birds of prey. Sakers, lanners, peregrines. It was a falconry camp. I followed Konstantin into one of the tents, and there, hooded and ready to fly, were half a dozen gyrfalcons, the most beautiful and expensive hunting birds in the world. There was also a white-bearded fellow there, extremely fierce-looking, who Konstantin said was a local tribal chieftain. He introduced us, someone brought us lunch, Coca-Cola and some kind of meat on skewers, and then we drove further into the desert and the falconers flew their birds at bustard and sand-grouse. It was truly spectacular."

"I never would have pegged you as a bird-watcher."

"I wasn't one until I joined the Service. Then I found out that several of the top Russia hands were birders, and that it wasn't enough to know your Pushkin and Akhmatova, you had to know your waxwings from your wagtails, too. So I took it up, and caught the bug."

"So you had a good day with him?"

"It was an extraordinary day, and I honestly didn't care that I was probably spending it with arms traders, opium dealers, and the high command of the Taliban. I wouldn't even have been surprised to have come face to face with Osama bin Laden, who I later learned owned several gyrfalcons."

"And he didn't make any kind of approach?"

"Of course not. He was much too smart for that. We talked very little except about the birds and the wildness and the strangeness of the occasion. And while he obviously had his professional reasons for cultivating me, I sensed that he took a real pleasure in my enjoyment of the day. I liked him very much, and I meant to return the invitation in some way. I felt that it was important not to be in his debt. But I didn't get the chance. He was recalled to Moscow shortly afterward, and we later learned that he'd been appointed chief of Directorate S."

"Did you ever see him again?"

Carolyn gives her the slightest hint of a smile. "Yes, but those are stories for another day. Let's get back to the matter at hand."

"All right. In 2008, Konstantin left the SVR altogether. Jumped or pushed?"

"Put it like this: when you're running an SVR directorate, it's up or out. And he wasn't promoted."

"Do you think he might have been resentful of his old bosses?"

"That wouldn't have been his way. Konstantin was an old-school Russian fatalist. He'd have taken it philosophically, packed his bags, and moved on."

"To what?"

"No idea. From the time he left the SVR until he turned up dead in Odesa, we had absolutely no knowledge of his whereabouts or activities. He vanished."

"You don't think that's strange?"

"I do, and it is. But it doesn't tie him to our killer."

"So what do you think he was doing for the past decade?"

"Gardening at his dacha? Running a nightclub? Salmon fishing in Kamchatka? Who knows?"

"Maybe placing a lifetime of experience of covert operations at the disposal of the Twelve?"

"Eve, there is no logical reason in the world to believe that that's the case. None."

"Carolyn, you didn't hire me for my logical skills. You hired me because I'm capable of making the imaginative leaps that this investigation demands. Villanelle might like to toy with the idea of leading us on, of leading *me* on, but when it really matters, she covers her tracks like a professional. Specifically, a professional who's been trained by the best. By a man like Konstantin Vasiliev."

Carolyn frowns, steeples her fingers, and opens her mouth to speak.

"Seriously, Carolyn, we have nothing else to go on. I agree we should follow the money-trail and the Tony Kent connection, but how long is that going to take us to untangle? Months? Years? The three of us at Goodge Street don't have the resources or the experience to get it done any faster.

"Eve—"

"No, listen to me. I know there's a chance that Vasiliev and the Twelve aren't connected, but if there's even the slightest chance that they *are*, then we need to follow up on it."

"Eve, it's a no. You can investigate the hell out of Konstantin from here, but I'm not sending you to Russia."

"Carolyn, please."

"Look, either you're wrong, and there's no connection, in which case it's a waste of your time and my resources. Or

you're right, in which case I'd be encouraging you, in the most irresponsible way possible, to place yourself in harm's way. You turn up in Russia and starting asking questions about political assassinations and the careers of men like Konstantin... I don't even want to think about the consequences. Or, for that matter, about what I'd tell your husband if anything happened to you. We're talking about a country so traumatized, so abused by its leaders, so systematically ransacked by its business class, that it can barely function. You start making enemies in Moscow, and a teenager will shoot you in the face for the price of an iPhone. There are no rules anymore. There's no pity. It's just havoc."

"I don't care. I want answers. And I know I'll find some there."

"Possibly. But you've said it yourself. Who do we trust? If we're to believe Frank, and in light of recent events we've got no choice but to believe him, the Twelve are buying precisely the kind of people we'd need to help us."

"That's why I need your help, Carolyn. You must know *someone* over there who's clean. Someone who's so damn principled there's no way they can be bought off."

"You don't give up, do you?"

"No, I don't. That's another reason you picked me for this job, isn't it?"

Carolyn sighs. "Eve, please. We can talk further if you want, but there's a couple over there staring at us, and I think they want this table. Also, I need to get back to the office."

* * *

Petra Voss yawns and stretches. "Well, that was nice. I'm glad I rang for you."

"Happy to be of service." Villanelle extricates her naked thigh

from between Petra's.

As Villanelle tries to stand, Petra takes her hand and pulls her back down onto the bed. "Don't go. I'm not done with you yet."

"Tell me about Max Linder," Villanelle says, running her fingers lightly down Petra's side.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm curious."

Petra shrugs. "He's weird."

"In what way?"

"He's got this thing for Eva Braun, apparently."

"Eva Braun?" Villanelle raises herself on one elbow. "You mean Hitler's—? What kind of thing?"

"Like he's her reincarnation. Are we just going to talk about that asshole, or are you going to fuck me again?"

"I'd love to," says Villanelle, sitting up again, "But I should get back to work."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. I'm just going to borrow your shower."

"So you've got time for a shower, then?"

"If I don't have one, I'll be in trouble with Birgit. And I'd rather not be."

"Who's Birgit?"

"Max's crazy bitch manager. She sniffs us to make sure we're clean. If I run into her smelling like this, she'll fire me."

"Well, we don't want that, do we? I might join you in the shower."

"Be my guest."

"I already am."

* * *

Back in the staff quarters, the temperature is, as usual, several degrees lower than elsewhere in the hotel. In the room they share, Villanelle finds Maria sitting on her bed, wrapped in a blanket, reading a Polish paperback.

"You missed lunch," Maria says. "Where were you?"

Villanelle takes her rucksack from the chest of drawers and, turning her back on Maria so as to block her view, reaches inside it, and takes out a ring of keys. "A guest wanted me to make up her room again."

"Shit. Which one was it?"

"That singer. Petra Voss."

"That's not fair, not on your lunch break. I saved you some food from the kitchen."

She hands Villanelle an apple, a wedge of Emmental cheese, and a slice of Sachertorte on a saucer. "We're not supposed to have the cake. I took it out of the room-service fridge."

"Thank you, Maria. This was very nice of you."

"People don't know how hard it is, all the shit we have to do."

"No," mumbles Villanelle, her mouth full of Sachertorte. "They really don't."

* * *

"So we're not going to Moscow after all," says Lance. "That's a shame. I really fancied some of that."

"Carolyn thought it was too dangerous to send me."

"To be fair, you do have a tendency to go a bit off-piste."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That last night in Venice, for example. You should have let me know where that jewelry designer's party was."

"How do you know the party was for a jewelry designer?"

"Because I was there, too."

"Really? I didn't see you there."

"Well, you wouldn't have."

She stares at him. "Wait. You followed me? You seriously fucking *followed* me?"

He shrugs. "Yeah."

"Not cool, Lance."

"I was doing my job. Making sure you were OK."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"You have no field training, Eve. That's the real issue, and that's why I'm here." He glances at her. "Look, you're good, OK? Smart. None of us would be here if you weren't. But when it comes to tradecraft and procedure, you're... well, you've got to trust me. No flying solo. We watch each other's backs."

* * *

After pulling on a pair of rubber cleaning gloves, Villanelle uses her pass-key to let herself into Linder's room, which Maria had serviced earlier. She works fast. The bathroom cupboards reveal little of interest, beyond a predilection for rejuvenating face creams. The clothes in the wardrobe are good quality, but not so showy and expensive as to alienate his working-class supporters, or to give the lie to his supposedly spartan lifestyle.

In the base of the wardrobe, there's an aluminum-bodied briefcase fitted with a lock. Villanelle's keyring holds several conventional door keys—enough to give a normal profile on an airport scanner—but also locksmith's jigglers and a bump key. A delicate twist of one of the smaller jigglers, and the lock springs open. Inside are an Apple laptop computer, several unmarked DVDs in plain boxes, a plaited leather bullwhip, an

Audemars Piguet Royal Oak watch, a boxed pair of cougar-head cufflinks by Carrera y Carrera, a Waffen SS ceremonial dagger, a death's head ring, a display case holding a heavy steel dildo ("The Obergruppenführer"), and several thousand euros in unused banknotes.

Leaving the case open, Villanelle conducts a quick tour of the rest of the room. On the bedside table is a miniature projector, an iPad tablet, a hardback copy of Julius Evola's *Ride the Tiger*, and a Mont Blanc fountain pen. Beneath these, on the floor, is a cabin-size valise secured by a five-digit combination lock. Glancing at her watch, Villanelle decides not to attempt to open the valise; instead, she tentatively lifts and shakes it. Whatever's inside is light; a faint swish suggests clothes. She replaces the valise, then unzips the large tan leather suitcase that has been placed against the wall. It's empty.

Sitting on the bed, Villanelle closes her eyes. A half-dozen heartbeats, and she smiles. She knows exactly how she is going to kill Max Linder.

* * *

Turning round in his chair, Kenny takes off his headphones. "Video file coming in from Armando Trevisan. Subject: attention Noel Edmonds. Is someone taking the piss?"

Eve looks up from the Sverdlovsk-Futura Group's website. "No, play it. Best quality you can."

"Give me a sec."

A clip of a crowded pavement, shot from about a meter above head height. A dozen or so pedestrians enter and exit the frame, a couple of them lingering in front of a clothes shop window. The footage is low-resolution gray on gray. It runs for seven

and a half seconds and cuts out.

"Is there a message?" Lance asks.

Kenny shakes his head. "Nope. Just the vid."

"That's the Van Diest boutique in Venice," Eve says. "Play it again at half-speed. Keep going until I say."

Kenny runs the clip twice before Eve stops him. "OK, slow it down even more. Watch the women in the hats."

As they enter the frame, the women seem to be together. The nearer of the two is wearing an elegant print dress, and her face is concealed by a broad-brimmed hat. The further figure is wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and what looks like a straw cowboy hat. A large man steps between them and the camera.

"Out of the way, fatso," Lance grumbles.

The man's there for a full five seconds, then he turns toward the camera to look behind him, and as he does so, the cowboy hat appears to slip back on the second woman's head, momentarily exposing her face.

"The Russian girlfriend?" Lance asks.

"Could be, if the timing fits when when they visited the shop. Which I'm guessing is why Trevisan sent it. Let's go frame by frame and see if we can get a better look at her."

The moment replays, infinitely slowly. "Best I can do," says Kenny finally, moving backward and forward between frames. "You've either got the full profile blurred, or the part-profile with her hand in the way."

"Print both," Eve tells him. "And the frames bracketing them."

"OK... Hang on, another email from Venice just came through."

"Read it out loud," she says, walking over to the printer.

"Dear Ms. Polastri, I hope this CCTV footage from Calle Vallarezzo is of use. It corresponds to the time of the two

women's visit to the Van Diest shop as described by yourself and confirmed to me by the manager Giovanna Bianchi. In this connection two women, registered as Yulia and Alyona Pinchuk, stayed at the Hotel Excelsior on the Lido for one night, two days after the date on the CCTV footage. Hotel staff have confirmed that the Pinchuks, described as sisters, might have been those shown in the footage. With compliments—Armando Trevisan.”

“Run a check on those names, Kenny. Yulia and whatever the other one was Pinchuk.” She grabs the first of the printouts as the printer wheezily disgorges it. “That’s got to be Villanelle in the dress. Look at how she angles her hat so it completely hides her face from the CCTV camera.”

“Might just be coincidence.”

“I don’t think so. She’s totally surveillance aware. And that’s got to be the girlfriend. Remember what Giovanna said? Same age but a little shorter. Medium-length brown hair. Strong but lean. It’s a pretty generic description, but...”

Lance nods. “She does fit it. Lean but muscular, definitely. Can’t tell the hair color, but I guess that’s medium length. Just wish the face wasn’t so blurred.”

Eve stares at the printout of the two women. The features of the girlfriend, if that’s what she is, are pixilated and indistinct, but the essence of her is there, enough that Eve is sure she’ll know her if she sees her.

“OK. Yulia and Alyona Pinchuk,” says Kenny. “Seems they’re the co-proprietors of an online dating and escort agency called MySugarBaby.com, based in Kyiv. The contact address is a post office box in the Oblonskiy district of the city.”

Lance hovers over Kenny’s shoulder. “Check if they do mail order brides. For interrogation purposes.”

“I don’t think there’s room in the operational budget for that,”

says Eve.

He shrugs. "A man can dream."

"Can you keep digging, Kenny? See if you can find any pictures or biographical stuff? I know they're just cover stories, but let's make sure."

Kenny looks dazed with exhaustion, and Eve feels a stab of guilt. "Do it tomorrow," she tells him.

"You sure?" he asks. "I could just get some coffee..."

"I'm sure. You've done more than enough for one day. Two days? However long you've been here. You need to go home and get some sleep. What's your plan for the evening, Lance?"

"I'm meeting someone. The bloke from the Hampshire Road Policing Unit whose bike was nicked by your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend, Lance. Call her Villanelle."

"OK. By Villanelle."

"Is he coming to London?"

"No, I'm taking a train from Waterloo out to Whitchurch, which is where his unit is based. Apparently they serve a nice pint at the Bell."

"Will you be able to get back OK?"

"Yeah, no problem. Last train's around eleven."

"OK. See you tomorrow, then. And thank you both for going all in on this investigation. Seriously."

* * *

An hour before the dinner shift, Villanelle knocks at Johanna's door. Unlike the other temporary staff members, Johanna has a room to herself. She is also, alone of the twelve of them, not required to serve at dinner. Kissing Birgit's ass has its rewards.

The door opens slowly. Johanna is wearing tracksuit pants

and a crumpled sweater. She looks half-awake. “Ja. What do you want?”

“I want you to take my place at dinner tonight.”

Johanna blinks and rubs her eyes. “I’m sorry, I don’t work the evening shift, except for turndown service on the upper corridor. Ask Birgit.”

Villanelle holds up a clear plastic bag containing the grubby thong retrieved from Roger Baggot’s bed. “If you don’t take that shift for me, I’m going to have to tell Birgit where I found this. I don’t think she’ll be very happy to learn you’ve been fucking the guests.”

“I’ll deny it. You can’t prove that’s mine.”

“Let’s go and speak to Birgit right now, then. We’ll see who she believes.”

For a moment, Villanelle thinks her bluff is going to be called. Then, slowly, Johanna nods.

“OK. I’ll do it,” she says. “Why is it so important to you, anyway?”

Villanelle shrugs. “I’ve had enough of Linder’s guests. I can’t stand another evening of their stupid conversation.”

“So what do I say to Birgit? She’s going to think it’s strange that I’m doing a shift I don’t have to.”

“Tell her whatever you like. Say I’m in my room, throwing up. Say I’ve got the shits. Whatever.”

She nods sulkily. “So can I have my *tanga* back?”

“Later.”

“*Scheisse*, Violette. I thought you were a nice person. But you’re a bitch. A real fucking bitch.”

Villanelle smiles. “Just be there at dinner, OK?”

When Villanelle gets back to her room, she can hear the weak splash of the shower. When Maria steps back into the room,

shivering in an undersized towel, Villanelle tells her that she's feeling ill, and that Johanna will be covering for her at dinner. If Maria is surprised at this turn of events, she says nothing.

After locking herself in the bathroom, Villanelle applies a thin layer of pale cake makeup, and dusts it with cornstarch. A faint smudge of shadow beneath each eye, and she's the picture of unhealth. Retching into her hand as she passes Maria, she goes in search of Birgit.

She finds her in the kitchen, bullying one of the sous-chefs. Haltingly, Villanelle tells Birgit about her stomach upset and her arrangement with Johanna. Birgit is furious to hear that Villanelle is not going to be serving in the restaurant, and tells her that she's thoroughly unreliable and disrespectful and that she will be docking her pay.

By the time she gets back to the room, Maria is in her serving uniform, and on the point of setting off for the restaurant. "You really don't look well," she tells Villanelle. "Make sure you wrap up warmly. Take the blanket from my bed if you want."

After she's gone, Villanelle waits for a further ten minutes. By now, everyone should be congregating in the main building for pre-dinner drinks. Opening the door onto the staff corridor, she peers cautiously out, but can hear nothing. She's alone.

She retreats back inside, takes her phone and a steel-bodied ballpoint pen from the bedroom chest of drawers, and locks herself in the bathroom again. Kneeling on the tiled floor, she removes the back from the phone and, lifting out the battery, extracts a tiny foil envelope containing a copper-bodied micro detonator. Then, taking a small violet-scented oval of soap from her wash bag, she strikes it with controlled force against the porcelain base of the sink, so that the outer shell of the soap cracks open. Inside it is a 25g plastic-wrapped disk of

Fox-7 explosive, which Villanelle returns to the wash bag. It's joined there by the micro detonator, the ballpoint pen, and the clippers, cuticle-pushers, and scissors from her manicure set.

She loathes Raymond, but she has to admit he's provided everything she asked for. The detonator and the Fox-7 explosive are state-of-the-art, the manicure items are engineered steel, capable of doubling as professional DIY tools, and the pen, with very little adjustment, turns into a miniature 110V soldering iron.

Now there's just one more thing she needs.

* * *

Goodge Street tube station is crowded. It's always this way during the after-work rush hour, which is one of the reasons that Eve usually prefers to take the bus. She's not claustrophobic, precisely, but there's something about being hemmed in by bodies while hurtling through an underground tunnel, with the possibility that the lights may flicker and go out at any second, or the train unaccountably stop, as if its functions have suddenly and catastrophically failed, that makes her profoundly anxious. There are just too many parallels with death.

The first train that arrives, a Northern Line train via Edgware, is already full to capacity, and as the ranks of commuters on the platforms press forward, trying to force their way aboard, Eve retreats to a bench.

"Crazy, no?" says an expressionless voice next to her.

He's in his late thirties, forty at a push. Skin that hasn't seen the sun in months. She looks frostily ahead.

"I have something for you." He passes her a brown office envelope. "Read please."

It's a handwritten note.

You win. This is Oleg. Do everything he says. C.

Frowning hard to disguise her elation, Eve puts the envelope and note in her bag. "OK, Oleg. Tell me."

"OK. Tomorrow morning, very important, you meet me here on station platform, eight o'clock, and give me passport. Tomorrow evening six o'clock meet me here again, and I give back. Wednesday you flying Heathrow to Moscow Sheremetyevo, and staying at Cosmos Hotel. You speak Russian, I think? Little bit?"

"*Ne mnogo*. I took two semesters in college."

"*Khorosho*. Have you been before?"

"Once. About ten years ago."

"OK, no problem." He opens a briefcase, and takes out two flimsy sheets printed with the tiny, smudgy script common to visa application forms the world over. "Sign, please. Don't worry, I fill in the rest."

She hands the forms back to him.

"Also, Moscow very cold now. Raining ice. Take strong coat and hat. Boots."

"Will I be going alone?"

"No, also your *kollega*, Lens."

It takes her a moment to realize that he means Lance.

"Thanks, Oleg. *Do zavtra*."

"*Do zavtra*."

It's only at this point that she starts to wonder what the hell she's going to tell Niko.

* * *

It takes Villanelle fifty-five minutes, working calmly and steadily, to prepare the explosive device with which she intends to kill Linder. When it's ready, she changes into her Bund Deutscher Mädel uniform, pockets the device and her pass-key, and leaves the room. Arriving at the guest wing, she pauses. The corridor is silent; the guests are still at dinner. Walking unhurriedly to Robert Baggot's room, she knocks quietly on the door, gets no response, and lets herself in. Having pulled on her rubber cleaning gloves, Villanelle takes an envelope from her pocket. In it is a pair of nail scissors and the plastic film in which the Fox-7 explosive was wrapped. In the bathroom, she finds Baggot's wash bag, makes a small cut in the lining with the nail scissors, and pushes the plastic film inside. The envelope goes in the small pedal waste-bin beside the sink. The scissors go in the bathroom cabinet.

She leaves Baggot's room and ascends to the first floor, and Linder's room. Once again, she knocks quietly on the door, but there's no sound from within. She lets herself in, her breathing steady, and carefully plants the device that she's prepared. For a moment she stands in the middle of the room, calculating blast and shockwave vectors. Then her body registers alarm, and she realizes that she can hear a faint, muffled tread climbing the stairs. It might not be Linder, but she can't take that chance.

Villanelle considers calmly walking out of the room as if she's just finished turning down the bed linen. But the linen isn't turned down, and there's no time now to do so. Besides, others might see her leaving, and remember. She looks around the room for a suitable hiding place. Her options are limited. She settles on the tan suitcase, and pulls open the twin zips. Stepping inside, she kneels, contracts, angles her shoulders, and tucks in her head. Then, reaching upward, she draws the

zips together, leaving a four-inch space to breathe and look through. It's a brutally tight fit, impossible for anyone who didn't exercise and stretch regularly, but Villanelle ignores the straining tendons in her back and legs and concentrates on regularizing her breathing. The case smells of musty pigskin. She can feel the steady beat of her heart.

The door to the room opens, and Max Linder walks in. He hangs the Do Not Disturb sign over the outside handle, and bolts the door from the inside. Rounding the bed, he stoops to pick up the valise, which he places on the bed and unlocks, using a combination code. From inside this, he takes a ginger-colored garment of some kind, and drapes it across the bed.

He crosses the room. Villanelle can't see the wardrobe because the bed is in the way, but she hears the creak of its double doors, and then the springing click of the lock as Linder opens the briefcase. Pressing one eye to the narrow aperture between the zips, she feels cold sweat crawling from her armpits to her ribs. A moment later, Linder walks back into view carrying the laptop computer and a CD, which he places next to the miniature projector on the bedside table. There's a pause as he connects them, and then a dim, projected image appears on the wall of the room, runs for a couple seconds, and stops. Villanelle can only see the image at an acute angle, but it appears to be the countdown timer of an old black and white film.

Touching a wall-switch, Linder turns off the overhead light, so that the only remaining illumination is provided by the lamp on the bedside table, and the beam of the projector. Then, unhurriedly, he strips naked, and taking the garment from the bed, steps into it.

It's a dirndl, a traditional Alpine dress with a laced-up bodice, a white blouse with puff sleeves, and a frilled apron. White

knee socks complete the costume. Villanelle can't see Linder clearly, but she can see enough to know that the look doesn't suit him. Bending down, he takes a female wig from the valise and teases it into place on his head. The wig is neatly coiffed and waved, in a stern, mid-twentieth-century style.

Her back and calf muscles screaming now, Villanelle stares through her tiny viewing slit, and remembers what Petra Voss told her.

He's turning himself into Eva fucking Braun.

Returning to the briefcase in the wardrobe, Linder takes out the rectangular box that houses the Obergruppenführer dildo. Given that less than an hour ago Villanelle has fitted the Obergruppenführer with a military-grade detonator and a lethal payload of Fox-7 explosive, this is not good news. Briefly, she considers bursting out of the suitcase, killing Linder with her bare hands, and then pitching him out of the window into the snowy darkness outside, but quickly dismisses the idea. As much planning and effort as she's put into her current plan, she wants to see it play out. And weirdly, illogically, she feels safe folded into the suitcase.

Linder taps a key on the laptop to resume the film, and as black and white images flicker on the wall, he inserts a pair of in-ear headphones and lies down on the bed. Despite the distorted angle, Villanelle can see that the film is of Hitler, delivering a ranting, histrionic speech to a vast crowd, perhaps at Nuremberg. All she can hear of the speech is a faint whisper from the headphones, but the lace apron of the dirndl is soon twitching like a tent in a high wind. "*Oh mein sexy Wolf,*" Linder mutters, clutching himself. "*Oh mein Führer.* Fuck me with that big wolf's *schwanz*. I need *anschluss*."

Villanelle closes her eyes, presses her forehead to her knees,

covers her ears with her hands, and opens her mouth. Her neck and shoulder muscles are quivering now, and her heart pounding.

“Invade me, *mein Führer!*”

The air ruptures, tearing like fabric, and a roar of sound slams from wall to wall, wrapping around Villanelle so tightly that she can’t breathe, lifting and upending her. For an extended moment, she’s weightless, then there’s a hard impact, and the suitcase bursts open. Lungs heaving, faint with shock, she rolls into a frozen, stinging silence. The room’s half dark, and there’s no plate-glass window anymore, just an empty black space. The air is filled with feathers, whirling like snowflakes on the intruding mountain air. Some, flecked with red, drift to the floor. One settles softly against Villanelle’s cheek.

Effortfully, she raises herself on one elbow. Max Linder is all over the place. His head and torso, still wearing the laced-up bodice of the dirndl, have been thrown back against the headboard. His legs, all but severed, hang loosely over the bed’s end. In between, on the exploded duvet, is a glinting mess of blood, viscera, and broken glass from the blown-out overhead light. Above Villanelle’s head, something detaches from the ceiling and splatters into her hair. She brushes it away absently; it feels like liver. The ceiling and walls are glazed with bloody-spray, and flecked with fecal and intestinal matter. Linder’s severed right hand lies, palm down, in the courtesy fruit bowl.

Slowly, Villanelle gets to her feet and takes a few shaky steps. Vaguely conscious that she’s hungry, she reaches for a banana, but its skin is sticky with blood, and she lets it fall onto the carpet. Her eyes ache with fatigue, and she’s desperately, mortally cold. So she lies down again, curling up like a child at the foot of the bed, as the body fluids of the man that she

has killed drip and congeal around her. She doesn't hear the splintering of the door, or the shouts and the screaming that follow. She dreams that she's lying with her head in Anna Leonova's lap. That she's safe, and at peace, and Anna is stroking her hair.

Sleet is spattering against the window of the Airbus as it taxis to the runway. A stewardess with over-bleached hair is giving a listless safety demonstration. Canned music rises and falls in volume.

"I know the hotel," Lance says. "It's on Prospekt Mira, and absolutely bloody enormous. Probably the biggest in Russia."

"Do you think they're serving drinks on this flight?"

"Eve, this is Aeroflot. Relax."

"Sorry, but it's been a really shitty couple of days. I think Niko may have left me."

"That bad, eh?"

"That bad. Venice was already a huge fight. This time I can't even tell him where I'm going. He'd freak out if he knew. And even though he knows that you and I are absolutely not, you know..."

"Having sex?"

"Yeah, even though he knows that, I'm still going to wherever it is that I'm going with some other guy."

"You told him I was coming?"

"I probably shouldn't have, but it seemed better than not saying anything, or lying about it now and then accidentally letting it slip later."

Lance glances at the passenger on his left, a bullet-headed figure wearing a bulky jacket in the black and red colors of FC Spartak Moscow, and shrugs. "There's no answer. My ex-wife hated that I never talked to her about my work, but what can you do? She liked a gossip with her pals, and with a couple of drinks inside her she got very chatty indeed. There are couples who cope better than others, but that's as far as it goes."

Eve nods, and wishes she hadn't. She feels hungover, sleep-deprived, and emotionally fragile. She and Niko were up until almost 3 a.m., drinking wine that neither of them felt like drinking, and saying things that could not be unsaid. Eventually she announced that she intended to go to bed, and Niko insisted with wounded determination on sleeping on the sofa.

"Don't be surprised if I'm not here when you get back from wherever the fuck it is you're going," he said, leaning balefully on the doorway.

"Where will you go?"

"Why? What difference does it make?"

"I'm just asking."

"Don't. If I don't have the right to know your movements, you don't have the right to know mine, OK?"

"OK."

She fetched him blankets. Sitting on the sofa with his head bowed, he looked lost, a displaced person in his own home. It distressed Eve to see him like this, so steeped in hurt, but some cold and clear-thinking part of her knew that this battle had to be fought and won. That she might back down was an alternative she never considered.

"How long is this flight?" she asks Lance.

"About three and a half hours."

"Vodka's good for hangovers, isn't it?"

"Tried and tested."

"As soon as we're airborne, flag down that stewardess."

* * *

The hotel, as Lance has described, is vast. The lobby is the size of a railway station, its pillared expanse and functional grandeur redolent of high Sovietism. Their twenty-second-floor rooms are drab, with worn furnishings, but the views are spectacular. Opposite Eve's window, on the far side of Prospekt Mira, is the complex of ornate pavilions, walkways, gardens, and fountains comprising the former All-Russia Exhibition Center. At a distance, it still has a fading glamour, especially beneath the enamel-blue October sky.

"So what's the plan?" Lance asks, as they drink a second cup of coffee in the hotel's Kalinka restaurant.

Eve reflects. She feels renewed by the night's sleep, and unexpectedly optimistic. The fight with Niko, and the issues surrounding it, have receded to a background murmur, a distant shimmer. She's ready for whatever the day and the city might bring. "I think I'll go for a walk," she says. "Maybe go to that park across the street. I want to see that rocket sculpture up close."

"Oleg said we'd be contacted at the hotel at eleven o'clock."

"Then we've got two and a half hours to kill. I don't mind going alone."

"If you go, I come with you."

"You seriously think I'm at risk? Or that we are?"

"This is Moscow. We're here under our own names, and we can count on those names being on some list of foreign intelligence operatives. Our arrival won't have gone unnoticed,

trust me. And obviously our contact knows we're here."

"Who is our contact, anyway? Any idea?"

"No names. Just that it's someone Carolyn knows from her time here. An FSB officer would be my guess. Probably someone pretty high-up."

"Carolyn was head of station here, right?"

"Yeah."

"So does this happen a lot? Senior officers keeping lines of communication open with the other side?"

"Not a lot. But she's always had a way of getting on with people, if you know what I mean, even when things got frosty at the diplomatic level."

"I remember Jin Yeong saying pretty much the same thing in Shanghai." She rolls her eyes. "We get it, Carolyn. You had a lot of fun in the eighties."

"I think Carolyn also saw those relationships as a kind of fail-safe. So that if one of their leaders, or ours, were to go completely off the rails..."

"Cooler heads might prevail?"

"That sort of thing."

Fifteen minutes later, they're standing at the foot of the Monument to the Conquerors of Space. This is a hundred-meter-high representation, in shining titanium, of a rocket rising on its exhaust plume. Beside them, a kebab vendor is setting up his stand.

"I always felt so sorry for Laika, that dog they sent up," Eve says, pushing her hands deep into the pockets of her parka jacket. "I read about her when I was a kid. I used to imagine her all alone in the capsule, drifting up there in space, not knowing she would never get to return to Earth. I know humans died in the space program, too, but Laika was always more of a downer

for me.”

“I always wanted a dog. My Uncle Dave managed a waste depot outside Redditch, and every so often he’d invite us kids round and we’d send his terriers in after the rats. They’d kill maybe a hundred in a session. Complete bloody mayhem, and the smell was diabolical.”

“What a lovely childhood memory.”

“Yeah, well. My dad always said Dave made a fortune out of that place. Most of it from turning a blind eye when blokes turned up at night with lumpy shapes rolled up in carpeting.”

“Seriously?”

“Put it like this. He retired aged forty, moved to Cyprus, and hasn’t lifted a finger since, except to play golf.” He hunches into his coat. “We should keep moving.”

“Any particular reason?”

“If anyone’s got surveillance on us, and that’s somewhere between possible and probable, we’re not going to know if we stay still.”

“OK. Let’s get going.”

The park, built in the mid-twentieth century to celebrate the economic achievements of the Soviet state, is vast and melancholy. Triumphal arches, their columns flaking and weather-streaked, frame empty air. Neo-classical pavilions stand padlocked and deserted. Visitors huddle on benches, staring into the middle distance as if defeated by the attempt to make sense of the nation’s recent history. And above it all, that almost artificially blue sky, and the scudding white clouds.

“So, Lance. When you were here before...”

“Go on.”

“What were you actually doing?”

He shrugs. A solitary roller skater whirrs past them. “Bread-

and-butter stuff, mostly. Keeping an eye on people who needed an eye kept on them. Seeing who came and went.”

“Agent-handling?”

“I was more of a talent-spotter. If I felt one of their people had potential, and wasn’t being fed to us, I’d pass it on and an approach would be made. With walk-ins, I helped filter out the obvious nutters.”

They’re rounding an ornamental lake, its surface furrowed by the wind. “Don’t look now,” Lance says. “Hundred meters behind us. Single gent in a gray overcoat, pork-pie hat, looking at a map.”

“Following us?”

“Certainly keeping eyes on us.”

“How long have you known?”

“He picked us up when we left the rocket statue.”

“What should we do?”

“What we were going to do anyway. Go and have a look at the metro station, like good tourists, and make our way back to the hotel. While resisting the temptation to turn round and stare at our FSB chum, if possible.”

“I’m not that naive.”

“I know. Just saying.”

Entry to the metro station is via a circular pillared atrium. Inside, it’s bustling but spacious, and after buying a ticket each, they descend by escalator to the palatial underground concourse. At the sight of it, Eve stops dead, causing a woman to ram her behind the knees with a shopping trolley before pushing brusquely past. Eve, however, is captivated. The central hall is vast, and lit with ornate chandeliers. The walls and vaulted ceiling are white marble; archways faced in green mosaic lead to the railway platforms. Passengers hurry to and

from the trains in swirling cross-currents, a young man is playing a song Eve vaguely recognizes on a battered guitar, a beggar displaying military service medals kneels with head lowered and hands outstretched.

Lance and Eve allow themselves to be drawn along the concourse by the crowd. "What's that song?" she asks. "I think I recognize it from somewhere."

"Everyone thinks they know it. It's the most annoying song ever written. It's called '*Posledniy raz.*' The Russian equivalent of the 'Macarena.'"

"The things you know never cease to amaze me." She stops. "Oh my God. Look."

An elderly man is sitting on a stone bench. At his feet is a cardboard box full of kittens. He grins toothlessly at Eve. His eyes are a pale, watery blue.

As Eve falls to one knee, intending to touch a finger to the impossibly soft head of one of the kittens, a fluttering wind touches her hair, followed by a smacking sound. The face of the man on the bench seems to fold inwards, grin still in place, as his skull bloodily voids itself against the marble wall.

Eve freezes, wide-eyed. She hears the tiny mewing of the kittens, and as if from a distance, screaming. Then she's dragged to her feet, and Lance is strong-arming her toward the exit. Everyone else has the same idea, and as the crowd presses around them, shoulders barging and elbows shoving, Eve feels herself stumbling and tries to catch herself, but is swept forward, the press of bodies against her ribcage so unyielding that she gasps for breath. The clamp tightens, points of light burst before her eyes, a voice yells in her ear—"Seryozha, Seryozha"—and the last thing she knows before her legs give way and the darkness rises to meet her is that from somewhere, somehow, she can

still hear that maddening, insinuating song.

Catching her, hoisting her up so that her head lolls on his shoulder, Lance carries her onto the escalator. This, too, is packed tight with passengers, but finally they reach the atrium, and he lowers her into a seated position against a pillar. Opening her eyes, she blinks, gulps air, feels the waves of dizziness rise and fall.

"Can you walk?" Lance scans the area urgently. "Because we really, really need to get away from here."

He pulls her to a standing position. She sways for a moment, lungs heaving, and attempts to order her thoughts. Someone has just tried to shoot her in the back of the head. The old man with the kittens has had his brains blown out. The shooter might catch up with them at any moment.

Eve knows that she should act decisively, but she feels so lightheaded and nauseated that she can't bring herself to move. Shock, a small voice tells her. But knowing that she's in shock doesn't dispel the meaty smack of the bullet, the infolding face, the brains tumbling from the skull like summer pudding. *Posledny raz*. The kittens, she thinks vaguely. Who will look after the kittens? Then she leans forward and vomits noisily onto the floor between her feet, splashing her boots in the process.

Immediately outside the metro station, four solidly built men are waiting. Behind them, a black van bearing the insignia of the FSB is drawn up on the tarmac. A fifth man, wearing a pork-pie hat, stands a short distance from the others, making no attempt to disguise the fact that he's watching the outpouring passengers closely.

Eve's retching, and the evasive action taken by those passing her, attracts the men's attention. By the time she straightens

up, wet-eyed and shaking, they're moving determinedly toward her.

"Come," says one of them, in English, placing a hand on her elbow. He's wearing a leather flat cap and a padded winter jacket, and looks neither friendly nor unfriendly. Like his three colleagues, he has a large handgun holstered on his belt.

"*Kogo-to zastrelili*," Lance tells him, pointing into the metro. "Someone's been shot."

The man in the leather cap ignores his words. "Please," he says, gesturing toward the black van. "Go in."

Eve stares at him wretchedly.

"I don't think we've got much choice," Lance says, as passengers continue to stream past them. "Probably safer there than anywhere else."

The drive is conducted in silence and at high speed, the van swerving aggressively from lane to lane. As they race southwards down Prospekt Mira, Eve attempts to focus her thoughts, but the swaying van and the overpowering smell of petrol, body odor, cologne, and her own vomit make her even more nauseated, and it's all she can do not to throw up again. Staring through the windscreen at the road in front of them, she runs a hand through her hair. Her forehead is clammy.

"How are you feeling?" Lance asks.

"Like shit," she answers, not turning around.

"Don't worry."

"Don't *worry*?" Her voice is a rasp. "Lance, someone just tried to fucking shoot me. I've got puke on my boots. And we've been abducted."

"I know, not ideal. But I think we're safer with these guys than on the street."

"I really fucking hope so."

They swing into a wide square, dominated by a vast and cheerless edifice in ocher brick. "The Lubyanka," Lance says. "Used to be the headquarters of the KGB."

"Great."

"Now occupied by the FSB, who are basically the KGB with better dentistry."

The driver takes a road to the side of the building, makes a turn, and parks. The rear of the Lubyanka is a wasteland of building works and litter. Wire grills cover windows impenetrable with grime. The man in the leather cap steps down from the front passenger seat and slides open the van door.

"Come," he says to Eve.

She turns to Lance, wide-eyed with apprehension. He tries to get up, but is pressed firmly back into his seat.

"She comes, you stay."

She feels herself boosted toward the van door. Leather-cap waits outside, blank-faced.

"This could be what we came for," says Lance. "Good luck."

Eve feels empty, even of fear. "Thanks," she whispers, and steps down onto a scattering of builders' grit. She's hurried past an entrance covered by corrugated iron to a low doorway surmounted by a hammer and sickle in carved stone. Leather-cap presses a button, and the door gives a faint, expiring click. He pushes it open. Inside, Eve can see nothing but darkness.

* * *

Oksana Astankova is walking at the side of a road in a city that both is and isn't Perm. It's evening, and snow is falling. The road is bordered by tall, flat-fronted buildings, and between

these, the dark expanse of a river is visible, and ice-floes painted with snow. As Oksana walks, the landscape shapes ahead of her, as if she's in a 1990s computer game. Walls rise up, the road unrolls. Everything is made of graduated flecks of black, white, and gray, like the wing-scales of a moth.

The knowledge that she is living in a simulation reassures Oksana: it means, as she's always suspected, that nothing is real, that her actions will have no consequences, and she can do whatever she likes. But it doesn't answer all her questions. Why is she driven to this constant search, this endless walking of this twilight road? What lies behind the surfaces of the buildings that rise up to either side of her like stage scenery? Why is it that nothing seems to have depth or sound? Why does she feel this terrible, crushing sadness?

Far ahead of her, an indistinct figure waits. Oksana walks toward her, her step determined. The woman is looking forward, into a snow-blurred infinity. She doesn't seem to be aware of Oksana's approach, but at the last moment she turns, her gaze a spear of ice.

* * *

Villanelle snaps awake, wide-eyed, heart pounding. Everything is sunlit white. She's lying in a single bed, with her head supported by pillows. Wound dressings and compression bandages cover much of her face. In the direction that she's facing, she can see light streaming through net curtains, a cast-iron radiator, a chair, and a bedside table holding a bottle of mineral water and a box of Voltarol tablets. When she first woke up here forty-eight hours ago, she felt utterly wretched. Her ears ached excruciatingly, bile rose in her throat whenever

she swallowed, and the slightest movement sent pain jolting through her neck and shoulders. Now, apart from a faint, residual ringing in her ears, she just feels drained.

Raymond walks into her field of vision. Apart from a mostly silent young man who has brought Villanelle her meals, he's the first person she's seen since arriving here. He's wearing a down-filled jacket, and carrying a zip-up cabin bag.

"So, Villanelle. How are you?"

"Tired."

He nods. "You've had primary blast wave concussion and whiplash. You've been on strong sedatives."

"Where are we?"

"A private clinic in Reichenau, outside Innsbruck." He steps to the window, pulls back the net curtains, and peers out. "Do you remember what happened to you?"

"Some of it."

"Max Linder? The Felsnadel Hotel?"

"I remember."

"So tell me. What the fuck happened? How did you get caught in the explosion?"

She frowns. "I went to his room and prepared the device. Then he came in, so I hid. I can't remember after that."

"Nothing at all?"

"No."

"Tell me about the device."

"I tried to decide where to put it. Phone, alarm clock, laptop..."

"Speak up. You're slurring your words."

"I thought about different methods. None of them seemed good. Then I found his vibrator."

"And you rigged it with the micro-det and the Fox-7?"

“Yes. After I planted forensic evidence on one of the other guests.”

“Which guest? What evidence?”

“The Englishman, Baggot. I hid the plastic wrapping from the explosive in the lining of his wash bag.”

“Good. He’s a moron. Go on.”

Villanelle hesitates. “How did I get out?” she asks him. “After the explosion, I mean.”

“Maria messaged me. Said Linder was dead and you’d been found unconscious at the scene and needed a rapid exfil.”

“Maria?” Villanelle raises her head from the pillow. “Maria works for you? Why the fuck didn’t you—”

“Because you didn’t need to know. As it happened, there was a high-altitude blizzard that night, and no emergency helicopters could get up there. So the guests were forced to spend the night of the explosion in the hotel, which apparently caused a certain amount of panic and distress. At least Linder’s body was properly refrigerated. After you blew out the plate-glass window, the temperature in that room must have dropped to minus 20 degrees.”

“And me?”

“Maria kept an eye on you overnight. At first light I chartered a helicopter, and had you picked up before the police got there.”

“No one thought that was weird?”

“The guests were asleep. The hotel staff assumed it was official, and given the state you were in, were probably glad to see you go. The last thing they needed was a second corpse on their hands.”

“I don’t remember any of that.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“So what happens now?”

"At the Felsnadel? You don't need to worry about that. Your part is done."

"No, what happens to me? Are the police going to show up?"

"No. I drove you here and checked you in myself. As far as everyone at the clinic is concerned, you're a French tourist convalescing after a driving accident. They're very discreet here, as they should be, given the price. Apparently they get a lot of post-operative cosmetic surgery patients. There's some sort of treatment where they pack your face in snow."

Villanelle touches the dressings on her face. The scabbing cuts are starting to itch. "Linder's dead, as requested. I'm worth everything you pay me and more."

Seating himself on the bedside chair, Raymond leans forward. "He's dead, as you say, and we appreciate that. But right now it's time to get your shit together, and fast. Because thanks to your antics in Venice with Nadia, and your *Hello!* magazine approach to assassination, we have a major fucking problem. Namely, that Eve Polastri is currently in Moscow, discussing your old friend Konstantin with the FSB."

"OK."

"OK? Is that the best you can come up with? For fuck's sake, Villanelle. When you're good, you're brilliant, so why do you have to act up in this childish, narcissistic fashion? It's almost as if you *want* Polastri to catch and kill you."

"Right." She reaches for the Voltarol tablets, and he snatches them away.

"That's enough of those. If you're in pain, I want you to remember that it's wholly self-inflicted. All this drama you create. Speedboats, made-up aristocratic titles, exploding dildos... You're not living in a fucking TV series, Villanelle."

"Really? I should be. I would watch it."

He throws the cabin bag onto the bed. "New clothes, passport, documents. I want you in London and ready to work by the end of the week."

"And what will I be doing in London?"

"Terminating this shit-storm once and for all."

"Meaning?"

"Killing Eve."

* * *

Escorted by the men who were in the FSB van, Eve walks into the building. The interior is not quite dark, as it appeared from outside. To one side is a battered steel desk behind which a uniformed officer is seated, eating a meatball sandwich by the light of a desk lamp. As they enter, he looks up, and puts down his sandwich.

"*Angliskiy spion*," says the man in the leather cap, slapping a crumpled document onto the desk.

The officer looks at Eve, reaches unhurriedly for a rubber stamp, inks it from a violet pad in a tin, and applies it to the document. "*Tak*," he says. "*Dobro pazhalovat' na Lubyanku*."

"He says, 'Welcome to Lubyanka,'" Leather-cap informs her.

"Tell him I've always wanted to visit."

Neither man smiles. The officer lifts the receiver of an ancient desk telephone and dials a three-figure number. A minute later, two heavily built men in combat trousers and T-shirts arrive, look Eve up and down, and beckon her to follow them.

She looks at Leather-cap, who makes a shooing gesture. The desk officer has already returned to his sandwich. She accompanies the two men down a long, sour-smelling corridor, through a pair of double doors, and into a courtyard littered

with cigarette ends. High buildings, some of yellowish brick, some faced with weather-stained cement, rise on all sides. Uniformed and plainclothes personnel lean against the walls, smoking, and stare expressionlessly at Eve as she passes. The two men lead her to a low door.

Inside is a tiled hall and a trestle table behind which two male officers are lounging, their crested caps tilted at jaunty angles on their shaved heads. One looks up briefly as they enter, then returns to his perusal of a body-building magazine. The other slowly rises and, advancing on Eve, gestures that she should empty her possessions into a plastic tray on the table. She does so, divesting herself of her watch, phone, passport, hotel room key card, and wallet. She's then made to remove her parka and boots and subjected to a body-scan with a handheld metal detector. She asks for the jacket and boots back, but is refused, leaving her shivering in a thin cardigan, turtleneck, jeans, and wool socks.

From the reception hall, she's led to a flight of stairs giving on to a small landing. From here, a dim-lit, concrete-walled corridor leads into the building's interior. The men walk fast, purposefully, and in silence. Their necks are thick and the backs of their heads bristled. Pig-men, Eve thinks. An increasingly painful stabbing in her right heel tells her that she's trodden on something sharp. The pig-men cannot fail to see her limping, but they don't slow down.

"Pozhaluysta," she says. "Please."

They ignore her, and Eve's hope that the situation is stage-managed, and designed to deliver her to Carolyn's contact, begins to ebb. The corridor turns at right-angles several times, each change of direction delivering an identical vista of bare bulbs and concrete walls. Finally, they reach an atrium, and a

large service elevator. The air smells of garbage and decay; the stench catches in Eve's throat. All this sends a very bad message. Is she under arrest? Do they really think she's a *spion*, a spy?

You are a spy, an inner voice whispers. It's what you always wanted. You're here because you wanted to be here. Because, in the face of wiser counsel, you insisted on it. *You wanted this.*

"Please," she says again in halting, pleading Russian. "Where are we going?"

Once again, the pig-men ignore her. Her heel hurts badly now, the pain driving upward like a blade. But the pain is nothing compared with the fear. One of the men presses the elevator's call button, and there's a distant mechanical clanking. Eve is shaking now. The possibility of imposing herself on the situation has evaporated. She feels utterly, mutely helpless.

The service elevator doors open with a metallic shriek, and Eve is led inside. The doors close and the elevator begins a slow, grinding descent, the pig-men leaning against the dented walls with folded arms and blank faces. From somewhere in the building, Eve senses a mechanical pulse. Faint at first, but growing louder as the elevator moves downwards. The noise becomes a roar, making the elevator shudder. She digs her fingernails into her hand. This is the twenty-first century, she tells herself. I'm an Englishwoman with a husband, a Debenhams store card, and a kilo of fresh tagliatelle in the freezer. Everything will be all right.

No, the voice whispers. No it fucking won't. That was your old life. Now you're just a pathetically amateurish spy, hopelessly out of your depth, and you're paying the price of your fantasies. This nightmare is real. This is really happening.

Finally, the doors open. They're in an atrium identical to the one they left just minutes ago. The light is a sulfurous mustard

color, and the noise, relentless and terrifying, is all around them. The pig-men march Eve into yet another corridor, and she follows them as best she can. If the journey is grim, she's certain that whatever awaits her at the end of it will be worse.

Ten minutes later, she's utterly disoriented. She senses that they're underground, but that's all. The mechanical roar is quieter now, although still audible, and the place seems to have other occupants. She can hear doors rattling and creaking, and a faint sound that could be shouting. They turn a corner. A tiled floor underfoot, the peeling walls suffused in that horrible mustard-colored light. At the head of the corridor, a door is open, and her guards pause long enough for Eve to look inside. At first glance, the interior resembles a shower room, with a sloping concrete floor, a drain, and a coiled hose. But three of the walls are padded, and the fourth is made of splintered logs.

Before Eve has time to guess at the implications of this room, she's moved into a row of cells with reinforced doors and observation hatches. The pig-men stop outside the first of these and pull it open. Inside, there's a stoneware basin, a bucket, and a low bench against one wall. On the bench is a soiled pallet. Light is provided by a low-wattage bulb protected by a wire grille. Open-mouthed and disbelieving, Eve allows herself to be manhandled inside. Behind her, the door slams shut.

* * *

Locking and bolting the door of her Paris apartment behind her, Villanelle drops her bag and curls, catlike, into a gray leather and chrome armchair. With her eyes half closed, she looks around her. She's grown very attached to her shabby-chic living space, with its faded, peeling wallpaper, anonymous paintings,

and eclectic assortment of furniture. Beyond the plate-glass window, framed by airy white curtains, is the city, silent in the twilight. She gazes for a moment at the faint shimmer of the illuminations on the white-domed Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur, and then dips into her bag for her phone. The SMS message is still there, of course. The one-time burn code dispatched with a single keystroke.

They were in bed together in Venice when Nadia showed Villanelle her phone. “If you ever get this text, I’ve been taken and it’s all over.”

“That won’t happen,” Villanelle replied.

But it has happened, and here is the text. “I love you.”

Nadia did love her, Villanelle knows. She still does, if she’s alive. And for a moment, Villanelle envies her that capacity. To share another’s happiness, to suffer another’s pain, to fly on the wings of real feeling rather than to be forever indifferent. The closest Villanelle has ever come to feeling such a thing was with Anna, and even that was rooted in carnal desire, and fueled by an irrational longing to possess something simply because she couldn’t have it. At the time, she had confused that for love, but now she knows better.

It’s bad that Nadia has been taken, though. Very bad. Rising from the gray leather chair, Villanelle walks to the kitchen and takes a bottle of pink Mercier champagne and a cold tulip glass from the fridge. In thirty-six hours she flies to London. There are plans to be made, and they are complex.

* * *

In Eve’s cell, the light flickers and goes out. She has no idea what time it is, or even if it’s night. No guards have returned with

food, and although she's painfully hungry, she's also desperate to avoid the shame of having to empty her bowels into the bucket. Thirst has forced her to take sips from the tap in the basin. The water is brownish and tastes of rust, but Eve is beyond caring.

She seems to have been lying on the hard bench for hours, her mind alternately racing off at frantic tangents and sinking into a sick fog of despair. At intervals, she's overtaken by shaking fits, caused not by the cold, although it is cold, and her cardigan painfully thin, but by the endlessly reshuffling memory of events in the metro. Nothing in her life has prepared her for the flutter of a bullet parting her hair. For the sight of an infolding face, and outpouring brains. Who was he, the old man with the pale eyes, whose last living act was to smile at a stranger? Who was the man she killed? Because I did kill him, Eve tells herself. I killed him with my stupid, misplaced self-belief. I might as well have shot him myself.

She stands up in the dark, endures another bout of the shakes, and limps about the cell, trying not to think about the pain in her heel. She can't sleep. Her stomach is twisting with hunger, the bench is hard, and the pallet smells of vomit and shit. She makes her way to the door. The random shouting that once seemed distant sounds closer now. A phrase, not quite intelligible, is repeated over and over again in a male voice. Others respond angrily. There's a low groaning, suddenly interrupted.

Warily, Eve lifts the small wooden panel in the door—wide enough to slip a food bowl through—and looks out. From the end of the corridor, in the direction from which she was led earlier, come dim, flickering lights. The shouting starts again, the same unintelligible phrase delivered in a furious, desperate rasp. It's met with the same responses, and the same sharply curtailed groaning. It occurs to Eve that she's listening

to a recording, some kind of looped tape. But if so, why? What would be the point? To intimidate her? That was hardly necessary.

Then, as she crouches by the hatch, looking out, a figure moves into her peripheral vision, and starts walking up the corridor toward her. At the sight of him, Eve once again starts to shake. A man of about forty, with thinning brown hair, wearing a boilersuit, a long leather apron, and rubber boots.

As he passes her door, Eve closes the hatch to a crack. She can't stop watching, and she can't stop shaking. Moving with the unhurried air of a doctor on a hospital round, the man goes into the room with the hose and the drain and the sloping floor. Perhaps a minute passes, then the two pig-men arrive at the opposite end of the corridor and unlock a cell door. Marching inside, they come out supporting a thin, blankly staring figure in a suit and shirt, and walk him past Eve's door and into the same room.

Moments later, they leave without him, and Eve sinks to the floor of her cell, her eyes as tightly shut as she can force them, and her hands clamped over her ears. But she still hears the shots. Two of them, seconds apart. And she's so terrified she can no longer think, or breathe, or control any part of herself, and she just lies there in the darkness, shaking.

Somehow, probably from sheer exhaustion, she sleeps, and is woken by a hammering at the cell door. The lights are on again, and there's a faint smell of cooked meat. At that moment, the only thing that she's sure of is her hunger. She limps to the communication hatch, her mouth dry and her guts twisting with longing.

"Da?"

"Zavtrak!" a voice growls. *"Breakfast."*

With that, the hatch opens, and a red box is pushed through by a large, hairy hand. It's a McDonald's Happy Meal, and it seems to be still hot. It's followed by a canned energy drink called Russian Power. Eve stares disbelievingly at these luxuries before ripping open the McDonald's box, and with trembling fingers, devouring the contents. In the box, with the hamburger and french fries, there's a cellophane-wrapped toy. A tiny plastic teapot with a Hello Kitty face on it.

Eve wipes her greasy, salty fingers on her jeans, then rips the tab from the Russian Power can and gulps down as much as she can before sinking back, gasping, onto the bench. Nothing makes sense anymore. Pulling the bucket to the door so that she can't be seen through the hatch, she pees in it, pours the urine down the sink, and washes her hands and the bucket with the trickling brown tap water. Her bowels give a warning grumble, but shitting in the bucket is an indignity she's not yet ready for, although she's resigned to the fact that that time will come. She takes a measured sip of Russian Power. Was this a last meal before being dragged to the room with the concrete floor, the hose, and the drain? Sorry, Niko, she thinks. Turns out you were right to be scared for me.

The door swings abruptly open. It's the two pig-men. They beckon to her, and she limps toward them, her hand closed tightly around the little teapot in her pocket. When they lead her past the killing room, her heart is pounding so hard that it hurts. Then, instead of continuing along the corridor, they open a cell door, beyond which is an elevator. Not the filthy service cage that she came down in, but a hotel-style guest elevator with a brushed steel interior. This ascends smoothly and silently to a half-landing, and a short flight of stairs leading to the tiled atrium, where the same two officers in the over-large caps are

sitting behind the trestle table. Waiting on the table are her parka jacket, her boots, and a tray holding her possessions.

Glancing nervously at the officers, who barely acknowledge her presence, she steps into her boots and pulls on the parka, glad of its warmth. Hurriedly, she loads the pockets with her passport, watch, phone, key card, and money.

“OK,” says one of the pig-men, moving back toward the stairs to the elevator. “You come.”

They rise several stories, and step out onto parquet flooring and a worn carpet the color of raw liver. At the end of the corridor, a dark wood door stands ajar. Inside, the office is all shadows. Nondescript curtains frame tall windows. Behind a mahogany desk, a broad-shouldered, silver-haired figure is hunched over a computer keyboard. He waves a hand to dismiss the pig-men.

Eve peers at him. He’s probably in his mid-fifties, with buzz-cut hair and a wry, urbane smile. His suit looks handmade.

He leans forward in his chair and extends a hand. “Take a seat, Mrs. Polastri. I’m Vadim Tikhomirov. Let me order you some coffee.”

Eve sinks into the proffered chair, murmuring bewildered thanks.

“Latte? Americano?”

“Sure, whatever, anything is fine.”

He presses an intercom button on his telephone. “*Masha, dva kofe s molokom...* Do you like roses, Mrs. Polastri?” Rising, he crosses the room to a side table bearing a bowl of crimson roses, selects one, and hands it to her. “They’re called *Ussurochka*. They grow them in Vladivostok. Do you have cut flowers in your Goodge Street office?”

Eve inhales the rose’s rich, oily fragrance. “We probably

should. I'll suggest it."

"You should insist on it. I'm sure Carolyn would approve the budget. But let me ask you: how did you find last night?"

"How did I... *find it*?"

"It's an immersive on-site project I'm developing. The Lubyanka Experience. Spend a night as a condemned political prisoner during the Stalinist Purge." Noting her speechless gaze, he spreads his hands. "Perhaps someone should have explained the concept to you beforehand, but I saw it as an opportunity for some valuable feedback, so... what did you think?"

"Uh... It was the most terrifying night of my life."

"You mean in a bad way?"

"I mean in the way that I thought I was going crazy. Or that I was about to be shot."

"Yes, you had the full NKVD Execution package. So you think it needs fine-tuning? Too spooky?"

"Maybe a little."

He nods. "It's tricky, because while this is very much a working secret police environment, we do also have these amazing historical assets. All those underground torture cells and execution chambers, we'd be crazy not to exploit them. And we've certainly got the actors. The organization's never been short of people who like dressing up in uniforms and scaring people."

"You don't say."

"At least you got to wake up in the morning." He chuckles. "In the old days, your ashes would have been used as fertilizer."

Eve twiddles the rose-stem. "Well, I was scared shitless, especially since someone actually did try to kill me yesterday, as I'm sure you're aware."

He nods. "I am aware of that, and I'm going to get to it in a

minute. Tell me, how is Carolyn?"

"She's well. And she sends her compliments."

"Excellent. I hope we're keeping her busy at the Russian desk."

"Busy enough. Did she explain to you why I'm here?"

"She did. You want to ask me, among other things, about Konstantin Vasiliev."

"Yes. Particularly what he was up to for the last ten years or so."

"Well, I'll do my best." Tikhomirov rises and walks to the window. He stands with his back to her, silhouetted against the pale, slanting light. There's a knock at the door, and a young man wearing combat trousers and a muscle T-shirt enters, carrying a tray, which he places on a side table.

"*Spasibo, Dima*," says Tikhomirov.

The coffee is ferociously strong, and as it races through Eve's system, she feels a faint shiver of optimism. A lifting of the fog of helplessness and shame which, for the last twenty-four hours, has enveloped her.

"Tell me."

He nods, responsive to the shift in her mood. He's back behind the desk now, his posture languid but his gaze attentive. "You've heard of *Dvenadtsat*. The Twelve."

"I've heard they exist, yes. Not much more beyond that."

"We think that they started life as one of the secret societies that came into being under Leonid Brezhnev in the late Soviet era. A cabal of behind-the-scenes operators who foresaw the end of communism and wanted to build a new Russia, free of the old, corrupt ideologies. As they saw them."

"Sounds reasonable."

Tikhomirov shrugs. "Perhaps. But history, as so often, has other ideas. Boris Yeltsin's policies in the early 1990s enriched

a handful of oligarchs, but diminished and impoverished the country. At which point, it seems, the Twelve went underground, and began to transform into a new kind of organization altogether. One that made its own rules, dispensed its own justice, and pursued its own agenda.”

“Which was?”

“Do you know anything about organization theory?”

Eve shakes her head.

“There’s a school of thought that holds that sooner or later, whatever its founding ethos, the most pressing concern of any organization is to ensure its own survival. To this end, it adopts an aggressive, expansionist posture which ultimately comes to define it.”

Eve smiles. “Like...”

“Yes, if you will, like Russia itself. Like any corporation or nation state that perceives itself surrounded by enemies. And this was the point, I think, at which Konstantin Vasiliev was recruited by the Twelve. Which was entirely logical, because by then the Twelve had their own Directorate S, or its equivalent, and they needed a man with Konstantin’s highly specialized skill set to run it.”

“So you’re saying that the Twelve is a kind of shadow Russian state?”

“Not quite. I believe that it’s a new kind of borderless crypto-state, with its own economy, strategy, and politique.”

“To what end?”

Tikhomirov shrugs. “To protect and advance its own interests?”

“So how do you join? How do you become a part of it?”

“You buy in, with whatever you’ve got to offer. Cash, influence, position...”

"That's such a weird idea."

"These are weird times, Mrs. Polastri. As was confirmed to me when I saw Vasiliev earlier this year."

"You saw him? Where?"

"In Fontanka, near Odesa. The SVR, our domestic intelligence agency, ran the operation against him which ended, regrettably, with his death."

"In the house of Rinat Yevtukh?"

"Exactly so. The FSB contributed intelligence and manpower to that operation, and in return, I was invited to question Vasiliev. He told me nothing, of course, and I didn't expect him to. He was old-school. He'd have died before betraying his employers, or the assassins he'd trained for them. The irony, of course, being that they're the ones who killed him."

"You're sure about that?"

"Sure enough. The Twelve would have worked out pretty quickly that Vasiliev hadn't been abducted just so that the local gangsters could collect a ransom payment. They'd have seen the fingerprints of the SVR all over the case. And they'd have liquidated Vasiliev in case he'd talked."

"So why was Yevtukh killed?"

"If he was, it might have been because he collaborated, willingly or otherwise, with the SVR."

"So do you have any interest in the Yevtukh case? In knowing exactly who murdered him?"

"We're following developments, certainly."

"Did Carolyn mention to you that we have a pretty good idea of who was responsible?"

"No, she didn't tell me that." He looks thoughtful. "Let me ask you something, Mrs. Polastri. Are you familiar with the expression 'a canary in a coal mine'?"

"Vaguely."

"In the old days, here in Russia, coal miners used to take a canary in a cage with them when they went down to dig a new seam. Canaries are highly sensitive to methane gas and carbon monoxide, so the miners knew that as long as they could hear the canary singing, they were safe. But if the canary fell silent, they knew they had to evacuate the mine."

"This is all fascinating, but what's your point?"

"Have you ever asked yourself, Mrs. Polastri, why you were appointed by MI6 to investigate a major international conspiracy? You'll forgive me, but you are hardly experienced in this area."

"I was asked to investigate a particular assassin. A woman. And I have several lines of inquiry that could lead to her identification. I'm closer to her than anyone else has ever gotten."

"Hence the attempt on your life yesterday."

"Maybe."

"There's no 'maybe' about it, Mrs. Polastri. Fortunately, we had people watching you."

"Yes, I saw them."

"You saw the ones we intended you to see. But there were others, and they intercepted and arrested the woman who attempted to kill you."

"You caught her?"

"Yes, we have her in custody."

"Here? In the Lubyanka?"

"No, in Butyrka, a couple of miles away."

"Can I see her? Can I question her?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. I doubt she's even been processed." He lifts a silver paper-knife in the shape of a dagger,

and turns it in his fingers. “Also, the fact that she’s been arrested doesn’t mean you’re out of danger. Which is why I made sure you were brought here, yesterday, to spend the night as our guest.”

“Do you have a name for this woman?”

“Her name is Nadezhda Kadomtseya. She’s what we call a torpedo, a professional shooter. New photographs will have been taken during her induction at Butyrka, but they haven’t sent them over yet. I should be able to find an old one for you from when she was there before.” He beckons for her to come around to the other side of his desk.

As she watches over his shoulder, he pulls up a database of current and former inmates and types ‘Nadezhda Kadomtseya’ into a search bar, but no results are returned.

“The software doesn’t allow Cyrillic inputs, and the transliteration of the names can be a bit inconsistent,” he explains. “Don’t worry, we’ll find her.”

With a few clicks, he sets the search parameters to only include women, and only those detained at Butyrka, then consults a notepad next to him and types in a range of dates. He scrolls down until he finds an inmate identified as Nadyezhda Kadomtseya and clicks on the thumbnail-sized head shot next to her name. The page that opens has an enlarged version of the same photograph, along with identifying information, dates of incarceration, and a list of criminal charges.

The face on the screen stares blankly out at her. Eve stares back, dazed. This person, a young woman she has never met, tried to kill her. To put a bullet through the back of her skull.

“Why?” she murmurs. “Why here? Why now? Why *me*?”

Tikhomirov looks at her, his gaze level. “You’ve crossed the line. You’ve done what nobody thought you could, or would.

You've gotten too close to the Twelve."

"She could be one of the pair who killed Yevtukh in Venice," she says. "We have some CCTV footage."

In response, Tikhomirov opens a folder, pulls out a sheet of paper, and holds it up next to the screen. It's an identical screen-grab to the one that Kenny printed out at Goodge Street. "We've seen that footage," he says. "And we agree."

"And the other woman?"

"We don't know, although we'd very much like to."

"I wish I could be more helpful."

"Mrs. Polastri, you've helped us far more than you know. And we're grateful."

"So what happens now?"

"In the first instance, we will put you on a flight home, under another name, as we did your colleague, yesterday." He hands her the folder. "This is for you. Read it on the flight. Give it to the steward before you leave the aircraft."

He also prints out a copy of the inmate record for her, then closes the window, revealing the screen with the search results again. As he goes to the printer in the corner to retrieve the printout, Eve is left staring at a list of names and pictures of hundreds of other women whose time at Butyrka overlapped with Kadomtseya's. She scrolls all the way to the bottom of the list, then back to the top. Most of the faces have the same empty expression. She finds this both depressing and unsettling.

And then, as she slides the printout he hands her into the folder, something in the back of her mind clicks into place.

"That woman," she says, looking back at the screen and pointing to one of the pictures near the top of the list. "Oksana Astankova. Can you pull up her record? What do you know about her?"

Tikhomirov clicks on the picture. "She's dead."

"Are you sure about that?" Eve says, suddenly short of breath. "Are you absolutely, one hundred percent certain?"

* * *

Tikhomirov is as good as his word. He buys Eve lunch in the Lubyanka canteen, and then shows her into a Mercedes with darkened windows which is waiting at the entrance to the FSB complex on Furkasovsky Lane. On the rear seat is her suitcase, which has been collected from the hotel. Within the hour, she is at Ostafyevo airport, being fast-tracked through the customs and security procedures by the car's driver, a young man in a business suit to whom the airport staff are immediately deferential. He ushers Eve to a first-class waiting room and sits with her, unobtrusive but vigilant, until her flight is called. As she leaves, with a dozen-strong group of Gazprom Executives, he hands her an envelope. "From Mr. Tikhomirov," he says.

The interior of the Dassault Falcon jet is shockingly luxurious, and Eve sinks pleasurably into her seat. Take-off is delayed, and dusk has fallen by the time the aircraft finally lifts off, banks to port over the glittering sprawl of Moscow, and sets its course for London. Exhausted, Eve sleeps for an hour before waking with a start to find a steward at her side, tendering frosted shot glasses of Black Sable vodka.

She takes a long swallow, feels the spirit's icy progress through her veins, and inclines her head toward the window, and the darkness beyond. Just forty-eight hours ago, she'd been flying the other way. She was a different person then. Someone who hadn't heard the passing whisper of a silenced bullet. Someone who hadn't seen a man's face infold.

She wonders if she can still do this. She knows she should want her old life back. She should want Niko, and Thelma and Louise, and their painfully normal friends and neighbors. She should want the routine, familiar things and places, a hand to hold on icy pavements, a warm body next to her at night. She should want these things, but she doesn't. Something has shifted within her, and instead of running away from the darkness she has always felt simmering beneath the surface, she wants to feed it and watch it grow.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out the envelope from Vadim Tikhomirov. Inside is a single sheet of paper. No message, just a black and white line illustration of a canary in a cage.

What does Tikhomirov mean? What is he not telling her, and why? Who, or what, is the canary?

And that other woman. Not Nadezhda Kadomtseya, but Oksana Astankova. Now dead, according to official records, but the doppelganger of the woman she saw in Shanghai on the night Bill was killed. Or is she imagining that, and making connections that simply aren't there? She only saw the woman momentarily, after all. Eve squeezes her eyes shut in frustration. None of it quite fits together. From having too little information to work with, she's now got too much.

Just as well, then, that it no longer matters. Just as well that on Monday morning she is going to schedule a meeting with Carolyn Martens, at which she is going to admit to her that she is out of her depth. That she will be tendering her resignation. That's what any reasonable person would do, right?

* * *

At London City airport, she sends Carolyn an encrypted text to say that she's back, and takes the tube home. Her phone battery's dying, she's starving, and she desperately wants to sleep in her own bed tonight. At Finchley Road station, she drags her case up the steps to the exit. Outside, the pavements are shining with rain, and she puts her head down and half walks, half runs through the illuminated darkness. Turning into her street, the wheels of her suitcase whirring and skidding behind her, she sees the unmarked van parked a few cars down from her house, and, in the wake of the previous day's attempt on her life, feels truly grateful for the watchers' presence for the first time.

Inside the house, the air is still and cold, as if long undisturbed. On the kitchen table, there's a note, secured in place by a vase of dying white roses whose fallen petals obscure the words.

Hope your trip went well, though don't expect to hear the details. Have taken car and goats and gone to stay with Zbig and Leila. Not sure how long I'll be gone. Hopefully long enough for you to decide whether you want us to go on being married.

Eve, I can't continue like this. We both know the issues. Either you choose to live in my world, where people do normal jobs, and married couples sleep together and eat together and see their friends together and yes, perhaps it is a bit boring at times, but at least no one's getting their throat cut. Or you choose to continue as you are, telling me nothing and working day and night in the pursuit of whatever and whoever, in which case sorry, but I'm out. I'm afraid it's that simple. Your call. N.

Eve stares briefly at the note, then goes back and double-locks

the front door. A quick scavenge through the kitchen produces a tin of tomato soup, three limp samosas in an oily bag, and a date-expired blueberry yogurt. She wolfs down the samosas and the yogurt while the soup is heating on the stove. As if in reproach of her usual untidiness, Niko has left the house in scrupulous order. In the bedroom, the bed is made and the blinds are lowered. Eve considers running a bath, but gives it a miss; she's too tired to think, let alone wash and dry herself. After attaching her phone to the charger, she takes the Glock automatic from her bedside drawer and slips it under her pillow. Then she pulls off her clothes, and, leaving them in a pile on the floor, climbs into bed and is instantly asleep.

She's woken around nine thirty by the chattering of the fax machine that Carolyn has insisted she install, on the basis that it's supposedly more secure than encoded email. It's a hastily scrawled invitation to a private view at an art gallery in Chiswick, west London. "Come if you're free, and we can chat," Carolyn signs off.

Chiswick is at least an hour away, and Eve doesn't much feel like making the journey, but it will be a chance to tell Carolyn her decision in a neutral setting. "See you there," she faxes in response, then crawls back to bed, burying herself under the sheets for another hour. Fear, she's discovering, is not a constant. It comes and goes, kicking in at odd moments with paralyzing suddenness, and then receding, tide-like, to the point where she's barely conscious of it. In bed, it takes the form of a fluttery nervousness just insistent enough to keep her awake.

The desire for breakfast eventually gets the better of her, and she dresses in jeans and a pullover, drops the Glock in her bag, and makes for the Café Torino in Finchley Road. Carolyn's watchers know their stuff, surely? And if they don't, and she's

beaten to the draw by a torpedo, it's going to be with a large cappuccino and a *cornetto alla Nutella* inside her.

Appetite assuaged, she dials Niko's number. When there's no answer, she's simultaneously frustrated and relieved. She wants to know that he's all right, but she can't quite face the intensity of the conversation that will ensue. From the café, she walks unhurriedly to the tube station. It's perfect Saturday weather, clear and cold, and she imagines her invisible watchers falling into step behind her. In the half-empty tube train, she picks through an abandoned copy of the *Guardian*, reading reviews of books she will never buy.

The gallery in Chiswick is difficult to find, identified only by a small silver plaque on the door. Occupying the ground floor of a Georgian house, it has a sunlit brick frontage and a wide bow window overlooking the Thames. As soon as she steps inside, Eve feels out of place. Carolyn's friends, or whoever the other people here are, have that casually privileged look that quietly but unmistakably fends off outsiders. For quite a few minutes, no one talks to her, so she affects a frowningly intense interest in the art on display. The watercolors and drawings are accomplished and inoffensive. Landscape views of the Cotswolds, boats at anchor in Aldeburgh, a girl in a straw hat on holiday in France. There's a portrait drawing, quite a good one, of Carolyn. Eve is admiring this when a young woman appears at her side.

"So what do you think?" she asks.

"It's very like her," says Eve. "Benign, but hard to read. Are you the artist?"

"Yes. I'm Geraldine. Carolyn's daughter. And I'm guessing you're Eve."

Carolyn has never told Eve she has a daughter, and Eve does

her best to mask her surprise. "That's right."

"Mum has mentioned you before. She seems quite fond of you. Obviously, official secrets and so on, and Carolyn being Carolyn, she hasn't said much else about you. But I've always rather wondered."

"Trust me, I'm not the mysterious type."

At that moment, Carolyn appears, clad in a pink linen shirt and chinos. "I see you two have met. Eve, would you like a drink?"

Carolyn is gone again before Eve can reply.

She smiles awkwardly at Geraldine. "The paintings seem to be selling well," she says. "Lots of red stickers."

"That's mostly the drawings, which are cheaper. Only a few paintings shifted so far."

"Won't you miss them? All those memories?"

"With art, it's not just about the memories, but the feelings it evokes. When someone looks at a piece of mine and it moves them in a certain way, it's almost as if we're experiencing those feelings together."

"Ah," says Eve, fervently hoping that Geraldine doesn't ask how the art has moved her, because it hasn't.

"So you really think this captures Mum's essence?" asks Geraldine, turning back to the portrait.

"Sure," says Eve.

"She's always been such an enigma to me. I know it's the nature of the work, but... Well, you know how it is." She sighs. "You're actually only the second person from work she's ever introduced me to."

"Technically, you introduced yourself."

"I suppose I did, didn't I?"

"Who was the first?"

"It was several years ago. We were at our house in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, and he came over for lunch. Older guy, Russian. God, I fancied him. I think it was mostly because he was so kind. He actually talked to me. Mum barely tolerated my presence."

"How old were you?"

"Oh, fifteen, probably. I don't even remember his name. It was probably fake anyway, right?"

"Not necessarily."

Carolyn reappears and hands Eve a glass of Prosecco she's procured from somewhere. "If you'll excuse us, Geraldine, I need a few minutes alone with Eve."

"Sure, Mum." She gives her a weak smile. "It was lovely meeting you, Eve."

"You too."

"Oh! I almost forgot!" Geraldine produces a card with her name and number on it, and hands it to Eve. "If you ever want to buy a painting, please give me a call. I also do commissions."

"Uh... Thanks," Eve says, and follows Carolyn outside.

* * *

Whitlock and Jones, purveyors of pharmaceutical and medical supplies, is one of the longer established businesses in Welbeck Street, in central London. Its sales staff wear white coats, and are known for the tact with which they cater to their customers' often intimate requirements. For sales assistant Colin Dye, it's been a slow day. The store caters to many of the private specialists whose well-appointed clinics line nearby Harley Street and Wimpole Street, and in the two years that he's been working here, Dye has come to recognize many of

the nurses who drop in when their employers' surgical supplies need replenishing. With half a dozen of these, he's on solid bantering terms. His own surname is always a good icebreaker.

So if he doesn't know the young woman who's approaching the counter, her gaze lingering on the fiberglass mannequins fitted with trusses and lumbar supports, he knows the type. Conservative makeup, sensible shoes, not hazardously pretty, and a generally brisk and capable air.

"So, what can I do you for?" he inquires, and in answer she places a written list in front of him. A blood collection kit, hemostatic forceps, a sharps disposal bag, and a packet of large condoms.

"Having a party?"

"Excuse me?" she peers at him. She's slightly cross-eyed, and the clunky glasses don't help, but that apart, Dye concedes, not a total car-crash.

"Well, you know what they say. I'm Colin, by the way. Colin Dye." He points to his name-tag. "As in... Live and let *Dye*."

"Have you got everything on that list?"

"Give me a couple of minutes."

When he returns, she hasn't moved.

"I'm afraid the condoms only come in standard size. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Do they stretch?"

He grins. "In my experience, yes."

She fixes him with one eye, the other looking disconcertingly over his shoulder, and pays for the goods in cash.

He drops the receipt into the Whitlock and Jones bag. "See you again, perhaps? Next time you're in, just ask for Colin Dye. You know what they say... *Dye* another day?"

"Actually, no one says that. Asshole."

Eve follows Carolyn out of the gallery, across the riverside walkway, and down a slipway to a floating jetty, to which dinghies and other small craft are moored. It's low tide, and the jetty rocks gently beneath their feet. There's a faint smell of ooze and seaweed, and the slow rasp of mooring chains shifting with the river's rise and fall. It's cold, but Carolyn doesn't seem to mind.

"Geraldine seems nice," Eve says.

"Does she? I really hadn't noticed."

"She does." A breeze shivers through the river's thin glitter. "A professional shooter tried to take me out in the Moscow metro. If it wasn't for the FSB, I'd probably be dead."

"Lance told me. Said that they took you to the Lubyanka."

"Yes."

"I'm terribly sorry. Sounds like the whole thing must have been quite frightening for you."

"It was. Although clearly it was my fault for insisting on going to Moscow in the first place."

Carolyn looks away. "That's not important right now. Just tell me exactly what happened."

She tells her. The metro, the Lubyanka, the conversation with Tikhomirov. All of it.

When Eve is finished, Carolyn says nothing. For almost a minute she seems to be watching a narrowboat edge past the jetty. "So they've got this Kadomtseya woman in custody," she says finally.

"Yes, in Butyrka. Which I'm gathering is not exactly a resort."

"No. It's bloody medieval."

"I'm pretty sure she's one of the women who killed Yevtukh

in Venice. Tikhomirov thinks so, too.”

“Does he, now?”

“Carolyn, you recruited me to find out who killed Viktor Kedrin. I believe that it was a young woman named Oksana Astankova, codename Villanelle. Originally from Perm. Arrested for murder at the age of eighteen. She was recruited and trained by Konstantin Vasiliev as an assassin for the Twelve. He lifted her from prison, faked her death, and created a series of new identities for her, before he was killed himself, quite possibly by Villanelle. I’ll fax you my full report within the next couple of days, if I live that long.”

“You really think—”

“Look at it from Villanelle’s point of view. She’s dangerously compromised by what I’ve discovered about her, and her girlfriend’s in Butyrka, mostly because of me. So who do you think she’s coming for next?”

“The people I’ve got watching you are the best, Eve. I promise you. You won’t see them, but they’re there.”

“I hope so, Carolyn. I really fucking hope so, because she’s a ruthless killing machine. I’m trying to sound calm, but I’m actually scared to death. I mean, really fucking terrified. I can’t even think about the reality of my situation, or take the necessary precautions, because I’m afraid that if I do, or start thinking about it too much, I’m just going to fall apart. So there you go.”

Carolyn regards her with silent, clinical concern.

“I’m not going back to Goodge Street,” she adds, before the irrational part of her takes hold again. “Ever.”

“All right.”

“I’m out, Carolyn. I mean it.”

“I hear you. But can I ask you one question?”

"You can ask as many as you want."

"Where do you want to be in ten years' time?"

"I'd settle for alive."

"Eve, there are no guarantees in this life, but you are in every sense more secure inside the citadel than outside. Let us take the strain. You were born for the secret life. You live and breathe intelligence work. The rewards could be... very great."

"I can't do it, Carolyn. I don't want to do it. And now I'm going to go home."

She nods. "I understand."

"I don't think you do. But either way," she holds out her hand. "Thanks for inviting me today, and my compliments to Geraldine."

Carolyn frowns as she watches her go.

* * *

With the medical goods from Whitlock and Jones stowed in her rucksack, Villanelle meets Raymond at the ticket barrier at Finchley Road tube station. He looks tense and short-tempered, and they've barely exchanged a few words before he turns away and leads her to the small Italian café outside the station.

Ordering coffee for both of them, he directs her to a corner table. "Ideally, I want it done tonight," he tells her. "The husband's away, staying with a friend, and I've just had confirmation he's still there. The weapon, ammunition, and documents you requested are in the bag under the table. You also asked for a vehicle, presumably for getting rid of the body?"

"Yes."

"You'll find a white Citroën panel van parked directly outside Palastrì's house. Key's in the bag with the gun. Signal me in the

usual way when the job's done."

"OK."

He looks at her irritably. "And why are you wearing those ridiculous glasses? You look mental."

"I am mental. Have you seen the Hare psychopathy checklist? I'm off the scale."

"Just don't screw up, OK?"

"OK. No more exploding dildos. Lesson learned."

"Villanelle, take this seriously. The only reason I still need you to do this job is that Nadia fucked up in Moscow."

Villanelle remains expressionless. "What went wrong?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you get it right."

8

On the tube, going home, Eve looks surreptitiously around her. Which of the other passengers are her watchers? There would probably be two of them, both armed. The Goth couple with the Staffordshire bull-terrier? The earnest-looking guys in the Arsenal shirts? The young women endlessly whispering into their phones?

She should ask to go to a safe house, but that would just be postponing the problem. The unspoken truth, as she and Carolyn both know, is that she must make any would-be killer break cover, and this will be most easily achieved by continuing to live in her own home. The house and the surrounding streets, meanwhile, will be invisibly cordoned off by the protection team. If Villanelle comes anywhere near, the team will move in for a hard arrest, and if she resists, disable or kill her out of hand. Right now, Eve knows, she's probably safer than at any time since she started working for Carolyn.

Dragging her keys from her bag, she unlocks the front door, and steps into the hallway. She stands there for a moment, listening to the silence, and the faint buzz of the Prosecco in her ears. Then, taking out the Glock, and ignoring the thumping of her heart, she closes the door behind her and subjects the place to a brisk and professional search.

Nothing. Collapsing onto her bed, still fully dressed, she flicks on the TV, which Niko has left tuned to the History Channel. A documentary about the Cold War is playing, and a commentator is describing the execution of thirteen poets in Moscow in 1952. Eve starts watching, but she can't keep her eyes open, and the documentary becomes a flickering montage of grainy black and white film and semi-comprehensible Russian. Minutes later, although it could have been an hour, the titles are rolling, accompanied by a scratchy old recording of the Soviet national anthem. Sleepily, Eve hums along:

Soyuz nerushimy respublik svobodnykh:

Spotila naveki velikaya Rus'!

Dreadful lyrics, all that shit about an unbreakable union or republics, but a stirring tune.

"Da zdravstvuet sozdanny voley narodov..."

The will of the people. Yeah, right... Yawning, Eve reaches for the remote and flicks the TV off.

"Yediny, moguchy Sovetsky Soyuz!"

She freezes mid-yawn. What the fuck? Is that voice in her head? Or is it right here in her house?

"Slav'sya, Otechestvo nashe svobodnoye..."

Terror stops Eve's breath. It's real. It's here. It's her.

The singing continues, clear and untroubled, and Eve tries to stand but discovers that her joints are gluey with fear, and her coordination all wrong, and she falls back onto the bed. Somehow, the Glock is in her hand. The singing stops.

"Eve, can you come here?"

She's in the bathroom, with its faint but unmistakable echo, and suddenly Eve is devoured by a curiosity that momentarily mutes her terror. Propelling herself through the bedroom into the hallway, gun in hand, she pulls open the door, and is met

by a warm, scented gust of steam. Villanelle is lying in the bath, naked except for a pair of latex gloves. Her eyes are half closed, her hair is a damp tangle, and her skin is pink in the hot, soapy water. Above her feet, lying between the taps, is a SIG Sauer pistol.

"Will you help me wash my hair? I can't do it with these gloves on."

Eve stares at her, open-mouthed, her knees shaking. Registers the delicate features and the hazel eyes, the half-healed facial cuts, the full lips with the almost imperceptible little scar. "Villanelle," she whispers.

"Eve."

"What... why are you here?"

"I wanted to see you. It's been weeks."

Eve doesn't move. She just stands there, the Glock heavy in her hands.

"What are you going to do with that?" Villanelle asks.

"I'm going to kill you."

"No, you're not."

"I am."

"You're not."

"I am."

"You like me too much." Villanelle reaches for a bottle of Eve's gardenia shampoo. "Calm down. Put your gun down there with mine."

"Why are you wearing those gloves?"

"Forensics."

"So you've come here to kill me? Oksana?"

Her expression remains neutral, but Eve catches the flicker of surprise in her eyes at the use of her given name. "Look at you. You are so pleased with yourself. Do you want me to?"

"I'd prefer it if you didn't, if I get a choice."

"Well, then." She looks up at Eve. "You don't have any plans for the evening, do you?"

"No, I... My husband is..." Eve stares around her wildly. At the steamed-up window, the sink, the gun in her hands. There's something paralyzing about Villanelle's physical presence. The wet hair, the livid cuts and bruises, the pale body in the steaming water. It's all too intense.

"I read Niko's note." Villanelle shakes her head. "It's so crazy that you keep goats."

"They're just small ones. I... I can't believe that you're here. In my house."

"You were asleep in front of the TV when I came in. Did you know you snore? It's adorable. I didn't want to wake you."

"There's an eight-bar security lock on that front door."

"I noticed. Quite a good one. I love your place, by the way. It's so... you. Everything's just how I remembered from last time."

"You broke in. You brought a gun. So I'm guessing that you are, in fact, here to kill me."

"Eve, please, don't spoil everything." Villanelle tilts her head flirtatiously against the edge of the bath. "Am I anything like what you imagine when you think of me?"

Eve turns away. "I don't think about you at all."

"You're really not a very good liar."

"You're right, I'm not. I... I'm gonna tell you something." She sighs and sits down on the floor so that she's eye level with Villanelle, and doesn't even try to stop the words that come pouring out of her. "I think about you all the time. I think about what you're wearing, and what you're doing, and who you're doing it with. I think about what friends you have. I

think about what you eat before you work, and what shampoo you use, and what happened in your family. I think about your eyes, and your mouth, and what you feel when you kill someone. I think about what you have for breakfast. I just want to know everything.”

“I think about you, too,” Villanelle says solemnly. “I mean, I masturbate about you a lot.”

Eve is taken aback. “OK, that—”

“Too much?”

“No, it’s just I wasn’t expecting that.”

Villanelle laughs. “Do you think about me like that, too, Eve?”

“Just answer me one simple question. Are you gonna kill me?”

“You keep coming back to this. But you’re the one holding the gun.”

“I’d just like to know.”

“OK. If I promise not to shoot you, will you wash my hair?”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“You’re insane.”

“So they say. Do we have a deal?”

Eve stares at her for a moment. Finally, she nods, lays down the Glock, rolls up her sleeves, slips her watch into her pocket, and reaches for the shampoo.

Touching her is strange. And running her hands through her slick, wet tresses is stranger. Eve washes Villanelle’s hair as if it’s her own, caressing her scalp with dreamily circling fingers, probing and pressing and inhaling the faint hints of her familiar scent, barely detectable, but there, mingling with the smell of Eve’s gardenia-scented shampoo. And then there’s the fact of Villanelle’s nakedness. The round, full breasts, the lean musculature, the dark crest of pubic hair.

“What do you really want?” Eve asks as she works. “Honestly. Don’t be a dick.”

“Normal stuff,” says Villanelle, her eyes closed. “A nice life. Cool flat. Fun job. Someone to watch movies with.”

Testing the water temperature on the back of her hand, Eve rinses Villanelle’s hair with the shower head, then picks up a bottle of conditioner and repeats the whole process.

When she’s done, she drapes a towel over Villanelle’s head, twists it into a turban, and picks up her Glock. “But what do you want right now? From me?” she asks, jabbing the end of the barrel into the base of Villanelle’s skull.

“Wow! That’s rude.” She turns to look at Eve. “I put some champagne in the fridge. Could you open it for us? I unloaded that, by the way. And the SIG.”

Eve checks both weapons. It’s true.

Abruptly standing up, Villanelle steps out of the bath and peels off her gloves, then takes Eve’s towel from the hook on the back of the door and begins to dry herself off.

“I thought you were worried about forensics.”

“I’ll deal with it. Speaking of forensics, I could really use some clean panties.”

“Couldn’t you have brought some with you?”

“I forgot. Sorry.”

“Jesus, Villanelle.”

When Eve returns, Villanelle is wrapped in the towel, gazing at herself in the mirror. Eve throws her the panties. Frowning, she holds them up and scrutinizes them. “Eve, these are not very sexy.”

“Tough. They’re all I’ve got.”

“You only have one pair?”

“No, I have lots, but they’re all the same.”

For a moment, Villanelle appears to wrestle with this concept, then she nods. “So will you open the champagne now?”

“If you tell me why you’re really here.”

A penetrating gaze meets hers. “Because you need me, Eve. Because everything has changed.”

* * *

Leaning against the wall in the kitchen with a glass of pink Taittinger champagne in her hand, Villanelle looks poised, efficient, and feminine. Her hair has been pulled back into a high, tight bun, and her outfit—a pale pink shirt flecked with silver, black jeans, sturdy boots—is chic but forgettable. She could be any smart young woman dressed to run errands or meet a friend for coffee. But Eve can sense her feral aspect, too. The potential for savagery that beats like a pulse beneath the urbane exterior. It’s a barely perceptible murmur, right now, but it’s there.

“Have you got any dessert in the fridge?” Villanelle asks. “Something that will go with this champagne?”

“There’s ice cream cake in the freezer compartment.”

“Can you get it?”

“Why don’t you get it yourself?” Eve snarls, growing weary of the constant demands.

“Don’t speak to me like that, Eve. I like you, but I don’t like you that much.” She takes her SIG Sauer from the waistband of her pants. “And this time the gun’s loaded.”

Wordlessly, Eve does as she’s been asked, and then, turning back from the fridge, sees Villanelle raise the pistol and turn towards her. Her mind emptying, Eve sinks to her knees and squeezes her eyes closed. A long silence roars in her ears.

Slowly, she opens her eyes to discover Villanelle's face inches from hers. Eve can smell her skin, the wine on her breath, the scent of her own shampoo. With shaking hands, she gives Villanelle the frozen cake.

"Eve, listen. I need you to trust me, OK?"

"*Trust* you?" Slowly, Eve stands. Villanelle has put the gun down on the dining table. It's within easy reach. One good lunge, and... she's hardly even formed the thought when Villanelle closes the distance between them and pins her against the refrigerator. She reaches out to pull a paring knife from the wooden knife block on the counter, and holds it to Eve's throat.

"I said. I need you. To trust me."

They stay there, face to face, then Villanelle reaches out her other hand and touches Eve's cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

Eve remains frozen in place as Villanelle gathers up the glasses and champagne bottle and deposits herself on the sofa. "Come on, let's talk. For a start, how is the bracelet? Do you like it?"

Tentatively, Eve nods and sits down at the other end of the sofa.

"So... what do you say?"

Eve looks at her. Notes how Villanelle mirrors the way she sits, the way she carries her neck and head, the way she holds her glass. If she blinks, Villanelle blinks. If she moves a hand or touches her face, so does Villanelle. It's as if she's learning her. As if she's occupying her, inch by stealthy inch, slithering into her consciousness like a snake.

"You killed Bill," Eve says. "You almost hacked his head off."

"Bill... Was that the one in Shanghai?"

"You don't *remember*?"

Villanelle shrugs. "What can I say? It must have seemed like

a good idea at the time.”

“You’re insane.”

“No, I’m not, Eve. I’m just you without the guilt. Cake?”

For several minutes, they sit there in silence, spooning ice cream, chocolate chips, and frozen cherries into their mouths.

“That was delicious,” Villanelle murmurs, putting her bowl on the floor. “Now I need you to listen to me very carefully. And before I forget”—she pulls a dozen 9mm rounds from her jeans pocket and hands them to Eve—“these are yours.”

Eve reloads the Glock, and uncertain what to do with it, pushes it into the back waistband of her jeans, where it lodges uncomfortably against her tailbone.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” says Villanelle. “But whatever.” Taking her phone from her pocket, she retrieves an image and shows it to Eve. “Have you ever seen this man?”

Eve peers at it. He’s about fifty, stocky and sunburned, wearing a khaki T-shirt and the sand-colored beret of the Special Air Service. The photographer has caught him in the act of turning, his eyes narrowed in annoyance, with one hand raised, perhaps to shield his face. Behind him are the unfocused outlines of military vehicles.

“No. Who is he?”

“I know him as Raymond. He used to command your E Squadron. Now he’s my handler. On Thursday he ordered me to kill you.”

“Why?”

“Because you got too close to us. And by us I mean the Twelve. When Raymond gave me the order, I was in a private hospital in Austria. He came to see me in my room, and when he left the hospital, he drove away with this woman. That’s Raymond on the left.”

The image is tilted and poorly framed, but clear enough. It's taken from inside a building, looking down on a snowy car park. Two figures are standing by the passenger door of a silver-gray BMW. The left-hand figure, in a bulky black jacket, has his back to the camera. Opposite him, clearly recognizable in an overcoat and scarf, is Carolyn Martens.

Eve stares at the image for a long while without speaking. Inside herself, she feels the collapse of all her certainties, like an iceberg imploding into the sea. This woman, who just hours ago was handing her Prosecco in a pink linen shirt, and telling her that she was "born for the secret life," has agreed to, and perhaps even ordered, her death.

Tikhomirov guessed. That moment when she asked him whether Carolyn had mentioned their suspicions about Yev-tukh's disappearance. Just for a second, the FSB officer's eyes widened, as if he'd suddenly understood something that had eluded him for ages. That's when he asked her about the canary. She pictures the bird, singing in its cage, far underground. The deadly, odorless gas wreathing through the seam, and the canary silent now, a stiff little mess of feathers.

"I need to make a call," Eve tells Villanelle, and, searching the detritus of her bag for Geraldine's card, she calls the number. It rings for almost ten seconds, and then Geraldine answers. She sounds as if she's been asleep.

"Hi, Geraldine. It's Eve Polastri. I wanted to ask you something about our conversation earlier. Confidentially."

"Oh, hi, Eve. Yeah, um, go ahead."

"That Russian guy you were talking about."

"Uh-huh."

"Was his name by any chance Konstantin?"

"You know, now that you mention it, I think it was. Why?"

Who is he?"

"Old friend. I'll introduce you one of these days."

"That would be lovely."

"Just don't mention to your mother that I called, OK?"

"Oh, that won't be a problem. She never listens when I talk anyway."

"Goodnight."

"Night."

Eve disconnects the call and lays the phone gently on the table. "Oh, God," she says. "Oh my God. Oh fuck. Oh my *fucking* God."

"I'm sorry, Eve."

She stares at Villanelle. "I thought I was hunting you down for MI6, but Carolyn just set me up to test the Twelve's defenses. I was the canary in their mine."

Villanelle says nothing.

"Every time I discovered anything, I'd report it to Carolyn, she'd pass it on to the Twelve, and they'd patch the vulnerability. All I've been doing, all this time, is making them stronger. Jesus. Did you know?"

"No. They don't tell me things like that. I knew you worked for Carolyn, but I didn't know that you'd been set up until I saw her with Raymond in Austria."

Eve nods, coldly furious with herself. She'd fallen for a classic false flag operation, constructed, like all the best deceits, around her own vanity. She thought she was so clever, with her intuitive leaps and her left-field theorizing, whereas in truth she was just a skillfully manipulated dupe. How could I have been such an idiot? she wonders. How did I not see what was happening right in front of my fucking eyes?

"You liked it, though, didn't you?" Villanelle says. "Playing the secret agent in your secret little office with your secret codes,

which weren't secret at all."

Eve nods. "Carolyn flattered me, and it worked. I wanted to be a player, not just some paper-pusher at a desk."

"You are a player. Any time I was bored, I'd log on and read your email. I love that you spent so much time thinking about me."

Looking at her undrunk wine, Eve feels a vast weariness. "So what happens now? Not that I'm complaining, but why haven't you shot me or whatever?"

"Two reasons. When Raymond ordered me to kill you, I realized it was because you'd found out too much about me. Which meant that I'd be the next one to die."

"Because you were compromised?"

"Yes. The Twelve don't take any chances. I saw that with Konstantin, who you obviously know about. He was my handler before Raymond. They thought he'd talked to the FSB, which was bullshit, and they... had him killed."

"At Fontanka."

"Yes, at Fontanka." She looks pensive. "And now someone else I work with has been arrested in Moscow."

"Nadezhda Kadomtseya. Your... girlfriend?"

"Nadia, yes. Although she wasn't so much a girlfriend in the holding hands and kissing sense. With us, it was more just sex and killing."

"Well, the FSB have her now. She's in Butyrka."

"That's very bad for me. They'll definitely interrogate her, so I'm doubly burned as far as Raymond is concerned."

"What does that mean?"

"It means he'll have me killed, as soon as he can. I imagine his plan is to wait until I'm finished with you, then he'll deal with me. He might even do it himself. He'd probably enjoy that."

"You're certain?"

"Yes. I already knew that Nadia was arrested, because she managed to send me an emergency message. And then when I saw Raymond earlier today, he mentioned Nadia, but didn't say anything about her being arrested, because he knew that I would know what it meant."

"What's the other reason you haven't killed me?"

Villanelle looks at her. "Really? You haven't figured that out yet?"

Eve shakes her head.

"Because it's you, Eve."

Eve stares at her, the complexity, strangeness, and sheer enormity of the situation suddenly bearing down on her. "So what happens now? I mean, what..."

"What do we do? How do we get out of this alive?"

"Yes."

Villanelle begins to pace the room, her movements as fastidious as a cat's. Occasionally, she darts a glance at a book or a photograph. Catching sight of her reflection in the mirror over the fireplace, she comes to a halt.

"There are a couple of things you need to understand. First, the only way we are going to survive is if we work together. You have to put your life in my hands, and do exactly, and I mean *exactly*, what I say. Because if not, the Twelve will kill you, and me, too. There's nowhere to hide, and no one you can trust to protect you except me. You have to take my word for it that this is true."

"And the other thing?"

"You have to accept that your life here is over. No more marriage, no more cozy little house, no more job. Basically, no more Eve Polastri."

“So...”

“She dies. And you leave all this behind. I take you into my world.”

Eve stares at Villanelle. She feels as if she’s in free fall, weightless.

Villanelle hitches up her sleeves. Her hands are strong and capable. Her eyes, all business now, meet Eve’s. “The first thing we have to do is convince Raymond that I killed you. Once he thinks you’re dead, we’ll only have a short amount of time before he comes after me. We have to misdirect him, and whoever he sends. Then we disappear.”

Eve rubs her hands over her face. “Look,” she says desperately. “Let me contact a friend in the police. Gary Hurst. He worked on the Kedrin investigation with me. There’s no way he’s compromised. He’ll put us under full protection, and I’m sure you can make some sort of deal to testify against the Twelve in exchange for immunity.”

“Eve, you still don’t get it. They have people everywhere. There’s no police cell, no prison, no safe house that they can’t get to. If we want to live longer than twenty-four hours, we have to disappear.”

“Where to?”

“Like I said, another world. Mine.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“I mean the world that’s all around you, but which is invisible if you’re not part of it. In Russia it is called *mir teney*, the shadow world.”

“Isn’t that also the Twelve’s domain?”

“Not anymore. The Twelve are an establishment now. You know what the assassination department is called? Housekeeping.”

Eve stands up and starts to walk around in tight circles. She's still in free fall, plummeting down some endless lift shaft. She can feel the Glock rubbing against her back. Pulling the gun from her waistband, she holds it loosely in her right hand. Villanelle doesn't move.

"Niko would think I was dead?"

"Everyone would."

"And there's no alternative?"

"Not if you don't want to actually be dead."

Eve nods, and continues to pace. Then, quite suddenly, she sits down again.

"Give me that," says Villanelle, gently taking the Glock.

Eve narrows her gaze. "What happened here?" she asks, reaching out and touching the scar on Villanelle's lip.

"I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything. But we don't have time for that right now."

Eve nods. Time rushes almost audibly past her ears. There's the world that she knows, the world of work, alarm calls, email, car insurance, and supermarket loyalty cards, and then there's *mir teney*, the shadow world. There's Niko, who loves her, and is the kindest and most decent man she has ever met, and then there's Villanelle, who has no qualms about killing people for money, and may even do it for pleasure.

"OK," she says. "What do we do?"

* * *

On the dining table, Villanelle places the medical supplies from Whitlock and Jones, and from her backpack, takes a bin bag, a tin of Waitrose dog food, a white porcelain cup, a plastic belt, a tin of modeling wax, a small glass dropper of spirit gum,

a fountain pen, a packet of hair ties, a face powder compact, an eyeshadow palette, a comb, several condoms, and a box of plasters. To this assortment, she adds her SIG Sauer automatic and suppressor and Eve's Glock.

"OK, first I need some of your hair. I'm going to pull it out." She does so, and Eve winces. "Sorry. Now I need a dark sheet. Darkest you've got. Go get that while I set everything up."

Taking herself to the bedroom, Eve returns with a folded dark blue bed sheet, which Villanelle places on the table with the other items. She's turned the TV on, and is streaming a noisy Japanese cop show. "Sit," she orders Eve, pointing to the sofa. "Pull up your sleeve."

A little apprehensively, Eve does as she's bidden. From the table, Villanelle takes a cannula, a hollow blood collection needle. The cannula has a twistable port and a clear PVC transfer tube attached. Villanelle feeds the open end of the tube into a condom, holding it tightly in place with an elastic hair tie. Taking the plastic belt, she tightens it around Eve's bicep until the vein in her forearm is bulging, and then, surprisingly gently, slips in the cannula and opens the port.

"Squeeze your fist," Villanelle tells her, as blood flows through the PVC tube and begins to fill the condom. After a few minutes, it holds two-thirds of a pint of Eve's blood, and Villanelle turns off the port, and detaches and knots the condom.

Picking up the SIG Sauer, Villanelle walks to the center of the room, then, holding the sagging condom over the carpet, she fires a single, downward-angled shot into its dark, distended belly. There's a wet smack, and an outward burst of blood. From the center of the carpet, a shining red spatter fans outwards toward the window, shading into a myriad of fine droplets which gleam on the floor and furniture and walls. Villanelle

regards her work with a critical eye, then moves back to Eve. Taking a pinch of modeling wax, she rolls it into a marble-sized ball, flattens it, and glues it to Eve's forehead with spirit gum. Then, taking the cap off the fountain pen, she presses the circular end into the low mound of wax, cutting a neat hole through to the skin. With the face powder, she blends the wax into Eve's forehead, fills the hole with black eyeshadow, and surrounds the raised area with bruise-colored purple.

"You're going to have such a pretty entry wound," she tells Eve. "But now I need more blood. It's going to leave you feeling a bit weird, OK?"

This time she takes two condoms of blood, another full pint.

Eve is very pale. "I think I'm going to pass out," she whispers.

"I've got you," Villanelle says. She withdraws the cannula, sticks a plaster over the hole left by the needle, removes the belt, and rolls down Eve's sleeve. Then, placing an arm around Eve's shoulders and another under her knees, she lays her down on the carpet, with her head at the epicenter of the blood spray. Carefully spread-eagling her limbs, she places the Glock in her right hand. "Don't move," she says. "I've got to work fast before the blood clots."

Eve flutters her eyelids in response. She's swimming in and out of consciousness now. The room is shadowy and insubstantial, and Villanelle's voice is muted, as if it's coming from far away.

Villanelle drops the porcelain cup into the Waitrose shopping bag and swings it against the dining table so that it shatters. Then, opening the dog food can, she empties its contents into Eve's hair, at the back of her head, and carefully arranges half a dozen of the larger pieces of shattered porcelain in the gelatinous mess. Satisfied with the composition, she pours the

first condom of blood on top, dotting a scarlet forefinger into the cosmetic entry wound. The contents of the second condom form a dark lake behind Eve's head.

"OK. Look dead."

This takes very little effort on Eve's part.

Taking out her phone, Villanelle photographs her from various angles and distances, checking the pictures until she's satisfied. "Done," she says eventually. "This looks great. The jelly in the dog food is perfect. Now I'm going to clean you up. Don't move."

She runs the comb through Eve's hair, dragging out the already congealing blood and offal. Then, having put the Waitrose bag over Eve's hair, and propped her up against the sofa, she scrapes the porcelain fragments and the remainder of the dog food from the carpet with a kitchen spoon, depositing it in the tin, and the tin in the rubbish bag. With it go the cannula and tube, the remains of the condoms, the comb, the eyeshadow and powder, the spirit gum and wax, the belt, the pen, the rest of the plasters, and the hair ties.

Taking the hair she's pulled from Eve's head, Villanelle sprinkles it in the congealing blood, which she then smears across the carpet with a swipe of her hand. She peels off the latex gloves and drops them in the bin bag, then pulls on a new pair. "Your turn for a bath," she announces, scooping Eve up in her arms.

Lying semi-conscious in the warm water as Villanelle rinses her hair, Eve feels a vast sense of peace. It's as if she's between lives. Half an hour later, dried and dressed in clean clothes, she sits on the sofa drinking sweet tea and eating slightly stale chocolate digestive biscuits. She's crushingly tired, her skin is clammy, and the smell of blood is thick in her nostrils. "This is

probably the weirdest I've ever felt," she murmurs.

"I know. I took a lot of your blood. But look what I'm sending to Raymond."

Eve takes Villanelle's phone. Notes with awe her own deathly pallor, half-closed eyes and gaping mouth. Just above the bridge of her nose, there's a purplish crater around a blackened 9mm entry wound. And at the back of her head, a chaotic horror of skull fragments, the bone shining whitely through the red, and a slick porridge of destroyed brain matter.

"Fuck. I really did die, didn't I?"

"I've seen plenty of headshots up close. It's accurate," Villanelle says proudly.

"I've seen a few, too. Mostly your handiwork. And your friend Nadia blew an old man's brains out in the metro, aiming for me."

"I'm really surprised she missed. And then to be picked up by the FSB and thrown into Butyrka. She had a really shitty day, didn't she?"

"Are you upset about her?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering."

"Don't wonder. Get your strength back. I've got to tidy up and pack the car."

"You've got a car?"

"It's a van, actually. Hand me your mug and that biscuit wrapper."

"Can I take anything with me?"

"No. That's the thing about being dead."

"I suppose you're right."

* * *

Five minutes later, Villanelle surveys the house. The place is as she found it, except for the bloody tableau in the main room, which looks just as she planned. She's particularly pleased with the clotted red-brown smear on the carpet, suggesting a bled-out corpse dragged away by the legs. As to what narrative will be constructed around this, she doesn't care. She just needs time. Forty-eight hours will do it.

"OK," she says. "Time to go. I'm going to wrap you up in a sheet, cover you with a folded rug, and carry you out over my shoulder."

"What if someone sees you?"

"It won't matter if they do. They'll just think it's someone moving their stuff. Later, when the street is full of police cars, they might see it differently, but by then..." Villanelle shrugs.

The whole business is accomplished very quickly, and Eve marvels at Villanelle's strength as she lowers her, apparently without effort, onto the floor of the panel van. Mummified in the blue sheet, with Villanelle's rucksack jammed beneath her head, she hears the van's rear doors close and lock.

It's not a comfortable journey, and the first half-hour is made worse by a succession of speed bumps, but eventually the road levels out and the van picks up speed. For Eve, it's enough just to lie there, seeing nothing at all, in a state that's not quite wakefulness and not quite sleep. After what might have been an hour, but might equally have been two, the van comes to a halt. The door opens, and Eve feels the sheet unwrapped from her face. It's dark, with a faint wash of street lighting, and Villanelle is sitting on the tailgate of the van, her rucksack over her shoulder. Leaning inside, she unbinds Eve from her winding sheet. Outside, it's cold, and smells like rain. They're in a car park beside a motorway, surrounded by the dim forms of

heavy-goods vehicles. An illuminated shack announces CAFÉ 24 Hrs.

Villanelle helps Eve out of the van, and they pick their way over the puddled ground. Inside the café, beneath the lunar glow of strip lights, a dozen men are silently addressing plates of food at plastic-topped tables as Elvis's "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" issues from ancient wall-mounted speakers. Behind a counter, a woman in a rockabilly bandana is frying onions on a hotplate.

Five minutes later, steaming mugs of tea and two of the biggest, greasiest burgers that Eve has ever seen are placed in front of them.

"Eat," Villanelle orders. "All of it. And all the chips."

"Thanks. I'm starving."

When they leave, Eve feels transformed, if a little nauseated. She follows Villanelle across the car park, and then, mystifyingly, along a darkened path toward a sparsely lit residential block. At the foot of a tower, Villanelle inserts a key into a steel-fronted door. They climb an unlit stairway to the third floor, where Villanelle opens another armored door and turns on the light. They're in an unheated studio flat, furnished with bleak austerity. There's a table, a single chair, a military canvas-topped camp bed, a khaki sleeping bag, a cloth-covered wardrobe with a hanging rail full of clothes, and a stack of metal storage boxes. Insulated blackout curtains prevent the escape of light.

"What is this place?" Eve asks, looking around her.

"It's mine."

"But where are we?"

"Enough questions. The bathroom's there, take what you need."

The bathroom proves to be a concrete cell with a toilet, a basin, and a single cold tap. A plastic crate on the floor holds a jumble of toiletries, tampons, wound dressings, suturing kits, and painkillers. When Eve comes out, the sleeping bag has been unrolled on the camp bed, and Villanelle is field-stripping and cleaning her SIG Sauer at the table. "Sleep," she says, not looking up. "You're going to need all your strength."

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine. Go to bed."

* * *

Eve wakes into a cold and unidentifiable twilight. Villanelle is sitting at the table in the same position, but she is wearing different clothes and slowly scrolling through maps on a laptop. Slowly, wonderingly, Eve's memory recreates the event of the previous day. "What time is it?" she asks.

"Five p.m. You've been asleep for fifteen hours."

"Oh." She unzips herself from the sleeping bag. "I'm starving."

"Good. Get ready, and we'll go and eat. I put out new clothes for you."

They step outside into a desolate, twilit landscape. Eve looks about her. It's the sort of place she's driven past countless times without really seeing. The building they've just left is a condemned tenement block. Metal shutters cover doors and windows, security notices warn of patrolling guard dogs, wild lilac bushes have grown through the forecourt's littered tarmac. *Mir teney*, the shadow world.

When they leave the café, the drizzle has become rain. On the motorway, the traffic is unceasing, zipping by in a gray, vaporous spray. Eve follows Villanelle past the building where

they stayed the night to a graffiti-tagged row of garages. The end garage is secured with a galvanized steel roller door and a heavy-duty coded padlock, which Villanelle unlocks. Inside, it's dry, clean, and surprisingly spacious. A hydraulic motorcycle repair bench runs along one wall; against the other, a shelved unit holds helmets, armor-paneled leather jackets, trousers, gloves, and boots. Between them, a volcano-gray Ducati Multistrada 1260 waits on its stand, fitted with locked panniers and top-box.

"Everything's packed," Villanelle tells Eve. "Get dressed."

Five minutes later, she wheels the Ducati out of the garage, and waits while Eve pulls down and locks the roller door. The rain has stopped, and for a moment, the two women stand there, facing each other.

"Ready for this?" Villanelle asks, zipping up her jacket, and Eve nods.

They put on their helmets and mount the Ducati. The whisper of the Testastretta engine becomes a murmur, the headlight beam floods the darkness. Villanelle takes the slip road slowly, allowing Eve to find her balance and settle tightly against her. She waits for a gap in the traffic, the murmur builds to a snarl, and they're gone.

III

Die for Me

1

As the light fades, an icy wind rises. A southeasterly, racing out of the Gulf of Riga across the Baltic Sea and meeting the ship broadside, so that the containers groan and strain against their lashing rods. Every day, as they voyage eastward toward Russia, the temperature falls.

The container that Villanelle and Eve have shared for the last five days is a corrugated steel box the size of a prison cell. It's a little over two and a half meters tall, contains a part-load of clothing bales, and sits atop a five-container stack on the starboard side of the ship. Inside, it's as cold as death. The two of them live like rats, huddling together for warmth, nibbling at a diminishing stock of stale bread, cheese, and chocolate, sipping rationed water, and urinating into a plastic bucket.

At the forward end of the container there is an emergency hatch, thirty centimeters by thirty, which can be unbolted from the inside. This admits a thin shaft of light and a freezing blast of salt air. Standing on the clothing bales, her eyes streaming, Eve watches the steady rise and fall of the horizon and the slow-motion leap of the bow wave, white against gray, until her face loses all feeling. When the wind drops, she pours the bucket out of the hatch. It freezes as it runs down the container.

Villanelle has thought of everything. Thermal vests and

leggings, underwear, toilet paper, washing stuff, tampons, neoprene gloves, red-light torches, a commando knife, PlastiCuffs, 9mm ammunition for her SIG Sauer and Eve's Glock, and a hefty roll of used U.S. dollars. They have no phones, laptops, or credit cards. No identifying documents. Nothing to leave a trail. No one except Villanelle knows for certain that Eve is alive, and Villanelle has been officially dead herself for years. Her grave, marked with a small metal plaque provided by the Russian state and inscribed Оксана Анатольевна Астанкова, is in an overcrowded cemetery in Moscow.

Two years ago, Eve hadn't known that Villanelle, or Oksana Astankova, existed.

She was in charge of a small inter-Service liaison department at Thames House, MI5's London headquarters, and life was, on balance, fine. She found her work to be on the dull side; she had an MA in criminology and forensic psychology, and had hoped for a more challenging deployment with the Security Service. But she had a steady, if unspectacular, income, and a husband, Niko, a kind and decent man who she loved. There were worse things, she'd tell herself, than routine. And if she spent every spare moment at the office building up a file of unattributed political assassinations, it was just a private thing. Just her keeping her hand in. A hobby, really.

In the course of this unofficial research, Eve became convinced that several of these killings had been carried out by a woman, and almost certainly the same woman. Normally, she would have kept this theory to herself. Her role at MI5 was administrative, not investigative, and there would have been raised eyebrows and condescending smiles if she'd brought the subject up with her superiors. She'd have been regarded as a slow-lane liaison officer getting above herself. Then a

Russian far-right political activist named Viktor Kedrin was shot dead at a London hotel, along with his three bodyguards. Eve was accused of failing to organize adequate protection for Kedrin, and was placed on administrative leave to await further disciplinary action.

This was bitterly unjust, and everyone involved knew it. But it was also known that when the department fouled up as royally as this—and it didn't get much worse than the assassination of a high-profile principal like Kedrin—someone had to take the fall. Ideally, someone senior enough to count, but not so senior that they couldn't easily be replaced. Someone expendable. Someone like Eve.

Shortly after this, she was discreetly contacted by a long-serving MI6 officer named Carolyn Martens who, unlike her counterparts north of the river, was prepared to listen to Eve's ideas. Seconded to her off-the-books team, and tasked with finding Kedrin's killer, Eve pursued Villanelle around the world. She proved a spectral and elusive quarry, always one flawless step ahead. All Eve could do was follow the blood trail. And, unwillingly, admire her grim artistry. She was bold, free from guilt or fear, and probably a little bored by the ease with which she evaded detection. Flattered to discover that Eve was pursuing her, Villanelle began to do the same to Eve. One night in Shanghai, she climbed up the outside of a hotel into Eve's room and stole her bracelet as a trophy. To make amends, and for the sheer effrontery of it, she later broke into Eve's house in London in broad daylight, to leave her a different (and much more expensive) bracelet that she'd bought for her in Venice. These intrusions were as flirtatious as they were terrifying. Whispered reminders that she liked her, but could kill her at any time she chose.

Although Eve refused to admit it at the time, even to herself, this twisted courtship had its effects. As Eve would discover, obsession is not immediate. It stalks you. It creeps up on you until it's too late to escape it. When she first saw Villanelle in person, it was by chance, and again it was in Shanghai. Eve was on a scooter, caught in traffic, and Villanelle was walking down the pavement toward her, dressed in a bold pantsuit, with her blonde hair falling loose around her face. Their eyes met, and though neither had even seen a picture of the other, each had recognized something familiar in the other's gaze.

Later that night, Villanelle lured Eve's colleague and close friend, Bill Pargrave, into an alleyway, where she hacked him to death with a meat cleaver. The savagery of the attack shocked seasoned investigators of the Shanghai homicide squad, who had seen their share of Triad killings and other horrors.

Their second meeting, on the hard shoulder of a motorway in England, was orchestrated with chilling brilliance. Eve was driving back to London from a Security Services interrogation center in Hampshire. Her passenger was Frank Hallett, a senior MI5 office who, earlier that morning, had admitted to her that he was in the pay of the Twelve, the organization that employed Villanelle to do their killing. Eve had tried to turn Frank, to get him to inform on the Twelve in return for immunity, and he had responded, rather cheekily, by trying to recruit her.

Twenty minutes into the journey, they were flagged down by a female police officer on a motorcycle. It was Villanelle, of course, but by the time Eve had figured that out, it was too late. Villanelle told Eve that she had missed her. Touched her hair, and talked about her "sad smile." It was all rather romantic, in its way. Then she disabled Eve's car and abducted Frank,

leaving Eve stranded beside the motorway. Frank probably thought he was being rescued. In fact, Villanelle drove him to a secluded spot outside Weybridge, smashed the back of his skull with a police-issue baton, and dumped him in the River Wey.

Villanelle wasn't ideal girlfriend material, but then, Eve wasn't looking for a girlfriend. She was married. Happily married, until recently. To a man. True, the sex with Niko had never been transcendent—no flaring comet-trails or exploding supernovae, no werewolf howls. But he was that rarest of beings, a genuinely good guy. He loved Eve when no one else gave her a second glance. He praised her hopeless cooking, was enchanted by her fashion-blindness, and regularly assured her that she was beautiful. In return, Eve treated him appallingly. She knew exactly how much she was going to hurt him, and did it anyway.

It was the way Villanelle made her feel. For all Eve's frozen horror at what Villanelle had done, she was awestruck. Her focus, her meticulousness, her ruthless purity of purpose. Eve had been sleepwalking through life and suddenly there she was, her perfect adversary.

She would later learn that Villanelle had felt the same way. That while working as the Twelve's star assassin had its professional and material rewards, she had begun to crave an excitement that routine political murders didn't deliver. She had developed an appetite for danger. She wanted to lure a pursuer onto her trail, someone worthy of her mettle. She wanted to dance on the razor's edge. She wanted Eve.

Niko loved Eve, and Eve always felt safe in his arms, but the games that Villanelle played were satanically addictive. It took Bill's murder to awaken Eve to the boundless range of Villanelle's cruelty. She hated her after that, which was what Villanelle intended. She wanted to show Eve the worst of

herself, to see if Eve would back off. Of course Eve only went after her all the harder, which delighted her, but then, Villanelle never drew any distinction between hate and desire, between pursuit and courtship, and in the end, neither did Eve.

Eve wonders when she lost perspective. Was it in Venice, when she discovered that Villanelle had been there a month earlier with another woman, a lover, and found herself transfixed with jealousy? Or was it earlier, by the side of the motorway, when Villanelle told her that after climbing into Eve's hotel room on that monsoon night in Shanghai, she'd sat and gazed at her as she slept? It doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that when Villanelle asked her to come with her, to walk out of her life and leave behind everything and everyone she'd known, Eve did so without hesitation.

Eve knew, by then, that she'd been living a lie. That from the time she'd first been approached by Carolyn Martens, she'd been brilliantly, artfully deceived. When Carolyn asked her to investigate Villanelle and the Twelve, Eve flattered herself that she was impressed by her intuitive and deductive skills. In fact, Carolyn had been a fully paid-up asset of the Twelve all along, and wanted to use Eve to test the organization's security. It was a classic false flag operation, and by conducting it off the books, for reasons that made perfect sense to Eve at the time, Carolyn ensured that no one at MI6 got word of it.

Eve had begun to suspect that she'd been used in this way, but it was Villanelle who finally confirmed it. She'd shown her, dispassionately, just how easily Eve had been manipulated. Listening to her, Eve felt like she was watching an elaborate stage set being dismantled, and suddenly seeing ropes and pulleys and raw brickwork. Villanelle told her that she'd been given her next target, and that it was Eve. She'd discovered

more than she was meant to. She wasn't the Twelve's dupe any longer, she was a liability.

The encounter, and its aftermath, was classic Villanelle. Eve had just come back from a horrendous few days in Moscow, and upon returning to her house, she'd fallen asleep, only to awaken to find Villanelle in the bath. A 9mm SIG Sauer was lying between the taps, and she was wearing latex gloves. Eve had been sure she was there to shoot her. In actuality, she was there to help Eve stage her death with the intention of disappearing together. But first she asked Eve to wash her hair and have dessert with her.

Soon they were racing through the night on Villanelle's Ducati motorcycle, Eve's arms wrapped tightly around her, heading north. Villanelle hadn't really given her much of a choice, but then, Eve hadn't wanted her to. She was ready to cut the ground from beneath herself. She was ready to fly.

Eve often wondered, since that day, what would have happened if she'd stayed. If she'd begged Niko's forgiveness, and gone to the police, or perhaps even the newspapers, with her story. Would she have survived? Or would it have been the car that didn't stop, the heart attack on the way to the supermarket, the apparent suicide? And if the Twelve had finally decided that she wasn't worth killing, and had engineered things so that she looked and sounded like a conspiracy theorist, just one more recruit to the sad, twilight army of the deluded, would Niko ever have trusted her? Or would she have forever felt his eyes on her, watching and wondering, as they made small talk over dinner, or endured endless evenings at the bridge club?

They stowed away at Immingham, a port in Lincolnshire. It cost them the motorcycle and the remains of Eve's dignity. The guy was a deckhand, on shore with a crew visa. They met

him in a pub outside the terminal, a fake Irish establishment so depressing it was almost funny. They'd been nursing a couple of beers for the best part of an hour when he came in. Villanelle clocked him as Russian straight away, swung over to his table, and went to work. His name was Igor and his ship, as they'd hoped, was the *Kirovo-Chepetsk*, a Panamax-class container vessel bound for St. Petersburg. Villanelle didn't waste any time. Poured a triple vodka into him and made her pitch. Igor didn't look too surprised.

When they took him outside to see the bike, it had started snowing. Villanelle unzipped the waterproof cover, and Igor gave a low whistle. Eve didn't know one end of a motorcycle from the other, but the Ducati was a thing of beauty and riding on it behind Villanelle had been a dream.

"Want to try her out?" Villanelle asked, her breath vaporous. Igor nodded, slowly running his hands over the handlebar controls and the volcano-gray tank. Then he swung a leg over the saddle, thumbed the ignition switch, and took off on a whisper-quiet circuit of the car park, snowflakes whirling in the headlight beam. When he dismounted, clearly smitten, Villanelle pressed home her advantage in fast, idiomatic Russian. He answered in a murmur, shifting his weight uneasily.

"He'll get us on board tomorrow night," she said. "But the bike's not going to be enough. He'll do prison time if he's caught."

"What else does he want?"

"He wants to see your..." She nodded at Eve's chest.

"My... *No*. No way! Wouldn't he rather see yours?"

"Just one photo, for his private use. He says you remind him of his Auntie Galya."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No. She drives a tram in Smolensk. Show him."

Eve looked around the car park. There was no one, except for the three of them. Unzipping her leather bike jacket, she pulled up her sweater, thermal undershirt, and bra.

Staring, Igor fumbled in his track bottoms for his phone. It took him the best part of a minute of crouching and weaving to get the shot he wanted.

"Just make sure my face isn't in the picture," Eve said, shivering.

"He's not interested in your face. He says you have nice breasts, though. And I agree."

"Well, it's nice that you're both enjoying this so much, but I'm literally freezing my tits off here. Can I please put my shirt down?"

"Yeah, we're good. He'll help us."

* * *

"When do they load this container onto the ship?" Eve whispered, as they hollowed themselves out a nest in the clothing bales.

"Tomorrow, the driver said. Probably around midday."

"Do you think anyone will check inside first?"

"They might. Are you scared?"

"I just don't want us to get caught."

Villanelle said nothing.

"How long have you been planning this?" Eve asked.

"I've always known that one day things might change and I might have to run. So I worked out escape routes. I just didn't plan for you to be coming, too."

"Sorry."

“Don’t be. Take your leathers and boots off.”

“Why?”

“So you have something to put on tomorrow when you wake up. And so we can share body heat to keep each other warm.”

“OK.” Eve undid her jacket, trousers, and boots, and placed them where she could find them in the dark. Beside her, she could hear Villanelle doing the same. Shivering, she settled herself into the bales. A moment later, Villanelle joined her. She molded herself against Eve, tucked their knees together, pressed her breasts against Eve’s back. Then she folded her arm over Eve’s and arranged her fingers around her wrist. Eve was still shaking, her teeth chattering, and Villanelle moved more closely against her.

Finally, as the warmth of Villanelle’s body possessed her, she was still. Silence enclosed them, and Eve imagined the snow beating at the container’s walls and roof. Her arm twitched, as it sometimes did at night, and Villanelle slid her hand down her wrist and twined their fingers together. Then she burrowed her face deep into Eve’s hair and kissed her neck.

“What are you doing?” Eve whispered.

In response, Villanelle tugged on Eve’s shoulder until she turned so that they were face to face in the darkness. Then she pressed their lips together. Eve yielded for a second, then pulled away. “Wait.”

“Why?”

“Just... talk to me.”

“About what?”

“Have you ever really cared, really *felt* anything for another person?”

“I feel things when I’m with you.” She wrapped an icy hand around Eve’s waist, pulling her closer. “I’ve wanted to do this

since the first time I saw you. Don't you feel the same way?"

"That's not the same as caring about someone."

"It's a good start."

Eve steadied her breath. "Have you ever even had a real relationship with anyone? Not just sex?"

"Mmm... Sort of. Once."

"And?"

"I killed her husband. She didn't want me after that."

"Oh."

"I could have done the same to yours, you know. But I didn't."

"Are you expecting me to thank you for that?"

"A little gratitude would be nice, yes."

"Fuck you," Eve said instead, and rolled away. As the minutes crept by, and the cold wrapped more and more tightly around her, Eve listened to the calm rise and fall of Villanelle's breathing and wondered what she was thinking about.

Eventually, Villanelle reached out for a lock of Eve's hair and ran it through her fingers. "Fine. You don't have to thank me for not killing him. But he was too normal for you. Too nice. You know that."

"Stop that."

"What?"

"You will never understand how much harder it is to be nice and normal and decent than it is to be like you."

"Like us, you mean."

"We aren't the same."

"We aren't that different, though."

Eve didn't have a response for that.

Villanelle yawned. "Aren't you cold over there? I am."

Eve scooted closer and allowed Villanelle to wrap her arms around her, tucking her head under her chin. "Why do you like

me?" she asked. "Really?"

"Who says I like you?" she teased. "Maybe I just want to get into your pants. Which, by the way, are not flattering."

"Ah."

Villanelle wriggled against her. "Lucky for you, I have a thing for frumpy women. Especially older ones."

"Thank you so much."

"Your turn now. Why do you like me?"

"Because it's freezing in here and you're the only source of heat." She pressed her body more tightly against Villanelle's to prove her point.

"So you're saying I'm hot?"

"You know you are."

"Yes, but I want to hear you say it."

"Fine. You're hot."

"Thank you. So are you."

Eve tilted her head up and started to pull Villanelle toward her, but Villanelle was already there, searching for Eve's mouth with her own.

"I've never done anything like this before," Eve said, when they finally broke apart for a moment.

"It's OK," Villanelle replied. "I know what I'm doing."

Then they were all over each other, bumping noses, smearing lips, and blindly, desperately kissing. Eve felt fingers hook into the waistbands of her thermal leggings and panties and drag them over her ankles, and as Villanelle moved back up her body, she tried to pull her sweater off, but the neck was so tight that Villanelle fell on top of her, laughing and whispering that Eve was choking her. Sitting astride Eve, she inched the sweater forwards over her head. It brushed Eve's face, and then it was gone, and her undershirt and bra after it. She pulled Eve's off,

and Eve shuddered as the cold seized her. “We need to toughen you up,” Villanelle whispered, wriggling out of her own leggings and panties.

Villanelle took charge, as Eve needed her to, and she felt a hand reach confidently between her thighs. She couldn’t help recalling how Villanelle had once killed a man with a knife-thrust through the femoral artery. A strike so delicate, so surgically precise, that her victim was probably not immediately aware that he’d been stabbed. Could Villanelle feel the throbbing of her femoral artery? When she slid her fingers inside Eve, was she remembering other, bloodier penetrations? Did the warm explorations of her tongue recall more lethal partings of flesh?

Afterward, they pulled their sweaters and jackets on top of themselves, and Eve spooned up behind Villanelle, with one arm under her head and the other around Villanelle’s waist. They lay there in the dark, overwhelmed, Eve’s lips touching the soft hair on Villanelle’s neck, which stirred as she breathed.

After several minutes, Villanelle squeezed Eve’s hand and extricated herself from the embrace. “I’m really enjoying all this inappropriate touching, but I need to pee.”

She did so, noisily, into the bucket, which she’d lodged in the clothing bales in one corner. Eve followed and did the same, not easy in the dark, and then they dressed themselves—it was too cold not to—and Eve curled up behind her again, with the faint smell of her shampoo in her face. “Admit it, Eve,” Villanelle murmured, barely audible. “That was much better than anything you ever did with the mustache.”

* * *

They woke the next morning as the truck shuddered into

life and began its journey to the docks. They lay motionless, the only sound their quiet, synchronous breathing. Twenty minutes later, they came to a halt, and Eve felt Villanelle's body relax. This was the moment of maximum danger. If there was to be an inspection of the container and its cargo, it would be now. Eve tried to imitate Villanelle's zen state, but started to tremble uncontrollably. Her heart was pounding so wildly she thought she was going to pass out.

A dull clang reverberated throughout the container. Eve burrowed desperately into the bales, ignoring a brief explosion of pain as her nose struck Villanelle's shoulder. The truck began to move again, but she stayed submerged, inhaling the thick smell of unaired cotton. This time the journey was shorter, their stop-start progress indicating that they were in a line of vehicles approaching the loading bay. With the final halt, the truck's engine fell silent. There was a harsh scraping of metal on metal, a heavy thump, and they started to ascend. Eve had dreaded the moment the container was hoisted from shore to ship, picturing it swinging sickeningly beneath the cranes. Nothing of the sort happened, of course. The process was smooth and deft, with only a brief kiss of steel to indicate the moment they were locked in place, and a faint knocking as their temporary home was fixed to those beneath it.

She waited a few minutes before clawing her way out of the bales. "Villanelle?" she whispered, groping for her, disoriented and blind.

The only response she received was a shushing sound.

Hours passed, and Villanelle maintained a trance-like silence. Eve wondered if she was telling herself that she'd made a fatal miscalculation in bringing her along, and if the previous night had meant anything to her at all. She lay there staring into the

cold darkness. Finally, she slept.

* * *

The steady thrum of the *Kirovo-Chepetsk*'s engines and the faint creak of the containers around them woke her up a few hours later. As she regained her bearings, Villanelle's hand reached through the darkness and found hers.

"Are you OK?" she whispered.

Eve nodded, still not quite there.

"Hey. We're alive. We got away."

"For now."

"Now's all there is, Eve." She pressed Eve's palm to her icy cheek. "It's all there ever is."

2

Eve is beginning to learn Villanelle's ways.

She withdraws. She locks herself into the secret citadel of her mind. Eve sits next to her, their legs pressed together, breath mingling, but she could be a thousand miles away, so arctic is her solitude. Sometimes it happens when they lie down to sleep, and Villanelle burrows into her for warmth. Part of her is just not there.

This frozen state can last for hours, and then, like dawn breaking, she'll wake to Eve's presence. At these times, Eve has learned to wait and see which way the cat jumps, because she's so unpredictable. Sometimes, she's pensive, just wanting to be held; sometimes she's as sullen and spiteful as a child. When she wants sex, she reaches for Eve. After four days and nights at sea, this has become a raw, feral business. They need the water that they have for drinking, and washing is impossible. Not that either of them cares. Villanelle knows what she wants and goes straight for it, and with the last of Eve's inhibitions dispelled by the darkness and the uncertainty of their situation, she is soon giving as good as she gets. Villanelle likes this. She's much stronger than Eve, and could easily throw her off when Eve pins her down and rolls on top of her, but she lets it happen, and lies there as Eve strokes her breast or probes for the scar

on her lip with tongue and teeth. Then she grabs Eve's hand and pulls it downwards, guiding her fingers inside her, and grinds against the heel of her palm until she's gasping Eve's name, and Eve can feel the muscles of her thighs twitching and shuddering.

"You've never been with another woman?" she marvels. "I'm really your first?"

This is a conversation they have had before. "You know you are," Eve replies.

"I don't *know*."

"You'll just have to take my word for it, then. You're the first."

"Hmm. Did you ever fantasize about it, though?"

"Sure, I thought about it. What it would be like with you. What we might do."

"That's what you were doing in that shitty little office all day? Thinking about having sex with me?"

"I was mostly trying to catch you. There was a whole team of us trying to catch you."

"You never got close." Villanelle is lying behind Eve with her face pressed against the back of her neck, and Eve can feel her smiling, pleased with herself as always. "What were their names, the ones you worked with?"

"Kenny and Lance."

"That's right. Kenny and Lance. Did you ever think about having sex with them?"

"Ew. No. Never. Kenny was a geek who lived with his mom. And Lance was like a rat. A cunning, well-trained rat, but still, you know..."

"A rat?"

"Exactly."

Villanelle considers this for a moment. "You know, when I

was bored, in Paris, I used to hack into your computer.”

“You did mention that, yes.”

“It wasn’t that interesting. Ever. I kept hoping to find emails from a secret lover or something. But it was always just orders for bin liners and moth traps and ugly clothes.”

“Sorry I wasn’t exciting enough for you.”

“Life doesn’t have to be so sad. You don’t have to buy acrylic sweaters, for example. Even moths think they’re disgusting. I don’t know why you even needed traps.”

“You kill people for a living, and you’re criticizing my knitwear?”

“It’s not the same thing, Eve. Clothes matter. And what’s Rinse-Aid? Is it for your hair? Some kind of charitable organization?”

“Have you ever used a dishwasher?”

“No. Why?”

Eve turns around in Villanelle’s arms and kisses her. “It doesn’t matter.”

“And now you’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not. Really.”

“I was sent to kill you, Eve. And I could have done it. So easily. But I didn’t. I saved your life, and I risked my own, which to be honest with you was a very stupid thing to do. But because I care for you, I got you away from London, and the Twelve, and that husband of yours—who looks like someone stuck a mustache on some fudge, by the way, I don’t know what you ever saw in him—and I’m taking you away somewhere we will be safe. So it is not very nice of you to laugh at me just because I don’t know what Rinse-Aid is.”

“Sorry. It’s... this whole situation is just so absurd. Thank you for rescuing me.”

“Well, it wasn’t a purely selfless act. My girlfriend is in a Moscow prison because of you, so I needed a replacement, and you were the only one I could find on such short notice.”

“If you mean Nadia, she’s hardly there because of me. She tried to shoot me in a crowded Metro station, missed, killed a harmless old man, and got herself arrested.”

“I know. So sloppy.” She shakes her head.

She’s such a jagged cluster of contradictions. Eve had no idea that someone with Villanelle’s capacity for cruelty and violence could also be so charming and affectionate, so funny and quick-witted. It’s hard to accept that the woman in front of her right now is the same one who lured her closest friend into an alley and nearly hacked his head off. But her mood can change at the drop of a hat, and each time it does, Eve is reminded of how precarious her current situation is. One minute, Villanelle is flirtatious and tender, covering Eve’s face with kisses; the next, she closes herself off and retreats into icy solitude. She seems almost vulnerable at times, but moments later, she pivots and hides behind humor or cruel barbs. Eve can never predict which it is going to be. She knows this is just a way for Villanelle to protect her fragile sense of self, but it pierces her like a knife every time. Because right now, if she doesn’t have Villanelle, she doesn’t have anything. And Villanelle knows that.

Perhaps Eve shouldn’t be surprised when Villanelle lashes out at her or withdraws into herself, because the more time they spend together, the more Eve realizes how utterly solitary Villanelle’s existence has always been. In choosing to save Eve’s life, and in risking her own, she went against her own nature.

What Eve still can’t understand is why she did it. The staging of her death and their escape from London was so bold, so meticulously executed. Why is Villanelle going to so much

trouble on her behalf? Does she really care for Eve, or is Eve just a fixation, an itch that she has to scratch?

Eve is just as confused about her own motivations. What does she feel, beyond the fact that she wants Villanelle, desperately, and lives for the moments when they reach for each other in the darkness?

* * *

They talk. In fits and starts to begin with, but soon for hours on end. Talking distracts Eve from the painful stomach contractions she's been experiencing. It feels like a snake coiling tighter and tighter in her guts.

"I think I'm dying," she says, curling into herself.

Villanelle laughs and puts a hand on her stomach. "You're just hungry. I felt like that a lot when I was a child. It will be bad for a day or two, then it will go away."

"And then what?"

"Then your internal organs start to dissolve as they digest themselves."

"Great."

"I'm just kidding. You'll be fine. I knew a model in Paris who only ate a single Ladurée macaroon every day."

"What flavor?"

"*Pistache*."

"I'd sell my left kidney for a pistachio macaroon right now."

"Too late."

"What do you mean?"

"You're mine now, and that means your kidney is, too. It's not for sale. You're just going to have to starve."

"Shit. OK, just keep talking."

“What about?”

“I don’t know. I just need a distraction. Tell me about your life before you worked for the Twelve.”

“OK, but I will only tell you the good parts that reflect well on me.”

True to her word, Villanelle skips over what she considers the less glamorous parts of her life, which makes it hard for Eve to establish a definitive story, but she already knows the basic facts, and gradually she fits some of the other pieces together.

Villanelle was born Oksana Anatolyevna Astankova in Perm, a second-tier industrial city near the Urals. Her father was a soldier and was absent for most of her early childhood, and she claims to have inherited her darkness from her mother, who surrendered her to an orphanage when she was seven years old. Three years later, she set fire to the dormitory block at the orphanage—“my first kill,” she says proudly—and ended up in a juvenile detention facility until she was sixteen.

After that, she enrolled in secondary school, where she had an illicit relationship with her French teacher. She glosses over the details of this affair, but Eve can read between the lines well enough. Anna had clearly done a number on young Oksana. “Her husband was in the way, so I slit his throat and chopped off his penis.” She shrugs. “I didn’t know it was going to upset her so much.”

She was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for his murder, but only served three of them before her release was engineered by a man named Konstantin Vasiliev. Eve is familiar with this name, having previously encountered it in the course of her investigation and pursuit of Villanelle. He was a former intelligence officer of considerable distinction and reputation, who had for some years run the FSB’s Directorate S, a secretive

bureau whose operational remit included the elimination of foreign enemies of the Russian state. When Oksana met him, he was apparently performing a similar service for the Twelve.

"He knew everything about me, all the way back to my childhood," Villanelle remembers. "He told me that we were going to change history. I didn't really believe him at first, but I went along with it because it seemed better than the alternative. He was right, though. We did."

"So that's how you ended up working for the Twelve?"

"Mm-hmm." She describes the intense training regimen Konstantin oversaw. When he was satisfied that she had acquired all the necessary skills to succeed in her new career as an assassin, he became her handler, installing her in an apartment at Paris, and at intervals dispatching her on kill missions.

Villanelle loved her life there. The chic-as-shit apartment with its view of Sacré-Cœur, the money, the beautiful clothes. When she wasn't traipsing all over Europe killing for the Twelve, she filled her days with lunches at fashionable restaurants, shopping trips, and occasional liaisons with attractive strangers. What she loved just as much as this gilded existence was the secret thrill of knowing that she wasn't the person the world thought she was. When she looked in the mirror, she saw not a trendy young socialite, but a dark angel, a bringer of death.

Eve is no longer the person the world thought she was, either. Her pursuit of Villanelle had awakened the darkness within her, but the events of the last week in particular have shown her the shadow self she's always denied, and forced her to hear the backbeat she's always pretended wasn't there. All her certainties have evaporated. Villanelle has deleted them.

* * *

“For fuck’s sake, Villanelle.”

“What?”

“Stop elbowing me.”

“You’re snoring. I used to think it was cute, but now that I actually have to sleep next to you, it’s just annoying.”

Eve huffs and rolls onto her side, facing away from Villanelle.

“That is not better, Eve. Now I’ll still have to listen to you snore, but you’ll also be farting on me.”

“I will not.”

“You will. You do it all night. You’re embarrassed so you hold it in all day, but it comes out when you are asleep.”

“I do not. You’re just making that up.”

“OK, I am. It’s just funny how shy you are about it. You’re too repressed. You should kill a few people. Get it out of your system. Then you might not be so uptight about things like passing gas in front of your girlfriend.”

“My what?”

“Girlfriend.”

“Is that what you are?”

“Unless there’s something else you’d rather call me.”

“Asshole?”

“No, I don’t like that as much.”

“Fine, girlfriend it is.”

Villanelle wraps her arms around Eve possessively. “You’re so whipped.”

“So are you.”

* * *

The last night in the container is the worst. The wind screams across the bow, pounding against the container stacks so that they creak and groan. In the darkness, Eve's hunger pangs and the vessel's pitch and roll join forces to nauseating effect. She draws her knees up against her chest and lies open-eyed as acid rises into her throat. Then she is on her hands and knees, retching uncontrollably, but there's nothing in her stomach to throw up. The wind continues its assault for hours, until her body is wrung out and her throat raw from dry heaving.

Throughout it all, Villanelle says not one word, makes not a single sympathetic gesture. Eve longs for a comforting touch on her back, a cool hand across her forehead, but none is forthcoming. She can't tell if Villanelle is asleep or awake, angry or indifferent. She's just not there. Eve feels so utterly abandoned that she half expects to find herself alone when the morning comes, if it ever comes.

Somehow, she drifts off. When she wakes an unquantifiable time later, the wind has dropped, the stomach cramps have gone, and Villanelle's sleeping body is warm against her back. Eve lies there unmoving, Villanelle's arm heavy on hers, her breath whistling across Eve's ear. Careful not to wake her, Eve maneuvers herself into a position where she can see her watch. It's just past 6 a.m., Baltic time. Outside, the day is dawning, cold and dangerous.

Finally, Villanelle stirs, yawns, stretches like a cat, and buries her face in Eve's hair. "Are you OK? You sounded awful last night."

"You were awake? Why didn't you say anything? I thought I was dying."

"You weren't dying, you were seasick. There was nothing I could say to make you feel better, so I went to sleep."

"I was already miserable, and then it felt like you'd abandoned me on top of that."

"I was right here."

"You still could have said something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, Villanelle. Just something to tell me that you knew how I was feeling?"

"But I didn't know how you were feeling. I've never been seasick." She gets to her feet and stumbles across the clothing bales to the safety hatch. A minute later, the interior of the container is illuminated with a thin morning light. In her thick sweater, she looks shapeless and bedraggled, her hair standing out from her head in spikes and whorls. Pulling down her leggings and pants, Villanelle squats over the bucket. Eve takes her turn at the makeshift toilet when she's done, then carries it over to the hatch and pours it out. The urine freezes immediately, thickening the cascade of yellowish ice streaking the container's exterior.

Bracing herself against the sub-zero blast of the wind, Eve searches the horizon. Slicing between sea and sky is a faint, gray knife blade. Eve isn't sure if it's a trick of the light. She squints, straining her eyes. It's land. Russia. She stares out of the hatch, trying to focus her thoughts, and then Villanelle is beside her, their cold cheeks pressed together.

"When we get there, do exactly as I say, OK?"

"OK. What's the plan?"

Villanelle shrugs. "First we have to get out of here. I don't know what's going to happen when we land. After that, we'll find a place to hole up for a while until we can get new identities, new passports, all that stuff. And then we can decide where to go from there. Your spoken Russian is shit, by the way, so if we

have to talk to anyone, pretend to be mute. Maybe weak in the head. Maybe both.”

Eve watches as the silhouette of St. Petersburg slowly hardens. “Villanelle?”

“What?”

“I’m really fucking terrified.”

Villanelle slips a cold hand under Eve’s sweater and over her heart. “It’s OK. Being scared when you’re in danger is normal.”

“Are you scared?”

“No, but I’m not normal. You know that.”

“Promise you won’t ditch me as soon as we land?”

“I promise. But you have to trust me.”

Eve turns to her, and they hold each other. She runs her fingers through Villanelle’s hair, trying to tame it.

“You don’t mind me being a psychopath?” Villanelle asks, seemingly out of nowhere.

Eve stiffens. “I’ve never called you that.”

“Not to my face. But that’s what you think I am, right?”

“I don’t know what I think anymore.” She stares out through the safety hatch. Other container vessels are visible now, converging on the distant port.

“I don’t either, actually. But whatever I am, if we’re going to survive, you’re going to have to be a bit more like me.”

3

They feel the *Kirovo-Chepetsk* slowing. A glance through the hatch tells them that the approach to St. Petersburg is frozen, with the ice extending at least two miles out to sea. For the next few hours, they barely move, and then an icebreaker vessel appears off the port bow, and begins cutting a ship lane. It's a desperately slow business, and they alternate between lying in frustrated silence on the clothing bales and facing the glacial wind at the hatch as the icebreaker shears, meter by meter, through the creaking, protesting ice.

By the time the ship docks at the terminal in Ugolnaya harbor, and the engine vibrations finally cut out altogether, it's been dark for hours. In the steel box that has been their home for the best part of the week, the air is thick with the smell of their unwashed bodies. They have eaten the last of the cheese and chocolate, and hunger is tearing at Eve's guts. She is exhausted, wrung out, and terrified, mostly at the thought of being separated from Villanelle. What will happen when the container doors are opened? Where will they be, and what will they face?

Unloading begins a couple of hours after docking. Theirs is one of the first containers to be lifted off the *Kirovo-Chepetsk*, and Eve's heart races as they swing through the air and lock

on to the waiting trailer. Zipped into the inside pockets of her motorcycle jacket are her Glock, which presses uncomfortably against her ribs, and three magazines of 9mm ammunition. If the container is scanned for body heat, or searched in the course of a security check, God knows what will happen. Igor assured them in Immingham that no such checks would be made, and that their safe transit to a St. Petersburg industrial depot would be taken care of, but they are a long way from Immingham now. As the container truck moves off, she reaches for Villanelle and touches her cheek.

She flinches at the unexpected contact before melting into it. "What?"

"What if we're stopped?"

"You worry too much, Eve."

"Well?"

"If we're stopped, just do what I say."

"You always say that. It doesn't help."

"Well, I don't know what you want me to say. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't have all the answers. Stop pressuring me." She pushes Eve's hand away and turns her back to her.

Eve lies there, grinding her teeth. Right now, she would almost welcome arrest if it involved a square meal, and to hell with Villanelle and the future. She imagines a warm office, a steaming bowl of borscht, crusty brown bread, fruit juice, coffee... She's so knotted up with hunger and anxiety that she fails to realize that they've left the port area behind them.

The container truck's progress through the outskirts of St. Petersburg is painfully slow, and they feel every grinding gear change. When they finally come to rest, there's absolute silence. Then a thunderous vibration seizes the container and it tilts

sharply, so that everything inside slips downhill and banks up against the rear doors. Eve goes with it, and ends up with Villanelle's knee in her face. Hurriedly, arms and legs scrabbling, they drag the bales on top of themselves. Eve burrows so far down that she can feel the cold steel floor of the container beneath her. The cargo doors are likely to be opened at any moment, and her heart is beating so violently that she's afraid she's going to pass out.

With an agonized scraping, the container slides to the ground. Minutes pass, and then there's a muted clanking as the locking rods are released and the doors are swung open. Beneath the bales, Eve freezes, her jaw clenched and her eyes squeezed shut, so scared she can't think. The moment stretches out, but she can hear nothing. Vaguely, she becomes aware of one of Villanelle's arms lying across her back. And then, just meters away, something slams shut, a truck engine grumbles into life, and there's the distant screech of uncoiled gates.

For several minutes, neither of them moves. Then Eve feels the arm slither away, and the bales shifting. Even so, she remains frozen to the container floor, not daring to hope that they're alone. It's only when she hears Villanelle's voice that she opens her eyes and glances upward.

"Hey," Villanelle whispers, directing the beam of a red-light torch at her face. "It's OK. There's no one here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Come out."

Hesitantly, Eve feels her way to the open door of the container and looks around her. They are in the loading dock of a warehouse the size of a cathedral. Above them, strip lights suspended from rusting joists give off a sick, sulfurous glow. To the left are the dim outlines of the steel doors, now closed,

through which the container truck entered and exited. A razor-cut of light shows around a Judas gate let into one of the doors. Ahead of them, vanishing into the shadows, stand serried ranks of industrial garment rails, all holding wedding dresses. It looks like an army of ghostly brides.

Villanelle beckons and Eve follows. She stops after a few steps, dizzy and lightheaded from hunger.

“Are you OK?”

Eve stands there for a moment, swaying. “Just need to get my balance.”

Villanelle frowns and puts an arm around Eve’s waist to steady her.

“I’m fine now,” Eve says. “Let’s go.”

They walk the perimeter of the warehouse, but there’s no quick way out. There are a couple of steel fire doors, both immovably locked. The windows are out of reach, at least ten meters from the ground, and the skylight that runs the length of the building is even higher. A small office, accessible by a stairway, is suspended above the shop floor. They climb the stairs. The door is unlocked, and on the desk there are invoices and other documents indicating that the warehouse is owned by a company named Prekrasnaya Nevesta. Beautiful Bride. The desk also holds a cheap TeXet phone, and on the floor next to it is a large plastic lunch box.

“If there’s anything in there, go ahead and eat it,” Villanelle says. “I’m not hungry.”

She’s lying, obviously, but Eve snatches it up anyway. The only thing inside is a thermos. There is a hiss of escaping air as she opens it, and she immediately gags. Whatever is inside smells like a mixture of rotten fish and sewage.

“On second thought, don’t eat that.” Villanelle pulls on a pair

of the latex gloves that she always seems to carry around with her. “And don’t expect me to kiss you anytime soon if you do.”

“I can’t tell what the hell it even is,” Eve says, eyes watering as she fumbles with the lid.

Villanelle takes the thermos from Eve and peers inside, holding her nose. “I think it used to be *ukha*. But now it has evolved into something unholy.” She screws the lid back on and turns her attention to the phone, holding the power button until the screen lights up. It has one percent battery life left. Before it dies in her hands, Eve checks the time against her watch. Twenty to six.

“What time do you think people start working here?”

“I saw a punch clock by the entrance. Let’s go back down and look at the employees’ cards.”

It turns out that the first members of the workforce arrive at six, or shortly after. They have barely a quarter of an hour. “When they come in, we need to go,” Villanelle says. “If we try to stay hidden, we’ll definitely get caught.”

As Eve searches the container, removing any evidence of their stay—rucksacks, empty water bottles, food wrappings—Villanelle prowls round the warehouse, examining the ranks of wedding dresses. Massive electrical heaters mounted on wheels stand at intervals in the floor’s central aisle, and one of these particularly interests her. After a couple of minutes, she returns to the office, collects the thermos and the plastic liner from the waste bin, and directs Eve to a hiding place among the garment rails, about ten or twelve meters from the gate. “Wait here,” Villanelle says, passing her the rucksacks. “And don’t move until I tell you to.”

The minutes pass with agonizing slowness. Eve is terrified that people will arrive early, Villanelle will be caught out in the

open, and she will be discovered crouching among the wedding dresses. Eventually, however, Villanelle reappears beside her. "When I tell you to, run like hell for the gate," she tells her, as they put on their rucksacks. "Don't speak, don't look back, and stay close to me."

"That's the plan? Run like hell?"

"That's the plan. These are just factory workers. They'll be more scared of you than you are of them. They won't have any idea what's going on."

Eve looks at her doubtfully, and at that moment they hear the creak of the Judas gate opening. There's a murmur of voices, and a series of electronic clunks as the Prekrasnaya Nevesta employees begin to punch their time cards. Overhead lights flicker on, there's a whiff of cigarette smoke, and as unseen figures shuffle past their hiding place, the distance between the two of them and the gate seems to grow greater and greater. Don't freak out, Eve tells herself, trying to steady her breathing. This is just like running up Tottenham Court Road for a number 24 bus.

A series of vibrant rumblings announces that the heating units have been switched on. Tightening the straps of her backpack, Villanelle moves to a runner's crouch. "Get ready," she whispers, and Eve imitates her form, dry-mouthed with apprehension. The rumbling of the heaters becomes a whirr, and then there's a spattering sound, ragged screams, an outburst of swearing, and the sound of feet running past them toward the center of the warehouse. "Go!" Villanelle mouths, and sprints toward the warehouse entrance, her pack bouncing on her back.

Eve is there at her shoulder, running for that bus. Away to the right, she is aware of a confusion of shouting figures and angry faces swiveling toward them. Somehow they reach the Judas

gate. Villanelle swings it open, they leap through, and race over the rough, frozen ground toward a chain-link fence. Waiting for them at the exit is a security guard in a high-visibility jacket. He stretches out his arms in a tentative attempt to block them, and Villanelle whips her SIG Sauer from her jacket and points it at his face. He dives sideways, and Eve reaches past Villanelle for the latch of the exit gate and wrenches it open. Villanelle pushes through, dragging Eve after her, but Eve's foot twists on the frozen ground, and she falls heavily onto her hip. She tries to stand, but her ankle explodes with pain.

"Get up, Eve," Villanelle says with quiet urgency, as a shouting mob begins to pour out of the warehouse.

"I can't."

Villanelle looks down at her, her expression unreadable. "Sorry, baby," she says, and runs.

Within moments, Eve is surrounded. Everyone is arguing, swearing at her, staring at her, and shouting questions. She curls up in the fetal position on the ground, her knees drawn up to her chest and her eyes closed. She can feel her ankle swelling. It hurts like hell. This is the end.

"*Otkryvay glaza! Vstavay!*" Open your eyes! Stand up! A male voice, harsh and accusatory.

Eve squints upward. Angry faces against an iron-gray sky. The speaker is an older man with a shaven head and skull-like features. To his side is a woman, fortyish, with a spectrally pale complexion and discolored teeth, and a young guy with a spider's-web neck tattoo. Others, perhaps a dozen of them, mill around. They're wearing hoodies, overalls, and work boots. Their voices are strident, but most of them just look baffled.

"*Ty kto?*" Who are you?

Even doesn't answer. Perhaps, as Villanelle hoped, they'll

think she's mentally ill. That she's been driven by voices in her head to commit random acts of trespass and destruction. Perhaps, and this is admittedly a long shot, someone will take her to a hospital, from where she can contact the British authorities. Erratic behavior as a consequence of post-traumatic stress, she will suggest apologetically. She will be flown home and prescribed rest. Niko will take a lot of winning over, but sooner or later he will take her back, and forgive her. And then the Twelve will kill them both. Fuck.

"Ty kto?"

She stares back at skull-face, and he issues a series of directives. She is yanked to her feet, her rucksack is lifted from her back, and two of the women support her as she half walks, half hops back to the warehouse. The young man with the neck tattoo, meanwhile, speaks with quiet urgency into a mobile phone. Now that she is helpless, and wholly unable to control events, Eve discovers that she is no longer afraid.

The two women help her over the step and through the Judas gate, and she is immediately assaulted by a stomach-turning stench. It's everywhere, filling her nostrils, throat, and lungs, and it gets worse the further they proceed into the building.

"Zdes vonyayet," says one of the women, holding a headscarf over her nose, and even with her limited Russian, Eve knows what she is saying. It stinks.

In front of one of the fan heaters, everything has been sprayed with a fine mist of fermented *ukha*. The floor is slippery with it, as are the ceiling and light fittings, and a dozen of the most elaborate wedding dresses, formerly shell-pink, pearly white or ivory, are unromantically flecked with grayish-brown.

Villanelle's improvised diversion has proven shockingly effective. When she was setting it up, Eve was too tense to pay

much attention, but now she sees what she was up to. Having anticipated that one of the first things that the Prekrasnaya Nevesta workforce would do on arrival at the warehouse was to get the place warmed up, she packed the interior of one of the heating units with the foul-smelling contents of the thermos, neatly knotted into the plastic bin bag. The bag would have melted fast, and the fans would have done the rest. The heater in question has been turned off, but still emits a smell of burnt plastic and putrid fish.

Disgusting, but even as Eve gags at the stench, she recognizes the flair that drew her to pursue Villanelle in the first place. But now Villanelle is gone. Given the choice between rescuing Eve and saving herself, she legged it.

Of course she did. She's a psychopath, and Eve feels like a fool for ever thinking otherwise.

The two women lead Eve to the center of the warehouse floor, where skull-face is waiting, and a chair has been pulled up for her. Her rucksack is placed at her side. Eve is amazed at their civility and consideration, given the circumstances.

"*Ty kto?*" she is asked again, and again she stares back vacantly.

"*Kto ona takaya?*" Who is she? Skull-face points in the direction Villanelle went, and Eve frowns as if she doesn't understand the question, or who he's referring to.

"*Ona bolnaya na golovu,*" says the woman with the headscarf, and at the suggestion that she has mental health problems, Eve gazes at her piteously and, to her surprise, feels tears welling up in her eyes.

She leans forward in her face, buries her face in her hands, and squeezes her eyes shut. She gave up everything to run away with Villanelle, and now she is trapped in a country she barely knows, forced to use a language she barely speaks, fleeing

an enemy she can't begin to identify. Niko thinks she's dead, but the Twelve won't be so easily deceived. And now the only person who could have kept her safe has fucked off, too, leaving her behind to suffer the consequences of the mess Villanelle had gotten them into.

How long Eve remains in this self-pitying state, she doesn't know, but when she finally raises her head, the guy with the neck tattoo is lowering his phone. "Dasha Duzran is coming," he announces grimly. "She'll be here any minute."

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, Eve looks at the faces surrounding her. Whoever this Dasha is, her arrival is clearly not good news.

* * *

There are five of them. The four men are young, thuggish, and sharply dressed. They stop dead when they enter, pinch their noses, and glance at each other with disbelief. The woman ignores the smell and the milling employees, strides to the center of the warehouse floor, and looks about her. She is a terrifying sight, but almost comical in these surroundings. A black tracksuit zipped to her throat, the name Dasha embroidered across the left breast in gold thread. Cold, dark eyes outlined in smudged eyeliner. Graying hair, which has been pulled back into a bun and held in place with a scrunchie.

She beckons to the men. Two of them approach Eve, preceded by a dizzying gust of cologne. The first pulls her to her feet and subjects her to a disdainful body search, the second empties her rucksack on the floor and separates the Glock and the magazines from the crumpled food wrappings and dirty socks and panties. The woman glances at the handgun. Placing

her hands on her knees, she leans forward and stares at Eve thoughtfully. Then she slaps her.

Eve almost falls out of the chair. It's not the stinging force of the blow, it's the assumption that she's someone who can and should be hit that really shocks her. Eve gapes at Dasha, who slaps her again. "So what's your name, you rancid whore?" she asks. Russian insults can be colorful. Eve understands the gist of it, even if the exact words are lost on her.

Something shifts in her, and she remembers Villanelle's words. Her demand that Eve should be more like her. Villanelle wouldn't be slumped in a chair, tearfully waiting for the worst. She would be ignoring the fear, sucking up the pain, and planning her next move.

Eve has never hit anyone in her life. So when she propels herself from the chair and punches Dasha Duzran smack on the tip of her nose, she is almost as surprised as Dasha is. There's a biscuity crunch, blood jets from her nostrils, and she turns sharply away, clutching her face.

Everyone freezes, and the two men who searched Eve grab her arms. She is so high on adrenaline that she doesn't feel a thing. Even her ankle is anesthetized. Dasha is swearing vengefully, in a voice thick with blood and mucus. She issues a series of orders, and two of the warehouse employees slip away, one returning with a long coil of industrial twine, the other wheeling one of the tall, steel garment hangers.

The two men stand Eve in front of the hanger and bind her wrists behind her back with the twine, knotting it with practiced fingers. Eve's confidence wavers, and she isn't sure her bad ankle is going to go on supporting her for much longer. As her knees start to shake, the two men lift her by the armpits and stand her on the horizontal bar at the hanger's base, a foot

off the ground. Then she feels her wrists wrenched forcefully upward and suspended from the upper bar. She slumps forward, her arms vertical, pain knifing jaggedly through her neck and shoulders. She fights to retain her balance, knowing that if her feet slip off the bar, both of her shoulders will be wrenched out of their sockets, but her knees are gluey and her sprained ankle is on fire.

The pain gets worse, and becomes inseparable from the sound of her ragged breathing and choked back sobs. Dasha steps in front of her, so that all she can see of her is her white sneakers, now speckled with blood. Then someone hands Dasha a plastic bucket of water, and a moment later, Eve is drenched, and gasping at the icy shock. She jerks and writhes so violently that the garment hanger tips toward the floor. She is a split second from a smashed face when invisible hands catch the hanger and ease it back upright. There is no feeling in her arms and shoulders now. She has to fight to breathe, dragging the air into her constricted lungs. She's so cold she can't think.

There's a gunshot, shockingly loud, followed by a dimming of the lights and a pattering of falling glass. Then there's a meaty crack and a thump.

"Dasha Duzran, you old hag. I thought I recognized that shitty little mole on your face," Villanelle says in Russian, her voice deadly calm.

"Oksana?" Dasha's voice is thick and unsteady. "Oksana Astankova? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Get her down from there right now, or I'll blow your head off."

Eve is untied and assisted to a chair, where she sits with her head down, dripping and shaking with cold. Villanelle stands, legs apart, over the unconscious body of one of the thugs that

tied Eve to the garment rail. He's bleeding from a serious head wound inflicted with the butt of Villanelle's SIG Sauer, which is now pointed unwaveringly between Dasha's eyes.

"Send someone to get her some dry clothes," Villanelle orders, glancing at Eve, and Dasha gestures to a pale woman, who hurries nervously away, glass from the shot-out ceiling light crunching and snapping beneath her boots.

"Can you please explain to me what the fuck you're doing here?" Dasha asks Villanelle. "And put the gun away. We're both Butyrka graduates, after all. We can be civil with each other."

Slowly, Villanelle lowers her weapon.

Dasha points at Eve. "Is she yours?"

"Yes."

"Sorry if we were rough with her. But I have to ask you again, Astankova, what the fuck is going on? The owner of this business pays me to make sure there's no trouble here, and I get a call saying that two crazy women have broken in, damaged machinery, and destroyed hundreds of thousands of rubles worth of stock. I mean, what am I to do?"

"Don't be so dramatic," Villanelle says, waving the gun in her hand dismissively. "It smells much worse than it is."

The pale woman returns, and leads Eve away to a dingy women's toilet. She's found her a T-shirt, a grimy pink sweater, and a faded pair of overalls like those worn by the Prekrasnaya Nevesta employees. A filthy hand towel hangs on the back of the door. Gesturing vaguely at the clothes, the woman disappears. By the time Eve has changed into the dry clothing and limped back to the others, Villanelle and Dasha are talking and laughing together. Where the thug with the head wound was lying is now just a long blood smear. At Eve's approach, Villanelle and

Dasha look up.

"You look cute," Villanelle says in English. "Proletarian chic suits you."

"Yeah, yeah. You're hilarious. Did you happen to notice that your new best friend was torturing me just a few minutes ago?"

"Hey, she apologizes, she's really sorry about that. And she's an old friend, not a new one. We know each other from prison."

"Small world."

"It really is. Dasha was famous in Butyrka. Everyone called her 'Necksnapper.' Her father was a big-time gang leader in the *vorovskoy mir*. Even as an old man, he was so powerful in St. Petersburg that the prosecutors were scared to try Dasha in a local court, so they sent her all the way to Moscow. And her family still managed to fix everything."

"How wonderful for her."

"*Amerikanka?*" asks Dasha, flashing yellow teeth at Eve. "You are American?"

Eve ignores her. Her shoulder muscles are still in agony. "So why was she on trial?" she asks Villanelle in English. "What did she do?"

"Some guy got a little too friendly with her on the Metro."

Dasha says something in Russian.

"She says he was feeling her up, because she has a super-sexy body that men cannot resist. She was a world-class gymnast, once. Apparently she is still *extremely* flexible. This is all according to her. I'm just translating."

"On my bum," says Dasha. "So I..." She mimes taking the guy's head in her arms and violently twisting it. "His neck make sound like... *popkorn*."

"Jesus."

"I know, right?"

“Weren’t there witnesses?”

Dasha beams. “Yes, but my father speaked with them.” She switches back to Russia.

“She says it was her Me Too moment,” Villanelle explains.

"I guess you should start calling me Oksana in front of other people."

"That's too bad. I like Villanelle."

"I know. Cool name. But it's too dangerous to use right now."

"Isn't using your real name dangerous, too?"

"Not as dangerous. There are lots of Oksanas out there. I could be any of them. Anyway, no one will be looking for us here just yet. Raymond knows how much I despise Russia. He probably thinks I ran off to Cuba or something."

They are lying at opposite ends of a huge old enamel bath in Dasha's apartment. Tall windows overlook a broad highway from which the rumble and hiss of traffic and the clanking of trams are dimly audible. The hot water is bliss after their confinement in the container.

The apartment is on the third floor of a massive neoclassical block in an area called Avtovo. The building must once have been very grand, the sort of property where senior Communist Party officials and their families lived, but it has clearly been in decline for decades. The fittings are worn, the lift creaks, the plumbing clanks and grumbles.

"Look at the color of this bath water," Villanelle says, playing with Eve's toes.

"I know. Gross. I don't think we're actually getting any cleaner by sitting in it at this point."

Villanelle rubs a bar of soap along Eve's leg, then drops it to tickle the back of her knee.

"Quit it. What's the deal with Dasha, anyway?"

"What do you mean, what's the deal?"

"I mean, are we her guests, her prisoners...?"

"Dasha and I were in prison together, and under the criminal code, the *vorovskoy zakon*, we are sisters. Murder sisters. That means she has to help me. I told her I was a *torpedo*, a shooter, for a powerful family in Europe, and that I had to get out fast. She doesn't need to know more than that."

"And me?"

"She didn't ask about you."

"I'm just the *torpedo's* girlfriend?"

"You want me to say you worked for MI6? I told her what I had to tell her to get her to trust me, because right now, we need her. We need new identities, and she can take care of that. Or at least she's connected to people who can. We can stay here as long as we need to, she'll help us, and she won't give us up. But she'll also expect me to do something for her in return. Something big. So we have to wait and see what that something turns out to be."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing. Can we have some more hot water? It's getting cold at this end."

"There isn't any more hot water. What do you mean, nothing?"

"I mean you just, I don't know, hang out or whatever. Dasha knows you're just my woman. She won't involve you in any criminal stuff."

"Wow. That sounds... Shit. I don't know what it sounds like."

"Would you rather be a gangster, Eve?"

"I want to be with you, by your side. I didn't come all this way just to go shopping."

"I did. I'm going to make you look amazing."

"I'm serious, Villanelle. I'm not just your arm candy."

"Of course not. If anything, I'm yours."

Eve sends a wave of filthy bathwater towards Villanelle and tries to get her head comfortable against the taps. "What sort of criminal stuff is Dasha into?"

"The usual. Smuggling, credit cards, protection, drugs... Probably mostly drugs. Her father led a brigade for the Kupchino Bratva, which controls the St. Petersburg heroin trade, and when he died a couple years ago, she took over from him. It's almost unheard of for a woman to hold rank in the gangs, but she was already a fully initiated *vor*, and people respected her."

"I bet. She's a fucking sadist."

"Eve, you have to move on from this morning. See it from her point of view. That Prekrasnaya Nevesta warehouse pays her to protect them, and we did make a bit of a mess in there. Dasha had to show she was in charge of the situation."

"*You* made a mess. And she didn't have to torture me."

"She only tortured you a little."

"She would have tortured me a lot if you hadn't shown up. So thank you, I guess."

"You're welcome. And she was just doing her job. Why is it that when a woman is assertive in the workplace she's always seen as a bitch?"

"Good question."

"We expect men to torture and kill people, but when women

do it it's seen as violating gender norms. It's ridiculous."

"I know. Life isn't fair."

"It really isn't."

* * *

Dasha, Eve has to admit, takes very good care of them. The apartment is impersonal, and the room assigned to them has an unaired, unused feel to it. The windows, which are locked shut, have the thick, greenish look of bulletproof glass. But the bed is comfortable enough, and after breakfast, which is brought to them by a young woman who introduces herself as Kristina, they both fall asleep again.

When they wake, it's almost midday, and they're ravenous again. The apartment appears to be empty except for Kristina, who has clearly been waiting for them to surface. Handing each of them a warm, down-filled jacket, she leads them out the door, and they descend to the street in the shuddering lift. Eve's ankle is less swollen than it was, and although it's still sore, she can walk.

It's good to be in direct sunlight. The sky is dark azure blue, and the morning's snowfall has frozen, dusting the grimy, yellow-brown buildings with sparkling white. Lunch is *pelmeni* at a restaurant where the waitress greets Kristina warmly by name, and then they walk a short distance down Stachek Prospekt to a second-hand store in a converted cinema, the Kometa. The seats have been removed from the auditorium, which now holds rank after rank of clothing stalls. These offer everything from goth and punk fashions to old theatre costumes, military and police regalia, fetish-wear, and home-made jewelry. The place smells musty and cloying, as such

places always do, and to Eve, it's oddly poignant to wander down the aisles beneath the art deco chandeliers, picking through the tattered residue of other people's lives.

"In these clothes, you'll look as if you've lived in St. Petersburg forever, like subculture people," Kristina says. Tall and long-legged, with dark brown hair and a gentle, hesitant manner, she's an unlikely member of a gangster household. She doesn't speak often, and when she does, it's so quiet that they strain to hear her.

Villanelle gives Eve's waist a squeeze. "Reinvent yourself," she says. "Go crazy."

In this spirit, Eve makes a point of choosing things she'd never have considered in her former life. A midnight-blue velvet coat, its silk lining in tatters, its label identifying it as the property of the Mikhailovsky Theatre. A studded jacket painted with anarchist slogans. A sweater striped in black and yellow like a bee. It occurs to her that she's enjoying herself, something she has never felt while buying clothes before. Villanelle seems to be having a pretty good time, too. She's as ruthless out shopping as she is in every other area of life, not hesitating to rip a garment out of Eve's hands if she disapproves of her fashion choices—the studded jacket is the first to go—and pointing out a number of skimpy dresses and impossibly short skirts that Eve just rolls her eyes at.

A visit to a nearby hairdressing and nail salon completes their makeover. Kristina pays for everything from a large roll of cash given to her by Dasha for this purpose. In the salon, she sits quietly, staring into space. The stylist gives Eve a trim and a fringe, and chops Villanelle's long hair into a layered, shoulder-length bob. Eve's nails end up turquoise, Villanelle's black. When they're done, Kristina gives them a rare, shy smile.

“Now you look more like proper Russians,” she tells them.

Afterward, they take a taxi to Aviatorov Park. Kristina doesn’t tell them why she takes them there, though Eve suspects it’s the nearest thing to a tourist attraction that Avtovo has to offer. As the sky darkens, and flurries of new snow whirl around them, they mooch across the near-deserted park to a frozen lake girded by dark, skeletal trees. On the far shore, a Soviet monument stands on a promontory. A MiG fighter aircraft leaping into the sky, arrested at the moment of takeoff. Kristina indicates it perfunctorily before continuing on her ghostly way along the icy lakeside path. Only then does it occur to Eve that Kristina has been ordered to keep them away from the apartment for as long as possible, so Dasha can search their possessions and decide what to do about them. Which might include selling them out.

She asks Villanelle about this, but Villanelle is doubtful. “The only people who would be interested in me, in us, are the Twelve, and they operate at a much higher level than the Kupchino Bratva.”

“Dasha might have heard of them, though. She has access to all kinds of underworld information sources, doesn’t she?”

“I’m sure she does, but they wouldn’t lead her to the Twelve.”

“Suppose she did make the connection. Just for the sake of argument.”

“How would she even contact them? Send them a friend request on Facebook?”

Eve shrugs, not quite convinced.

“Look, Dasha didn’t get to be a brigadier in a *bratva* by being stupid. If she breaks the *vory* code or betrays me to the Twelve, or to anyone else, no one will ever trust her again. Also, I’d kill her. Maybe not immediately, but one day I’d come for her, and

she knows it.”

* * *

Days pass, and Eve begins to feel stronger. Her shoulders are still painful, especially in the mornings, and she can't walk far without her ankle protesting. But Dasha feeds them well, and the effects of living in a container on starvation rations are beginning to ebb. Villanelle runs every day, sometimes for two or three hours, and pushes herself through a rigorous exercise routine on her return. Eve spends this time trying to improve her Russian by reading Dasha's back issues of *Vogue* and listening to Radio Zenith, the local current affairs channel.

Eve is discovering that sleeping with Villanelle is different from sleeping with Niko. Where Niko's body was unambiguous, so familiar that it was part of her waking and sleeping, Villanelle's body is enigmatic. The more she explores it, the more mysterious it seems. Hard and soft, yielding and predatory. She draws Eve deeper and deeper. There are still times when she slides into an impenetrable silence, or pushes Eve away from her, tense with anger at some imagined slight, but mostly she's needy and tender. She's like a cat, yawning and stretching and purring, all lean muscle and sheathed claws. When they sleep, she clings to Eve as if she's afraid someone is going to snatch her away in the middle of the night.

Villanelle keeps the details about their departure from England vague, and is confident that Dasha believes her, more or less. She's asked Dasha about fixing them up with Russian interior passports and new identities. This appears to be possible, for a price.

What Villanelle hasn't yet raised with Dasha is the question

of Nadia Kadomtseya, currently languishing in Butyrka prison in Moscow. Personally, Eve would be happy to see her rot there forever. Not only is she Villanelle's ex, but Eve is also still more than a little resentful of the fact that Nadia recently tried to kill her. But Villanelle wants her out of there for some reason, and is planning to ask Dasha whether it might be possible, through her *vory* connections, to make this happen.

Eve tries not to let the idea of Nadia upset her, but Villanelle knows how inadequate Eve feels compared to her former lover, and misses no opportunity to drop references to Nadia's amazing physique, athleticism, and sexual virtuosity in order to make Eve prickly with jealousy. There's a rational part of Eve that knows Villanelle doesn't actually miss Nadia in the way that she claims to, and probably doesn't give her a moment's thought from one day to the next. But love is not rational, and for all of Villanelle's selfishness and cruel teasing, Eve has stopped pretending to herself that she is not falling in love with her.

She is still uncertain if Villanelle herself is capable of love in any traditional sense. When she was a graduate student, studying criminology and forensic psychology, she'd once attended a lecture given by a psychiatrist who was considered something of an expert on the subject of psychopathy. At one point, he'd polled the audience, asking them what came to mind when they thought of a psychopath. Most of those who raised their hands to respond described them as regular people, but with the addition of certain negative traits, such as violence, narcissism, and sadism. "Wrong," he'd said. "Don't add, take away. Everything that makes us human, just take it all away."

Villanelle claims she feels things when she's with Eve, and in her words and actions, Eve sometimes even believes this.

But Villanelle is a skilled mimic and a master manipulator who can make anyone believe anything she wishes them to. It's not hard to imagine that this version of Villanelle is purely an act, a character she's immersed herself in, one she will cast off once she grows bored with the play. And when that happens, as it inevitably will, what will become of Eve? She worries about this often when she is by herself during the day. At night, however, when she is lying with Villanelle in their shared bed, wrapped in darkness and dreams and the warm smell of her body, she finds it easier to believe that the affectionate words and intimate gestures are sincere.

* * *

A week after their arrival, Kristina directs them to a department store where there is a photo booth. When they return, Dasha takes the prints and tells them that they should have their Russian internal passports and other identity documents within the week. In total, for both Eve and Villanelle, the cost will be fifteen hundred U.S. dollars, which Villanelle pays immediately. There are cheaper versions available, Dasha says, but they are recognizable as forgeries. Eve is glad to see the money handed over, because she is beginning to feel uncomfortable about accepting Dasha's hospitality on an indefinite basis, *vory* or no *vory* code. She is also aware of Villanelle's increasing restlessness, which running and exercise cannot assuage. "I'm bored," she tells Eve, pacing the flat like a caged panther. "It is not good to spend this much time doing nothing. I can feel my brain rotting inside my skull."

After pocketing the cash for the documents, Dasha informs them that she's hosting a dinner at the apartment that evening.

Her boss is coming, his name is Asmat Dzabrati, and they are to address him as *Pakhan*, or leader. He is a hugely respected figure, apparently. A gangster boss of the old school, who in his younger days was known for dispatching rivals with an axe. With the Pakhan will be the gang's three other brigadiers, Dasha herself being the fourth. It's an important occasion, Dasha impresses on them, and she's anxious for it to go well. Kristina will lend them the appropriate clothes.

Villanelle is irritable this morning, and the session doesn't go well. She glances into Kristina's wardrobe, snatches a Saint Laurent tuxedo suit, holds it against herself, admires herself in the mirror, and walks out without a word.

Kristina watches her go. "Everything OK?"

"Oh... you know. She just doesn't know what to do with herself when she doesn't have something to keep her busy."

She smiles faintly. "I do know."

"Kristina?"

"Tina."

"Tina... are you and Dasha... together?"

"Yes. For a year now."

Eve stares at the array of dresses, not knowing where to start. "Do you love her?" she asks impulsively.

"Yes, and she loves me. One day we're going to move out of the city to a village in Karelia. Maybe adopt a dog."

"Good luck with that."

Tina takes a ruffled silk Bora Aksu dress from the rail, looks at it, and frowns. "You and your Oksana. You're going to live happily ever after, is that the plan?"

"Something like that."

She hands Eve the dress. "She's a killer, isn't she? A professional."

Eve holds her gaze. Listens to the sound of her own breathing.

"I can recognize them straight away. That look they have. Do you like the name Bobik? I've always wanted to call a dog that."

* * *

Asmat Dzabrati is one of the least remarkable men Eve has ever met. Short, with thinning hair and mild, rabbit eyes, he's the last of the evening's guests to arrive. His entrance is low-key, but he's immediately the center of attention. The Pakhan wields the kind of power that doesn't proclaim itself, but is evident in the demeanor of the others. As he is helped from his shabby overcoat, led to a chair, and furnished with a drink, the other guests enact an elaborately deferential dance, positioning themselves around him in hierarchical ranks. The inner circle consists of Dasha and the other brigadiers, then there's a cordon of bodyguards and foot soldiers, and finally the wives and girlfriends. Villanelle threads herself between these groups like a shark, never quite finding a resting place, while Eve drifts around the outer perimeter of scented, dressed-to-kill women, smilingly listening in on conversations, and moving on if there's any suggestion that she's expected to do more than nod in agreement. Neither makes any effort to approach the other. After picking out their clothes, they'd spent the rest of the morning bickering over every little thing until Villanelle stormed out into the cold shortly before lunchtime. She didn't return until an hour before the first guests were expected to arrive, and they've been avoiding each other ever since.

They are in the apartment's principal reception room. This is furnished with heavy grandeur and dominated by a spotlight portrait of Dasha lounging in a smoking jacket, holding a cigar.

Opposite the painting, between the tall windows overlooking Stachek Prospekt, an ice sculpture of the Russian president riding a bear drips on a sideboard. At the far end of the room, a white-jacketed steward with a bandaged head is serving drinks at a generously stocked bar. Eve recognizes him as the gang member Villanelle laid out cold in the warehouse. His colleagues mock him, slapping him condescendingly on the cheek as they collect their drinks, laughing at his idiocy in allowing himself to be hospitalized by a woman.

Eve takes a glass of pink Latvian champagne from the bandaged barman, who eyes her ruefully, and searches the crowd for Villanelle. She's deep in conversation with Dasha, and although she can't hear what either of them is saying, she can see the sly flash of Villanelle's eyes and Dasha's slow, complicit smile. They look at Eve and laugh, and although Eve is tempted to hurl her glass at them, she maintains a level gaze and sips the sweet, ice-cold champagne instead.

Tina materializes beside her. She looks elegant in gray chiffon, but out of place among the glittering Kupchino Bratva women, like a moth among fireflies. "They're so boring," she murmurs to Eve. "It's impossible to have an intelligent conversation with any of them. They only talk about three things: clothes, kids, and how to stop their men screwing around."

"Oh God. How dull."

"Exactly. They're endlessly telling me how the nanny's so lazy, how she spends her whole time stuffing herself from the fridge and WhatsApping her friends and ignoring little Dima or Nastya, and then they look at me pityingly like they've just remembered and say, 'But of course, you haven't got children, have you? Do you think you might have some if you meet the

right guy?’ And of course I have to be polite and play along, because Dasha would be angry if I was rude to them, but I want to say, ‘You know what, bitches? There is never going to be a “right guy,” so suck on that.’”

For Tina, this is quite a speech.

“Are you sure this whole *vorovskoy mir* is for you?” Eve asks her.

Tina gives her a weary smile. “I love Dasha, and this is her world, so I guess it has to be for me. How did you and Oksana meet?”

Eve is wary. Has Dasha instructed Tina to fish for information about them? But then she drains her champagne glass and looks Tina in the eye, and she’s so transparently guileless, and Eve so badly needs an ally, that she’s almost tempted to tell her the truth.

She doesn’t, though.

Clapping her hands to announce that dinner is served, Dasha squires the Pakhan out of the room. The rest of the guests follow the two of them at a sedate pace into an ornate dining room, where a long table has been set for twenty. A crystal chandelier sends out rainbow spikes of light, the air is heavy with the scent of lilies, and along the center of the table, framed by gold cutlery and glassware, a glazed sturgeon is laid out like a corpse. Place cards indicate where everyone should sit, and the protocol is strict. The Pakhan occupies the place of honor, flanked by Dasha and another brigadier, the soldiers are arranged on either side of them, and the women cluster around the table ends.

Villanelle, looking fabulous in the tuxedo suit, has been placed between two of the soldiers, and Eve watches as her eyes narrow with anger as she realizes she has not been seated among the

Kupchino Bratva elite. Eve has learned the hard way just how badly she reacts to any perceived disrespect. Something flips in her. Possessed by the need to reassert control over the situation, she's capable of the most lacerating viciousness. Eve watches as one of the men tries to converse with her and is icily ignored. Eve could have told him not to bother. When Villanelle is like this, she's impossible.

"So, which is your man?" asks the woman seated on Eve's left, as a selection of blinis, salads, and caviar is brought to the table, along with silver trays of vodka in shot glasses. A glance at her place card tells Eve that her name is Angelina. She has nervous eyes and hair the color of burnt caramel.

"Oksana," she tells her. "Over there, in the black suit."

Angelina regards Eve uncertainly for a moment. "Pavel," she says, nodding to one of the men whom Villanelle is studiously ignoring. "My husband. He's a *boyevik*. One of Dasha's crew."

"How does he feel about working for a woman?"

"He says he doesn't mind, because she's clever like a man."

"And what do you do?" Eve asks, piling caviar onto a blini.

"What do you mean, do?"

"Like do you work, or...?"

"I put up with Pavel and all his bullshit precisely so I don't have to work." She glances downwards at her cleavage, which has been sprinkled with tiny gold stars. "That's why all of us are married to these *bratva* guys. They're wealthy. Not Forbes Rich List wealthy, but, you know, comfortable. So where do you come from? Your Russian is, like, really weird."

"I'm from Canada," Eve lies. "It's a long story."

"And this Oksana, you're friends, or...?"

"Partners."

"Business partners?"

“We’re fucking.”

Her face goes blank for a moment, then she brightens. “That’s a really beautiful dress, where did you buy it?”

Eve is saved from answering by Dasha, who stands, raises her glass, and proposes an elaborate toast to the Pakhan. “Long life and good health to the father of our *bratva*,” she concludes. “Death to our enemies. Strength and honor to our fatherland.”

The Pakhan blinks, smiles his rabbity smile, and touches his shot glass to his lips.

“I’d also like to welcome my sister, Oksana,” Dasha continues. “We holidayed together in Butyrka, once upon a time. And believe me, friends, she was one tough bitch. I once saw her try to tear a girl’s throat out with her teeth. She spent a long time in the hole for that one.”

Villanelle bows, grins, and raises her glass to Dasha. “From one tough bitch to another, *spasibo*.”

At this point, Dasha brings Eve into the conversation. “You and Oksana had quite a journey, didn’t you? The Baltic container route can be quite cold, I believe?”

A polite silence descends on the table, and nineteen faces turn toward Eve. She forces a smile, and suddenly unconfident in her Russian, attempts to explain that she spent the entire week shivering.

Dasha’s eyes widen with shock, and she starts to laugh. Everyone else joins in, even the Pakhan. The men stare at Eve and at each other, spluttering as they repeat her words, and Dasha has tears running down her cheeks. The laughter goes on and on, as Eve looks desperately from face to face. Even Tina is smiling. “Don’t worry,” one of the brigadiers says, wiping his eyes with his napkin. “You’re among friends. Your secret’s safe with us.” Only Villanelle is not laughing, but even she is

grinning as she looks down at her plate.

The meal seems to go on forever. Endless courses of soup, baked meat, ash-roasted beetroot, sturgeon with porcini mushrooms, dumplings and pastries. And vodka, glass after tiny glass of it. Citrus vodka, cardamom vodka, raspberry, pepper, and bison grass vodka. Every couple of minutes, someone proposes a toast. To companionship, loyalty, honor, the *vory* life, beautiful women, absent friends, and death. Eve tries to sip discreetly rather than swig, but she is soon hopelessly, wretchedly drunk. Time slows to a ticking standstill. The conversation and laughter rise and fall, the room swims in and out of focus. Angelina and others attempt conversation, but give up when they discover that Eve can only manage slurred and simplistic responses. From time to time, she glances over at Villanelle, but she is making a point of avoiding her gaze, and conversing animatedly and flirtatiously with everyone around her. Eve wonders what she has done to offend her. The briefest complicit smile or sympathetic glance would turn the evening around for her, but none is forthcoming. Instead, Villanelle's eyes slide over her as if she's simply not there.

Finally, mercifully, the last toast has been drunk. *Na pososhok*, one for the road. Everyone stands, and the Pakhan is escorted from the dining room by his bodyguards. Standing at the door, Eve watches the guests file past. Some smile at her, some shake hands; one or two of the women, clearly as drunk as she is, embrace her like old friends. As Villanelle passes, her face is stone.

The apartment empties, leaving Dasha, Tina, and Villanelle standing in front of the glassy remains of the ice sculpture. "Go to bed," Villanelle orders Eve as she approaches. "Dasha and I need to talk."

“Planning another torture session?” Eve asks, and Dasha has the grace to look uncomfortable. “Can I just say, I’ve had the loveliest evening. The food was divine and your friends are delightful. I particularly liked the Pakhan. He’s a riot.”

“Eve, please,” Villanelle murmurs. “Haven’t you embarrassed yourself enough tonight? Do us all a favor and fuck off.”

Eve obeys, mostly because she is too drunk and hurt to form a coherent response. She picks her way carefully through the thick silence to the bedroom. There, she sits on the edge of the bed for several minutes, listening to the thudding of her pulse as the vodka creeps through her system. Drawing back a curtain, she watches as a tram rumbles laboriously down the street, sparks intermittently cascading from its overhead cable. Then she kicks off her shoes and pulls off her dress, leaving it in a crumpled heap on the floor, before crawling into bed in only her undergarments. She stares at the ceiling, tilting and spinning above her, until she drifts off into a fitful slumber.

She wakes to the sound of the door closing behind Villanelle as she enters the room. She sits on the bed, reaches out a hand, and strokes Eve’s hair. Eve slaps her hand away, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and sitting bolt upright.

“You looked very sexy in that dress tonight.”

Eve ignores her, stands up, and strides toward the door, although she has no clothes on and no real idea where she’s going. Villanelle jumps off the other side of the bed, bounds across the room, and blocks her path. Eve tries to shove past her, but Villanelle is faster, and she grabs Eve by the shoulders and pins her back against the wall.

“Let go of me,” says Eve, spitting the words in her face.

“Why? Where are you going, dressed like that?”

“Anywhere but here. I’m tired of this. You don’t get to ignore

me all night except to order me around like a dog and tell me to ‘fuck off,’ and then just come in here acting like nothing even happened. I don’t even want to be in the same room as you right now.” She tries to squirm free, but Villanelle is too strong.

“Eve, stop. Why are you being like this?”

“Why are *you*?”

“What exactly do you want from me?”

“I want you act like a decent fucking human being.”

Villanelle narrows her eyes and leans in until their noses are almost touching. “As opposed to what?”

“Someone who can’t deal with the fact that you have, right in front of you, a real living, breathing person who has given up everything for you. *Everything*.”

“Don’t forget, I gave up everything, too, Eve.” She releases her and takes a step back.

They stand there for a moment, neither of them moving, just breathing. Then Eve’s shoulders sag, and she slumps against the wall. “I need you, Villanelle. I left my whole life behind and came all this way just to be with you. Just... stop shutting me out.”

Villanelle tilts Eve’s chin up until their eyes meet, and slowly traces her face with her forefinger. Across her eyebrows, down her cheekbone, and between her lips.

“Come on,” she says. Taking Eve’s hand, she leads her back to the bed, then strips out of her clothes, folding them carefully and putting them on a chair before lying down next to her.

“You’re still a dick,” Eve whispers, taking Villanelle’s hands in hers.

“You’re kind of a dick, too. You could just talk to me, you know. Without being all dramatic about it.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

"Me too." She looks at Eve gravely. "Tomorrow, we will sit down and plan. Together. Dasha is getting us passports and money, but I have to do something for her. *We* have to do something for her."

"What do we have to do?"

"Can we talk about it tomorrow?" She pulls Eve toward her. "Because right now I have other things in mind."

"Really? What sort of things?"

"Just... things."

"I'm very drunk."

"I noticed. Me too. But not that drunk."

An hour later, Eve is almost asleep when a thought occurs to her. "Villanelle?"

"Mmm?"

"What was so funny at dinner? When I said I spent the whole week shivering?"

"Your Russian. Shivering is *drozhala*, and you said *drochila*."

"What does *drochila* mean?"

"Masturbating."

"Oh." Then, a few minutes later, "Villanelle?"

"What now?"

"Did you really try to tear someone's throat out with your teeth?"

"Dasha was embellishing a little. It was just her jugular. And she attacked me first."

"Villanelle?"

"Eve, please shut up and go to sleep."

"What did Dasha ask you to do?"

"You really need to know right this second?"

"I really do."

"She asked me to kill the Pakhan."

5

The next fortnight passes swiftly, and for the first time since they left London, Villanelle feels calm and focused. She's naturally secretive, an archetypal lone wolf, and planning an assassination with Eve is not easy for her. She suspects it is even less easy for Eve, for whom murder is still murder, even if the intended victim is a horrible person like the Pakhan. But they've both kept going. She has begun to share her thoughts with Eve, who seems to be doing her best to put aside what Villanelle is calling her "civilian guilt," and is concentrating on practicalities and logistics, which she is proving to be quite good at.

Villanelle is trying to make their collaboration work, and more than that, to make their relationship work, even though she is decidedly out of her element. She has no instinct directing her here. She knows how to excite, manipulate, and hurt people, but despite the fact that they've lived in each other's pockets for the best part of a month, she still finds Eve's feelings difficult to read. Eve does not make it easy. She shows her emotions in extremes, or not at all. To Villanelle, who habitually studies the most minute details of other people's facial expressions so she can absorb them into her repertoire and wear them as a mask, Eve is a frustrating enigma. She feels as if she has her

nose pressed against the glass separating them, eternally out in the cold, trying to look in.

Asmat Dzabrati, the Pakhan, is sixty-nine years old. He lives in an apartment in a massive, gray, seventeen-story building on Malaya Balkanskaya Ulitsa, near Kupchino Metro station. He owns several apartments there, which are occupied by, among others, his four bodyguards, his ex-wife Yelena, and his sister Rushana and her husband. He also leases a small apartment behind the Fruzensky department store, a short drive away, where he keeps his “sugar baby,” a twenty-four-year-old Ukrainian woman named Zoya whom he met through an introduction agency. His family and Yelena disapprove of this relationship, and refuse to acknowledge Zoya, so she never visits the Malaya Balkanskaya building.

The Pakhan’s regular ports of call are Zoya’s apartment, a clinic in Nevsky Prospekt where Zoya goes for lip injections and he for rejuvenation treatments, and the Elizarova bathhouse in Proletarskaya. Meetings with the Kupchino Bratva brigadiers are either conducted at an Ossetian restaurant named Zarina, where a private room is reserved for the Pakhan and his guests, or at the bathhouse. Occasionally, Dzabrati also entertains at home, with Rushana acting as hostess to gang members and their families. At intervals, he visits his cardiologist at a private clinic in the city center. He has a heart condition, believed to be atrial fibrillation, for which he takes Digoxin tablets.

This information has been provided by Dasha, and Villanelle has mounted surveillance operations to confirm it. She involves Eve in some of these, but always at a distance. Mostly she prefers Eve to remain safely ensconced in the apartment on Stachek Prospekt, collating and processing information. She knows Eve would like to be out there with her, but she is afraid Eve

will get lost or attract attention in some way. Eve has a terrible sense of direction and, while her Korean features might not be much of an issue in the Russian Far East, it is harder for her to blend into a crowd in St. Petersburg.

So Villanelle goes alone, which is what she's used to anyway. On a couple of occasions, she leaves for over twenty-four hours at a stretch, returning cold, hungry, and dog-tired. At these times, Eve doesn't even try to talk to her, at least not before she's had a bath, some food, and few hours of sleep.

All the intelligence they acquire goes into a file, which they scour continuously for recurring patterns. So far they've found none. For all his old-school leadership style, the Pakhan is wary as a fox, and well versed in counter-surveillance. Arrangements and appointments are invariably made at the last minute, decoy cars are used, and his drivers always vary the routes he travels. As far as they can discover, he never uses public transport.

They are looking for cracks in this facade. Vulnerabilities that they can exploit. Eve seems to view the operation as an intellectual exercise, much like her work for MI5. Villanelle doesn't appreciate Eve's single-minded focus on the task at hand as much as she probably should, primarily because she would rather be the sole focus of Eve's investigative pursuits, and right now she is feeling neglected.

"Why don't you take a break? Maybe have a bath?" she says, as Eve pulls back her hair and stares at the wall on which she's hung pictures of the Pakhan and his inner circle. "I'll run one. We can get in together."

"Not until we've figured this out," Eve says absentmindedly.

Villanelle sulks and throws herself onto a dusty velveteen armchair, legs draped over the side, one arm hanging off the edge so that her fingers brush the floor. It's all well and good

to lose *herself* in the planning stages of a job for days on end, but when Eve does it, and hardly pays any attention to her, it stings a bit.

"Has Dasha told you exactly why she wants the Pakhan eliminated?" Eve asks, finally remembering Villanelle exists.

"She doesn't need to."

"She wants to run the *bratva*?"

"She sees that he's weakening. Getting older, losing his grip. So she has to make her move, because if she doesn't, one of the others will. That's how it works."

"And then what happens?"

"As soon as the Pakhan is dead, Dasha calls a meeting of the other brigadiers and announces that she's in charge. No one will say out loud that she was responsible for killing him, but everyone will know it, and they'll also know that if they give her any shit, she'll kill them, too."

"Will it be a problem that she's a woman?"

"It shouldn't be, but it will be. Women are very poorly represented in the field of Russian organized crime. Dasha told me the statistics and they're horrifying."

"So we're—"

"Yes, Eve, we're doing a good thing here."

Eve doesn't look convinced.

"Hey. If we don't kill him, someone else will. So we might as well do it for Dasha, get our papers and money, and disappear. We can't stay here forever. Someone will come looking for us in Russia eventually, and it's better if we're gone by the time they do."

Eve nods, flips through a stack of photos, pulls out several of Dzabrati's apartment building and other locations frequented by their target. "Are you sure we can't get into his building?"

Villanelle shrugs. "I can get into anywhere. It's getting in and out without making a mess that's the problem. There's a *boyevik* at the street entrance and another on the floor where Dzabrati and his people live, and he's never alone in his apartment. He always has a bodyguard. Plus family members, kids... Too much collateral damage."

"OK. What about Zoya's place?"

"Better. He's there a few days a week. A bodyguard takes him up to the apartment, but he waits outside while Dzabrati does whatever it is he does to her."

"Ugh. I don't even want to think about that. He's what, forty-five years older than her?"

"I never would have expected you to be so judgmental about age gaps, Eve."

"Oh, shut up. Fifteen years is nothing compared to that."

"It certainly doesn't bother me. Anyway, poverty sucks, Eve. Trust me, I've been there. This way she gets a flat and thousands of dollars every month. And instead of working as a cleaner or a cam-girl in some shithole in Ukraine, she gets to spend every day getting beauty treatments and buying nice clothes."

"Yeah. Except she has to have sex with that creepy old bastard whenever he feels like it. And I don't even want to imagine what kind of fucked up stuff he's into."

"He looks like a rabbit. I bet he has her do crazy things with a carrot," she says with a smirk. "Actually, I doubt he's into anything too exciting. He's got that heart thing. And if she's smart, she'll be able to control him. I once knew this girl who had a rich sugar daddy. He gave her everything: money, clothes, holidays... And he never even touched her. She just had to use some sex toys while he watched, and that was it. She always said she'd have been doing that stuff anyway."

“Still gross.”

“Is it only gross because he paid her for it? Because she let me watch for free, and it was actually very sexy.”

Eve just rolls her eyes, trying not to give Villanelle the satisfaction of knowing if she has made her jealous.

“I asked Dasha to ask around about Nadia, by the way,” Villanelle says, hoping this will get more of a reaction.

Eve doesn’t answer, but from the way she stiffens her shoulders and fixes her gaze on a photo of Dzabrati’s ugly daughter, who is really not worth looking at at all, let alone that closely, Villanelle knows she’s gotten to her.

“Apparently she’s been released from Butyrka for lack of evidence. Her case isn’t going to court anymore.”

“Well, whoopee for Russia’s incorruptible justice system. Are you going to get in touch with her?”

“No. Why would I do that?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who’s always going on about her.”

“Don’t be jealous,” she says, even though that was the whole point. She suddenly remembers she is supposed to be working on being less of an asshole, and softens her voice. “I wasn’t with her when I was with her, you know. It didn’t mean anything. Not like what we have.”

Eve huffs. “And what’s that?”

“An intellectual connection, for one thing. Nadia is not very smart. And she has terrible taste. I remember when we were in Venice, having dinner at our hotel, and I ordered us the lobster risotto, which was the *specialità della casa*. When the sommelier asked us what wine we’d like, Nadia said she wanted Baileys Irish Cream. I could taste it on her tongue when we were kissing later. It was so gross, Eve.”

"Thanks for that little detail. And I'm sorry to disappoint, but my food and wine tastes aren't terribly sophisticated, either."

"That's OK. I can teach you to appreciate the finer things in life. We'll start with the basics. You like pizza, right? We should go to Hank's, in Paris. That's where the best pizza in the world is made."

"Let's try to focus. Back to Zoya's place. Getting inside the apartment when the Pakhan is there would be hard. The door's reinforced, and there's a high-def security camera on it. There's no way he'd let Zoya buzz a stranger in."

Villanelle nods. "It would be much easier to shoot him and his bodyguard inside the building but outside the apartment, in one of the public areas."

"How would you get into the building?"

"There's a man living on the second floor who teaches at one of the universities and is sleeping with one of his students, so I could—stop judging, Eve. I can see it on your face. You're such a prude. I don't know how I ever got you into bed."

"You didn't 'get' me into bed."

"Oh, I didn't?"

"I jumped. I wasn't pushed."

"Is that right? Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted..."

"You interrupted yourself!"

"There you go, doing it again. *Anyway*, I could pretend to be a friend of hers with an urgent message for him. That would get me inside. Then I could deal with him and go from there. Not ideal, but it's possible."

"The restaurant?"

"Again, possible. I could walk in, shoot him and a couple of bodyguards in the face before anyone reacts, and get out fast."

But it's always crowded. Too messy, and too many witnesses. Plus there's CCTV everywhere."

"So, no good," Eve says.

"No good," Villanelle agrees. "We need a solution that doesn't involve killing the bodyguards or any of the other soldiers. Dasha will never be able to keep the gang's loyalty if they know she's responsible for killing their brothers. So we need to get him alone and eliminate him without any witnesses."

"He's alone in the *banya*, we know that. And defenseless."

"The problem is getting in. On the days he goes, it's men only, and it's almost impossible to do drag convincingly when at most you are wearing a towel."

"There must be a way in."

Villanelle frowns. "I spent hours in there on one of the women's days. I know the layout of the entire place. I checked out cupboards, ceiling cavities, ventilation ducts, everything like that, and there's literally nowhere to hide. And there are customers everywhere."

"Naked guys with towels around their waists?"

"Well, women on the day I was there. But yeah."

"So no way to bring a gun in."

"You'd be surprised how many places there are to hide a weapon on or in a naked human body, actually. But yes, I'd rather not go that route if we can avoid it. It's very uncomfortable."

"I've never actually been to a bathhouse. What's the routine?"

"You go in through the street entrance, pay your money at the ticket desk, and go into a big changing room with lockers, where you leave your clothes and they give you a towel. Then you go through to the steam rooms. They have fireboxes in them, like giant ovens with hot rocks inside, and wooden benches along

the walls where you sit. There's a bucket that you fill from a tap and pour into the firebox through a hole to make steam, which raises the heat."

"Like a sauna?"

"Yes. Except everything's bigger. And it's more sociable than a European sauna, where everyone just sits there silently and pretends not to check each other out. After the steam rooms, there's a cooling-off room with steel pillars and marble slabs where you can get a massage, and people smack each other with birch twigs, which is supposed to be good for the circulation."

"I thought you said he'd be alone in there."

"I'm getting to that part. There's a room with a small plunge pool."

"Hot or cold?"

"Cold. You go there from the steam room."

"How big is it?"

"It's just for one person. About a meter and a half deep."

"That sounds promising. What else does the place have?"

"There's a tea room with a samovar. You can get cakes and blinis and stuff."

"Good quality?"

"Pretty good."

"What did you have?"

"A slice of Napoleon cake."

"Just one slice?"

"OK, two."

"So you wouldn't necessarily mind going back there? And taking me?"

"No. But since we're never going to get in there on a men's day, I don't see the point."

"Bear with me, OK? I've got an idea."

“What is it?”

So Eve tells her. Villanelle listens, interrupting occasionally to ask for clarification or to make a suggestion, then wanders over to the window, where she stands deep in thought, drumming her fingers on the side of her leg as she runs through the plan again in her head.

“What do you think?” Eve asks.

She turns around. “It could work. If Dasha can get us everything we need.”

“But?”

“But it would take both of us. You’d have to be part of it. So...”

“So?”

“Are you willing to be an accomplice to murder?”

“Isn’t that what I am already?”

“It’s not the same as actually being there when it happens.”

“I’m willing to do whatever it takes for us to survive.”

Villanelle stares at Eve, searching for any flicker of doubt or hesitation, but Eve’s expression is blank. “OK, then.”

* * *

It’s Monday, nine days later, and Dasha has just learned that the Pakhan has ordered his driver to take him from the apartment on Malaya Balkanskaya directly to the Elizarova *banya*. This works well for Villanelle and Eve. They have everything they need in place, and it’s already snowing heavily this afternoon, which will compromise the effectiveness of the CCTV cameras in the streets surrounding the bathhouse.

At midday, they leave the apartment for Kupchino station, and take the Metro two stops northwards to Moskovskaya. Their vehicle is waiting for them outside Alfa Bank, as agreed.

It's a Gazelle ambulance, about ten years old, with the interior fixtures stripped out but with emergency lights and siren still in place. According to Dasha, "ambulance-taxis" like this one are regularly hired by wealthy business types who want to beat St. Petersburg's traffic jams and get to meetings on time. With their sirens blaring and their lights blazing, they can thread their way through the worst gridlocks.

They both pull on latex gloves, and Villanelle takes the keys from the top of the rear wheel, where the owner has left them, and opens the Gazelle. After checking the equipment, they change into official blue ambulance-crew uniforms, and pull on wigs and cotton caps. Villanelle's wig is a garish henna-red; Eve's, peroxide blonde. Villanelle drives. They've left themselves plenty of time, so she takes the slow lane on the eastbound motorway, impassively negotiating the busy traffic. She radiates calm, her eyes betraying nothing except anticipation.

Eve, on the other hand, is all over the place. One moment she is intensely focused, with her surroundings vibrant and pin-sharp. The next, everything is flat and two-dimensional, and she's so distanced from events, it's as if her life is being lived by someone else.

They are in position by quarter to two. Villanelle parks in the narrow street that runs alongside the Elizarova *banya*, thirty meters from the entrance, and they put their feet up on the dashboard and wait for the Pakhan's arrival. Eve's heart is slamming in her chest, and she feels weightless and nauseated.

He arrives just two minutes before two o'clock, climbing from a black Mercedes SUV, and Eve switches on a phone provided by Dasha and uses it to access the app controlling the microcamera that they had planted in the bathhouse three days prior. The

motion-activated camera is the size of a thumbnail, and it is held in place by a blob of chewing gum the size of a cherry stone.

To Eve's horror, she gets a low-battery warning on the phone. Three percent charge remaining. She tells Villanelle, her heart sinking. Villanelle doesn't waste time getting angry with her for forgetting to charge it, but just nods, all focus. The seconds and minutes crawl past, agonizingly slowly. Two percent battery charge left. The Pakhan will not visit the plunge pool, where the camera is hidden, until he has been through all the steam rooms. Eve touches the app icon, and a grainy image of the pool fills the phone screen. There's someone in the pool, a big guy, wallowing like a whale, and definitely not the Pakhan. He hauls himself out and vanishes. His place is taken by two older men who descend the ladder one by one, briefly immerse themselves, and leave.

There's now one percent of the battery charge remaining, and the pool is empty. Another few minutes and the phone will die. Eve feels sick with dread. Fear of getting caught if the whole plan falls apart has eclipsed all other thoughts. They stare at the tiny screen. Villanelle's breathing is steady. Her wig, which smells of ancient sweat, tickles Eve's cheek. A figure enters the microcamera's field at the same moment that the screen goes black.

"Go," says Villanelle, grabbing the first-aid pack and the medication bag. "Go, go, go."

Eve takes a firm grip on the defibrillator unit. It's the monophasic type, at least twenty years old, and heavy. Villanelle pushes open the side of door of the Gazelle, they hit the pavement running, and seconds later burst through the entrance of the *banya*. Instinctively, Eve pulls the brim of her cap down

and ducks her head, trying to hide her face, and especially her eyes, as much as possible. There are two male reception staff sitting at a desk behind a low pile of folded towels. Seeing the women enter, they half-rise, and Villanelle yells at them to stay where they are. They look uncertain, but the uniforms represent officialdom, and they obey.

Villanelle leads the way, marching briskly through the changing room, ignoring the half-naked figures who freeze with surprise at the intrusion, and into the wet-floored steam rooms. There, again, everyone stares and no one moves. The choking heat makes Eve's scalp run with sweat. Villanelle leads the way into the cold plunge area, and there's the Pakhan, alone and naked, submerged up to his chest in the small marble pool. He has an impressive range of faded tattoos, including a knife through his neck, eight-pointed stars on his collarbones, and epaulets on his shoulders.

"Are you all right?" Eve asks him breathlessly. "We had a 112 call."

He gapes at her, struggling to understand both the situation and her shaky Russian. Villanelle, meanwhile, drops everything she's carrying, and attends to the defibrillator.

"I'm fine," the Pakhan says, smiling. "There's been some mistake."

"Our apologies," Villanelle murmurs, and touches the defibrillator paddles to the surface of the water. The Pakhan shudders, his eyes widen, and he slips sideways onto his back, his legs trailing underwater. His face turns the color of putty, and his lips bluish-gray. His fingers twitch and grasp feebly at the water. His hands, Eve notices, are quite small for a man who has killed several people with an axe.

"Bit more?" she suggests.

“Stand back,” Villanelle says, and gives him another jolt of electricity.

Still Dzabrati doesn’t die. Instead, he lies there open-mouthed, pillowed by water, staring at Eve sadly, as if disappointed by her choice of wig.

Villanelle kneels, taking Eve’s wrist with one hand to steady herself, and holds his head underwater with the other until the bubbles stop coming. It’s nothing much. She doesn’t even have to push very hard.

She is still kneeling there when, with a wet slap of plastic sandals, the two reception staff arrive. “I think he’s had a heart attack,” Villanelle explains. “We’re trying to get him out. Can you help?”

One of the men descends the ladder into the water, and between them, they manhandle the Pakhan’s naked body onto the tiled floor. As they do so, Villanelle discreetly reaches up and removes the microcamera from the top of the door frame. Kneeling beside the wet body of the Pakhan, Eve goes through the motions of attempting cardiopulmonary resuscitation. To no one’s surprise, it doesn’t work.

An hour later, Eve and Villanelle are walking away from the ambulance, which they’ve left outside Alfa Bank in Moskovskaya, where they found it. They are back in their own clothes. The ambulance service uniforms, the wigs, and the medical equipment have been tossed into the back of one of the city’s garbage trucks, and are now on their way to a landfill site.

“I’m sorry about the phone...” Eve begins, but Villanelle is in an affectionate, lighthearted mood.

“You were so good!” she says, slipping her arm through Eve’s and dancing them down Moskovsky Avenue toward the Metro.

"I was afraid you were going to freak out and throw up in the pool or something, but you didn't. I'm so proud of you!"

Deciding that she's hungry, Villanelle steers them into a half-empty McDonald's, where they order Happy Meals. "People think that there's this hard border between life and death," she says, cramming fries into her mouth. "But it's not like that at all. There's this whole area in between. It's fascinating."

Eve unwraps her burger. "Did Dasha say when she could get us the papers and the money?"

"Yes. This week."

"So do we have a plan?"

"Of course we do."

"What is it?"

"You have to trust me."

"No, you have to trust me. No more shutting me out, remember?"

"OK, well... Can we talk about it later?"

"Why not now?"

Eve feels a hand slip under her shirt, and fingers tweaking her waist.

"That's not an answer. And stop pinching my muffin top."

"You don't have a muffin top. That's why I brought you to McDonald's. To fatten you up."

"And here I thought you just wanted a toy."

"I did, but not this one. I don't even know what this is." She throws it, along with her food wrappers and crumpled napkins, into her empty Happy Meal box. "Come on. Let's go back to the apartment."

"Why?"

"You know why."

Eve furrows her brow. "Did what we do in the *banya* turn

you on?"

"No, of course not. You did."

Before Eve can respond, half a dozen blue-uniformed *Politsiya* officers swagger in, give a cursory glance around the restaurant, and start eyeing up the women at the serving counter. "Don't look at them," murmurs Villanelle, surreptitiously sliding her hand from under Eve's sweater, and Eve transfers her gaze to a copy of *Izvestia* that someone left on the table. The lead story is about the upcoming New Year summit talks in Moscow between the Russian and U.S. presidents.

One of the cops saunters over. "Afternoon off work?" He's a mean-looking type with a bad shaving rash.

"Tourists," says Villanelle in English. "*Ne govorim po Russki.*" Her accent is comically awful.

"*Vy amerikanki?*"

"*Da.*"

"*Pasport?*"

"At the hotel. Four Seasons. *Sozhaleyu.* Sorry."

He nods and joins the others.

"Shit," Villanelle whispers. "We shouldn't have come in here. I think they bought the tourist story, but that could have ended badly. We've got to be more careful."

The *Politsiya* officers mill around for a few minutes, attempt desultory banter with the female staff, pull out their phones to take selfies, and leave.

"What were they doing in here?" Villanelle mutters. "Why were they taking those photos? Did you notice that they didn't get any food? Or even a drink?"

"They were just getting in out of the cold for a minute, and checking out the girls."

"Maybe. I hope so."

They don't step back outside until Villanelle is satisfied that the cops have moved on.

Eve links her arm with Villanelle's again as they walk. "I wish we could go into the city center. Do the whole tourist thing for real. Palaces, art galleries, all that stuff."

"That could be fun. St. Petersburg isn't nearly as bad as the rest of this depressing shithole country. But right now the center is too dangerous. There's mass-surveillance tech everywhere. CCTV, facial recognition scanners, all that stuff. And we have to assume the Twelve are monitoring it. Same with every other big city in the world."

"I know."

"We'll come back someday."

"Promise?"

"You want me to pinky swear?"

"Yes."

"You have to promise me something, too, then."

"What?"

"You have to trust me. I mean really trust me."

"I've trusted you so far, haven't I?"

"Yes. But I need you to keep trusting me, even if things get really bad."

"That sounds ominous. What do you mean?"

"I mean trust me. That's all."

"Well, now I'm scared."

"Don't be. Let's do what we should have done an hour ago, and go back to the apartment and have sex."

"There's my silver-tongued girlfriend."

"What's that about my tongue?"

"It's just an expression in English. It means you have a way with words. You know how to talk a woman into bed."

"That's true."

"What would you have done if I'd said no? If we'd run away together and all that, and then I'd refused to do it?"

"Do what?"

"Sleep with you. Be your girlfriend."

"I don't know. I always knew you would."

"How did you know? I mean, I was married, I had a husband, I'd never so much as looked at a woman..."

"You know, I still don't actually believe that. You picked up on everything just a little too easily."

"I'm a fast learner. Like you with languages."

"There's a very obvious joke there, but I'm not going to make it."

"Seriously, though. How did you know?"

"You looked at me. And I looked back."

"And what did you see?"

"You, Eve."

At 5 p.m., Asmat Dzabrati's family are contacted by officials of Pokrovskaya Hospital with a request to collect his body. There is, apparently, no suggestion that the Pakhan died of anything other than natural causes, although there is some confusion about the fact that two separate ambulance teams appear to have attended the bathhouse where he suffered a fatal heart attack. This is Russia, however, and such misunderstandings occur. Pokrovskaya is a busy public hospital, and the duty physician who certified Dzabrati dead on arrival from the Elizarova *banya*, and issued the requisite certificates, saw no reason to authorize a post-mortem examination. Apart from anything else, it appears that the mortuary is full.

All of this is relayed to the others by Dasha, following her long and difficult phone conversation with Dzabrati's tearful ex-wife Yelena. Dasha then convenes an emergency meeting of the three other Kupchino Bratva brigadiers, who arrive within the hour.

Eve and Villanelle have dinner in the kitchen with Tina. After winding herself around Eve like a cat all afternoon, and practically dragging her into bed, Villanelle is now in a simmering fury. When she sits down to eat, she sips Dasha's vintage Riesling, announces that it tastes like petrol, and helps

herself to champagne from the fridge. Eve doesn't need to ask why she's so angry. She is certain that it's because Villanelle has not been invited to attend Dasha's gangster conclave. Though why she thinks she should be invited, Eve has no idea. So as Tina and Eve dart anxious glances at each other, Villanelle spoons down her borscht with sour cherries, scours out her bowl with a hunk of bread, flips her spoon into the sink, and walks out without a word.

"Sorry," Eve says. "Again."

Tina nods. "There are things Dasha doesn't tell me, but I'm not stupid. I know that you and Oksana were involved in what happened today. I'm not going to ask you about it, but I just want you to know that I know."

"OK. Thank you."

"Are you all right? Oksana is obviously dealing with it in her own way, but—"

"I think I'm OK. I'm not sure."

"Was it awful?"

"Not really, to be honest. I just watched. I didn't actually have to... you know."

Tina peels a banana. "She loves you. You know that, don't you?"

"I wonder. There are times when I think that she just might. Then there are other times when it's hard to believe that she even likes me. Once the novelty wears off, I'm afraid she might decide I'm more trouble than I'm worth."

"Eve, you prove to Oksana that she exists. You're the only reality that she has outside herself. It's that basic."

"You think her insecurity is that deep?"

"I do, yeah. You're going soon, aren't you?"

"I guess."

"I know. Dasha's got your passports and money in our room. She's had them for two days. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too. How do you feel about Dasha becoming the Pakhan?"

Tina shrugs her narrow shoulders. "It's what she wants, although I've never understood why. I mean, fuck. Those *bratva* guys. They're jackals. You take your eyes off them for a second, and they rip you apart." She looks away. "I have a lot to be grateful for, Eve, truly. And unlike Zoya, I don't have to sleep with some horrible old guy to support myself. But I worry. I worry all the time."

Sleeping with Dasha, with her leathery skin and breath that stinks of cigarettes all the time, seems like it would be pretty horrible, too, but Eve keeps this thought to herself. "What do you worry about?"

"About this life. About the *vorovskoy mir*. Gang leaders don't die of old age." She winds the banana skin around her finger. "I love Dasha. I don't want to see her killed."

"I'd say she can look after herself pretty well, having seen her in action."

Tina smiles faintly and nods. "Come on. Bring your glass. There's something I want to show you."

She leads Eve into the bedroom she shares with Dasha. Eve has never been in here before, and looks around in amazement. The bed is a four-poster with purple damask curtains, the walls are decorated with framed posters of Amazonian women riding dinosaurs and giant dragonflies, the shelves hold velveteen unicorns, Beanie Babies, and statuettes of Marvel Comics heroines.

"This look is more than you than Dasha, isn't it?"

"She said I could have it how I wanted."

"I'm guessing your side of the bed is the one without the gun."

Tina shoves the butt of the Serdyukov automatic under the pillow. "You guess right. I hate that it's there, but she insists. Apart from that, I love it in here. It's where I come when everything gets to be too much." She gestures for Eve to make herself comfortable on the bed, then turns down the light, takes a DVD from a shelf, and slips it into the player. It's a cartoon, very old-fashioned, about a hedgehog going to meet his friend, a bear cub, so that they can count the stars in the sky. Thinking that he has seen a beautiful white horse, the hedgehog tries to follow it and gets lost in the night.

The film is short, lasting perhaps ten minutes, and when it ends, Tina's eyes are shining with tears. "What did you think?" she asks Eve.

"It's sweet."

"I just love it. I feel like that all the time. Like I'm lost in the fog, and all I can see are the outlines of monsters. But it ends happily. The hedgehog is saved, and he finds his friend, and they count the stars together, like they always do. And that's all I want to do, really. Count the stars with Dasha."

Eve doesn't know what to say, so she reaches out and pats her hand. "You will," she tells her.

In the bedroom, Villanelle is asleep in one of Eve's T-shirts. The curtains are undrawn, and on the boulevard outside, the fresh snow glitters beneath the street lights. Villanelle's face is turned toward the window. Eve watches the flutter of her lashes as she dreams, and wonders what stories her mind is creating, and if she is there with her.

She pulls the covers over Villanelle. Her eyes don't open, but her hand snakes out and her fingers lock around Eve's wrist, strong as steel. "Come to bed," she murmurs.

The next morning, Dasha joins them for breakfast. "It's been great having you," she tells them. "And thank you for your help with my predecessor. But you need to leave St. Petersburg today. I'm the acting Pakhan of the Kupchino Bratva now, so..."

Dasha doesn't need to finish. Everyone knows what she means. She's discharged her duty to them, just as they have to her. Now it is time to go, before their presence makes life complicated for her. "Your passports," she says, handing Villanelle an envelope.

"Thanks."

Dasha gives Eve one of her sharp little smiles. "Sorry about hanging you up by the wrists. Must have been uncomfortable."

"To be fair, I did punch you in the face."

"You did, didn't you?"

Back in their room, they pack their rucksacks and inspect the passports. These appear to be new, and issued in the names of Maria Bogomolova and Galina Tsoi. Eve is Galina.

It takes them very little time to get ready to go. They've decided to take the train to Sochi, a modern city on the Black Sea, where they will find a cheap guest house and review their options. Eve is sad to be saying goodbye to Tina. It's been nice having her as an ally for the past month, and Eve decides to give her the blue velvet coat from the Mikhailovsky Theatre as a parting gift. Tina is touchingly excited—Eve knows that she wishes she'd seen it first at the Kometa vintage store—and she puts it on at once, posing self-consciously. Dasha accompanies them to the entrance hall of the building, where she and Villanelle shake hands, and Eve hovers behind them, unsure of the protocol. Tina, looking like a minor character from

Anna Karenina in the velvet coat, steps out the front door. She is accompanying them to the Metro station. There's been no snowfall this morning, and she stands there for a moment, a slight, wistful figure. The wind blows an escaping tendril of hair across her face, and she's lifting her free hand to brush it away when there's a smacking sound, not loud, and she flies back through the open door like a blown leaf, landing on her side between Dasha and Eve.

"Get inside," Villanelle says, wrenching Eve away from the entrance. "Dasha, *move*." But Dasha is on her knees, gazing at Tina's surprised eyes and twitching body. As Eve backs away toward the stairs, she sees the fist-sized hole and the mess of blood, bone and velvet below her left shoulder.

"Dasha," Eve says, her voice shaking.

Still Dasha doesn't move. Then she slips an arm below her dying lover's knees and another below her shoulders, and lifts her like a sleeping child from the widening pool of blood.

"Get upstairs," Villanelle orders. Her SIG Sauer is in her hand, and her eyes are as flat as a snake's.

When they've gone, Eve and Villanelle grab their rucksacks and race through the unlit corridors to the rear of the building. Outside, visible through heavy glass-paneled doors, is a snow-covered car park and garbage collection area. Villanelle gives it a single wary glance and pulls Eve back the way they came.

"They'll have it covered," she says. "We need to go back up to the apartment. We need the service staircase."

"Who are 'they'?" Eve asks, and Villanelle just looks at her. They both know who they are.

The Twelve have found them.

By the time they get upstairs, Tina is dead. Dasha carries her body to the bedroom, and when she emerges, her face like

stone, she's all business. She hits the phone, issuing orders and summoning her soldiers from their various apartments in the building. Villanelle, meanwhile, crouches at one of the front-facing windows, scanning the street with a pair of binoculars. Eve busies herself checking and re-checking her Glock, and keeping out of the others' way. She is lightheaded with shock. She keeps thinking about Tina's coat. The coat she had worn at least every other day for the last fortnight. The coat she had given her.

"There are three men in a black Mercedes," Villanelle says after a couple of minutes. "They're all armed. Getting out of the car. Approaching the building now."

As she finishes speaking, there's an urgent triple buzz at the front door of the apartment. It's three of the *boyeviki*, carrying automatic weapons and spare magazines. Dasha hurries them in, a heavy Makarov pistol in her hand, and issues a terse series of orders. Two of the soldiers return through the front door to take up position on the stairs and landing outside, the third starts upending tables and heavy furniture in the apartment's entrance hall. Villanelle, meanwhile, runs around switching off lights and pulling curtains closed. In a firefight, darkness favors those who know the terrain.

"It's me they want," Eve tells Dasha, suddenly sure of her words. "They shot Tina because she was wearing my coat. Send me out to them. Please, don't risk anyone else's life."

Dasha frowns distractedly. "Go to my bedroom," she says. "Shut yourself in."

"Do it, Eve," Villanelle confirms, and Eve obeys. She feels as if she is sleepwalking, as if she is no longer in charge of the business of putting one leg in front of the other.

Tina, her eyes still open, has been laid out on her back on the

double bed. The ghastly exit wound can't be seen. The only visible sign of the shot that killed her is a neat hole in the blue velvet coat, over her heart.

Seeing her there, surrounded by her fairy posters and unicorn statuettes, Eve freezes. She feels so lost, so useless, so guilty. She knows that Villanelle, Dasha, and the bodyguards know what they're doing, and that she would only be in the way, but this powerlessness is horrible, particularly since she is responsible for Tina's death. And then there's Dasha. Eve never warmed to her, but she knows she and Villanelle have brought nothing into her life except mayhem, and the vengeance of the Twelve. And now Dasha is putting her life on the line to defend them.

From the street, far below, Eve hears a faint splintering as the attackers kick in the front door of the building. It's followed by a sporadic popping sound, at first distant, but soon rising in volume as the *boyeviki* engage the attacks. She sits on the bed, loaded weapon in hand. From the other end of the apartment, there's a shattering crash as the front door gives way, followed by confused shouting and staccato bursts of gunfire. Someone is screaming, and though Eve knows that it's not Villanelle's voice, she is weak with terror at the thought of losing her. The screaming dies to an intermittent groaning.

She has to help. Or at least try to.

Touching her pocket to check for spare Glock magazines, she makes for the door, and turns the key with trembling fingers. Outside, a passage leads to the darkened reception room where they gathered before dinner with the late Pakhan.

As she steps into the passage, a ringing silence prevails. There's the crack of a handgun from the entrance hall, shockingly amplified in the enclosed space, and silence again. Eve creeps through the reception room, fearfully hugging the wall,

and edges toward the open door and the entrance hall beyond. This is also dark, but she can make out the main features. Just meters in front of her, a marble-topped table has been pushed on its side, spilling a pair of heavy onyx lamps onto the floor, and behind the tabletop, in profile, crouch two men dressed in street clothes and armed with submachine guns. Beyond this pair, his body slumped over the vertical tabletop as if arrested in the course of a dive, is a third man. Eve can't see who is facing them at the other end of the hall, but she prays that one of them is Villanelle.

Buried in darkness, breathing air sharp with gun smoke, she attempts to take stock. She doesn't recognize the man nearest her; he could be one of Dasha's soldiers. Then she sees the pale chevrons of impacted snow on the treads of his combat boots. He's just come in from the street. He's an attacker, and Eve decides to kill him. *"...if we're going to survive, you're going to have to be a bit more like me."*

Very slowly, she raises the Glock, lining up foresight, back-sight, and the man's ear.

And the second guy? It's as if Villanelle is whispering in her ear.

I'll deal with him next, Eve promises her, and squeezes the Glock's trigger.

She doesn't kill him. The 9mm round smashes a hank of hair and bone from the back of his head, and as he whips round to face her, submachine gun leveled, Villanelle rises into view on the far side of the room and fires two shots in fast succession. Both rounds punch through the man's throat, and he sinks to the floor, choking.

The second man returns fire, but Villanelle has vanished. He turns to Eve, and she squeezes off a round that tears through his

cheek and rips one ear from his face. She tries to retreat into the doorway. There's a flare of orange at his gun barrel, and a fiery whiplash streaks across her back. She's dimly aware of the crack of a third weapon—Dasha's Makarov—and watches detachedly as his knees fold and a slew of brain matter pours from the side of his head.

Dasha and Villanelle rise to their feet, and Villanelle races across to where Eve is lying on the floor. "You dumbass," she says, dropping to her knees, her face fraught with worry. "What were you thinking? Where did he get you?"

"My back."

"Sit up. Let me look." She switches on the reception room lights, pulls off Eve's leather jacket, and wrenches her blood-sodden sweater over her head. Sprawled in front of her in the unlit hall, just a few meters away, the three attackers lie in twisted, grotesque repose. The first man Eve shot is still alive, and his eyes follow Dasha as she walks over to him, slaps a fresh magazine into her pistol, and fires a single shot through the base of his nose. Then she heads for the front door. "I'm going to check the stairs. See if any of my people are still alive."

"OK," Villanelle says.

Eve is so sick with guilt that she can't even look at Dasha, let alone respond. She thinks of Tina, lying lifeless in the bedroom.

Villanelle hurries away, returning with a military-issue first-aid box and a wet bath towel. It's very cold, and Eve feels savage waves of pain as Villanelle cleans up her back. "You were lucky," she murmurs. "A centimeter deeper and you could have been paralyzed. Dasha saved your life. What the fuck were you thinking? We told you to—"

"I know you did. I wanted to help."

"And I guess you did help. But Jesus, Eve."

"I know. Everything's fucked."

"Just don't move." She presses the towel hard against Eve's back. "I could have lost you, you stupid idiot."

"I'm sorry," Eve says.

"You will be, because now I'm going to have to stitch you up." She sets to work with a suturing needle. It hurts a lot, and Eve is glad of the pain. It means she doesn't have to think.

"Have you done this before?" Eve asks.

"Only on myself, once. And we did sewing at school. I made a crocodile. It had teeth and everything."

Dasha walks back into the flat, her face wiped of all expression. She's accompanied by a man and two women, and she's no longer holding the Makarov. That's now in the right hand of a lean, muscular young woman with with cropped brown hair, high cheekbones, and eyes the color of slate.

Eve recognizes her instantly from a CCTV clip that they had on file in Goodge Street. Nadezhda Kadomtseya. Nadia. Villanelle's former lover and companion in murder, recently released from Butyrka jail. Beside Nadia, cradling a submachine gun, is Raymond, formerly a squadron commander in the Special Air Service and now the head of the Twelve's assassination department, and Villanelle's handler, until recently. The second woman is Carolyn Martens, Eve's former boss at MI6, and a long-term Twelve asset.

Pain folds into paralyzing despair. It's over.

Once the newcomers have disarmed them, they look around, registering the upturned furniture, the bodies, the spattered walls, and the congealing pools of blood. All three appear entirely at home among the carnage.

"So," Villanelle says. "You."

"Me," Nadia replies.

Villanelle continues to stitch Eve's back. "That haircut is not at all flattering, by the way."

In the CCTV clip, sent to Eve's team by the Italian police, Nadia and Villanelle were strolling down the Calle Vallaresso in Venice, window-shopping. With her straw cowboy hat tilted just so, Nadia looked like a catwalk model. In the flesh, with a state-of-the-art sniper rifle slung across her chest and Dasha's Makarov in her hand, she looks a lot more dangerous.

"Is she the one who killed Tina?" Dasha asks, her voice so low Eve can hardly hear her.

"Are *they* the one," Nadia corrects her. "My pronouns are actually 'they' and 'them' now. But yeah, that was me. Sorry." She gives a dismissive shrug.

Eve can tell that Dasha wants to scream, to hurl herself at Nadia and inflict agonizing violence on them. But she is a Pakhan, and does none of these things. "Just know this," she says to Nadia. "I will kill you. That's a promise."

"You've already killed three of our soldiers," Carolyn says. "For a local *bratva*, that's impressive."

Dasha turns to Villanelle, her dark eyes steady. "These are your people?"

"Not anymore." She pulls the final stitch tight.

"We're terribly sorry for dropping in unannounced like this. It's just that you've been extending your hospitality to two people with whom we have some unfinished business, Miss Duzran. Mrs. Polastri here, my former employee. And her somewhat unstable... girlfriend?" Carolyn inclines her head in their direction.

"And for this you murder an innocent young woman, storm my building with assault weapons, seriously injure two of the men who are trying to defend me, and kill a third? Fuck you,

and fuck your Twelve.”

“So you’ve heard of us. Our condolences for the loss of the girl. That was unintentional.” She looks at Nadia. “She mistook her for Eve.”

“They mistook her,” Nadia mumbles.

“Your *condolences*?” Eve’s voice shakes. “You have a daughter her age, Carolyn. How would you feel if someone shot Geraldine, and then turned to you and said it was ‘unintentional’?”

“I’m sure I’d get over it eventually. It’s Geraldine, after all.” She turns back to Dasha. “All we want from you is Villanelle.”

“Who’s Villanelle?” Dasha asks.

“I am,” says Villanelle. “Long story.”

“She’s ours,” says Carolyn.

“No. I’m done working for you.”

Carolyn flicks her a brief, toothless smile, and switches her gaze back to Eve. She’s wearing a blue overcoat and a ridiculous fur hat that Eve wants to snatch off her head and shove down her throat.

“So, did Kim Philby go to Oxford, too?” Eve asks her.

“No. Cambridge. I met him once. In Moscow, shortly before he died. Dreadfully boring man, actually. And a traitor, of course, which I’m not.”

“And how are you not a traitor, Carolyn, may I ask?”

“If I could show you the big picture, Eve, you’d understand. But right now, none of us has the time for that.” She moves away from Eve and cursorily examines the three dead men on the floor. “You’ll be pleased to know that your attempt to fake your own death delayed us for a whole twenty-four hours. A convincing piece of work. We allowed your husband a glimpse of the photograph, and he was quite upset. This time, though, I’m afraid it’s going to have to be for real. Raymond, would you

kindly do the honors?”

Raymond takes Villanelle’s SIG from his pocket, and weighs it in his hands. “Actually, I’ve got a better idea.” Popping out the SIG’s magazine, he removes all the rounds except one, and then hands the gun to Villanelle.

“Villanelle, shoot Eve in the head. Quickly, please.”

Eve’s mind empties. At least it’ll be Villanelle.

“Get on with it,” Raymond says.

Villanelle doesn’t move. She’s calm, her breathing steady. She stares at the SIG, frowning.

“Am I going to have to do it myself?” Raymond says. “Because I’d be very happy to. I just thought it might be more intimate this way.” He regards them with fastidious distaste. “I know how... fond you two are of each other.”

“If anyone harms Eve, I’ll shoot myself,” Villanelle answers, raising the SIG and pressing the barrel to her temple. “I’m serious. I’ll blow my brains across the room.”

Carolyn gives her the thinnest of smiles. “Villanelle, we have a job for you. The one that all the others have been leading up to.”

“And if I say no?”

“You won’t say no. This will be the greatest challenge of your career. And afterward, you’ll be free to go, with more money than you’ll ever be able to spend.”

“You’d really just let me go? I don’t believe you.”

“We really would. The world would be a different place.”

“And Eve?”

“Right now, her knowledge threatens us all. Kill her and move on.”

“No. Eve comes with me.”

Carolyn regards her patiently. “Villanelle, there are other

women. This one's really quite ordinary. She'll hold you back."

Villanelle's eyes narrow, and she returns the barrel of the SIG to her temple. "Eve lives. Agree, or I fire."

Raymond regards her expressionlessly for a moment. "If Eve lives, you accept the contract."

"Who's the target?"

"You'll learn in due course. But I guarantee that you'll be impressed."

"And if I'm not?"

"If you decline the contract, then you and your... *girl-friend*"—he says the word as if it nauseates him—"will be loose ends that we have to tie up. And we will. No faked deaths, no last-minute escapes. Just two anonymous bodies in a landfill." Swinging the barrel of his weapon toward Eve, as if to warn Villanelle not to try anything, he takes back the SIG. "But don't let's spoil the moment. You won't decline this one. And the really heart-warming news is that you'll be working with Nadia again. She can't wait."

"*They* can't wait," says Nadia.

They spend the rest of the day in the black Mercedes, traveling to Moscow. Raymond drives, Carolyn is in the passenger seat, and Nadia, Villanelle, and Eve are in the back. It's a perverse situation. Eve's back hurts like hell, the slightest bump or vibration tearing at the stitches. Villanelle gazes wordlessly out of the side window, Nadia looks bored, and Eve sits between them, watching the flat, snow-blown landscape race past. Meanwhile, her Glock and Villanelle's SIG are in Raymond's pockets.

"...shoot Eve in the head."

At intervals, she finds herself shaking uncontrollably. When this happens, Villanelle looks at her with frowning concern. She doesn't seem to know what to say or do. At random moments, she'll take her hand, or put an arm around her and press Eve's head awkwardly to her shoulder. Nadia pointedly ignores all of this.

"Kill her and move on."

Eve doesn't respond to Villanelle. She can't. She's locked in to the events of the morning. Tina's sudden weightlessness as she is borne backward by the high-velocity sniper round, and the softness with which she falls to the marble floor. The sound of bullets smacking into clothing and flesh. The tiny blur of

orange announcing the shot that furrows through her back, and the way that the sound seems to follow the pain. The sight of Dasha's men as they leave. One sprawled across the stairs, glued in place by his own congealed blood. Two others sitting on the half-landing, wounded but alive, and one of them, the one Villanelle struck on the head with her SIG Sauer, raising a rueful hand in farewell as they pass.

"...shoot Eve in the head."

They pass exits for Gatchina, Tosno, Kirishi.

"Quickly, please."

Velikiy Novgorod, Borovichi.

"Kill her and move on."

Villanelle takes Eve's head in her hands, and gently turns it until they are face to face. "Listen to me," she says, very quietly, so that only Eve can hear. "I will look after you. Keep you safe. We are going to be fine."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Of course I do. Now lean your head on my shoulder and sleep. It's still three hours until Moscow."

"Earlier," Eve whispers. "You were ready to die for me?"

"Go to sleep, Eve."

* * *

When she wakes, it's dark and they're crawling through an industrial suburb in heavy traffic. The motorway is awash with churned up slush. Raymond follows an exit sign reading Ramenki.

"Feeling better?" Villanelle asks.

"I'm not sure. Maybe."

"Good. We need to eat." She kicks the back of the driver's

seat. "Hey, assholes, we're hungry."

Carolyn and Raymond look at each other.

"Raymond, you toad-faced dildo, I'm talking to you. Where are you taking us for dinner? Because it fucking well better be good."

"Is she always like this?" Carolyn asks Raymond.

"She's always been a degenerate, yes. There was a time she used to behave slightly more respectfully."

"Suck my dick," Villanelle says. "Those days are over. Tell me where we're going."

"Somewhere we can have a civilized, face-to-face conversation," Carolyn says. "We're going to have to work together here. We can't have the project compromised by personality issues. It's too important."

They sit in silence as they wind through the suburbs. It's snowing again, and Eve listens to the soft thump of the windscreen wipers and the hiss of the slush beneath their wheels. The city's traffic is as chaotic as ever, and as they pass Moscow State University and cross the river, they're forced to slow to a crawl. The last few hundred meters take almost half an hour, but finally they pull up in front of a massive Stalinist block. Its gray frontage, pierced with archways, extends the length of the entire street.

They climb out and stretch cramped limbs. The building's vast impersonality fills Eve with dread. Its towers are so tall that they vanish into the night sky. She is standing next to Villanelle, her back throbbing painfully, when there's a whooshing crunch in front of her, and glittering slivers spatter her face. Grabbing her arm, Villanelle drags her beneath one of the archways.

"What—"

"Falling icicle," she says, and Eve stares at the shattered lumps

in the snow, some the size of a baby's head.

"Fucking hell."

"Yes. You have to watch out for those."

Nadia saunters over from the Mercedes, grinning. "Another near miss?"

Eve doesn't answer.

Raymond jumps out of the driver's seat, regards Eve and Villanelle irritably, and locks the Mercedes.

"Take your things and follow Nadia," he says. "And no bullshit. Because I know for a fact that she'd love an excuse to shoot you."

"They'd love an excuse."

They follow Nadia into a huge, dimly lit atrium from which passageways lead in multiple directions. There are marble pillars and classical details of the sort often found in an international railway station, but the overall effect is cheerless. A few people come and go, muffled against the winter weather, and no one seems perturbed by the fact that Nadia is carrying a sniper rifle and an automatic pistol. There's a shining trail of boot prints leading to the nearest lift, but Nadia avoids this and leads them to a small alcove, where she inputs a code into a wall panel. A door slides back, revealing a glass and steel lift, which whisks them with sickening speed to the twelfth floor.

"That's a bit on the nose, isn't it?" remarks Eve, who has regained some of her composure now that she is no longer in immediate danger of being impaled by a spear of ice plummeting from the sky.

They emerge into a softly illuminated space, neither hot nor cold, dominated by armored-glass windows and a huge Salvador Dalí painting of a tiger. There are doors to the left and right, and a faintly ominous humming that might be the building's climate control system or distant machinery. Beyond

the windows, far below, the dark form of the Moskva river winds between snowy parks and windblown embankments.

Nadia touches a button beside the right-hand door, and they are admitted by a young man in paramilitary uniform, who leads them along a corridor hung with abstract paintings in hues of ivory, scarlet and vermilion, their slashing brushstrokes so exactly like knife wounds that the stitches in Eve's back start to ache. Several other men and women in business suits pass them in the corridor, before Nadia lets Villanelle into one of the rooms and pointedly leads Eve into another. It's painted dove gray, and undecorated except for a bronze statuette of a panther, which stands on a walnut side table.

"I'm afraid there's no complimentary dressing gown or slippers," Nadia tells her sourly. "We weren't expecting you to still be alive. I'll be back to collect you for dinner in an hour."

Eve eases herself into a sitting position on the bed. Her back is screaming now. "Can you get me a doctor?" she asks.

"You have pain?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

Reluctantly, Eve eases her sweater over her head, turns her back to Nadia, and pulls up her T-shirt.

"Yeah, that looks painful." Nadia pauses. "Why does Oksana like you so much?"

"I really don't know."

"All the time, even in bed, she was like Eve, Eve, Eve. So annoying. I've tried to kill you *twice* now."

"I'm aware."

"Oh well. *Die Another Day*. Have you ever seen that film?"

"No."

"Rosamund Pike, super-cute. Pierce Brosnan, not so cute.

You think I could be in a Bond film?"

"Sure. There's always some crazy Russian with a butch haircut and a big-ass gun."

Nadia looks at her uncertainly. "OK. I'll find someone."

The doctor arrives just ten minutes later. A businesslike young woman in the uniform of a Russian navy medic, with a case full of gear. She prods the stitches, feels Eve's lymph nodes, and gives her a box of antibiotic tablets and another of painkillers. She doesn't ask her how she came by an obvious gunshot wound, but she's interested in the stitches. "Haven't seen that before. Blanket-stitch suturing. Nice, neat work, though."

"My girlfriend," Eve explains. "She hasn't done much sewing since school."

"And these marks on your neck. They look like bites."

"Also my girlfriend."

"Well, I'm sure you know what you're doing. Be careful, OK?"

* * *

Eve knocks on Villanelle's door. When she answers, her hair is damp from the shower and she's wrapped in a white bathrobe.

"Do you know anything about this place?" Eve asks her. "Did Konstantin or anyone else ever mention it?"

"Never."

The bedside telephone rings. Villanelle answers it, listens for twenty seconds, and hangs up. "That was Carolyn. She says we've all had a stressful day, ha fucking ha, and she'd like to invite us to meet for a quiet, informal dinner. She thinks we should all get to know each other better, so that we can 'draw a line under this morning's unfortunate events and move on.'"

"Move on," Eve says. "Seriously? She's completely fucking insane."

"Well, I'm starving, so it's fine by me. Nadia's coming to collect us in fifteen minutes. Wear your bee sweater. I like you in that."

The twelfth floor is luxurious, in an impersonal, chain-hotel sort of way, but they are unquestionably prisoners. The triple-glazed windows can't be opened, and the exit door to the lift is code-controlled. Watchful young men and women, some of them carrying weapons, patrol the corridors and move between cryptically numbered offices. By the time they leave Villanelle's room, the place is as busy as ever. The work, whatever it is, continues day and night.

Dinner is in a suite overlooking the river. The decor is Stalinist neoclassical with a twist, and they're shown to their places by suited waiters with a distinct paramilitary air. Eve is seated between Nadia and Raymond, which presents an interesting conversational challenge, and Villanelle is opposite her next to Carolyn and a man who introduces himself as Richard Edwards. Something about his bearing, and his familiarity with Carolyn, shouts senior MI6 officer to Eve. Both she and Villanelle are underdressed for their surroundings, but then, they didn't exactly ask to be there.

"This is all very weird," she says to Raymond, and he shrugs.

"It's Russia," he replies. "A theatre where the play is rewritten every day. And the cast change roles mid-performance."

"So what role are you playing right now?"

"A small but necessary one. A spear carrier. And what about you, Mrs. Polastri?"

"Given that you've tried to have me killed three times now, I think you can probably call me Eve, don't you?"

"Very well." He pauses as a waiter pours wine into his glass. "So, Eve, may I ask you, how does it feel to be running with the hounds rather than the hare?"

"To be honest, I was hoping to avoid the hunt altogether."

"Too late. You left that option behind you when you helped murder Asmat Dzabrati." He smiles. "Yes, we know all about that."

"I see." The stitches in her back are throbbing angrily. The wound feels raw and jagged.

"You think you're different from the rest of us, Eve, but you're not." He takes an exploratory sip of his wine. "This is really good. Try some."

"I'm afraid that if I start drinking, I'm going to pass out. Today has been one of the most traumatic days of my life, starting with the moment when Nadia shot Kristina dead, thinking she was me."

"That's exactly why you need a glass of this excellent Romanian Chardonnay."

Eve touches the heavy crystal glass to her lips for politeness' sake, and takes a deep, cold swallow. Raymond is right; it's delicious.

"I wasn't always a soldier," he continues. "My first love was literature, especially Shakespeare, so I appreciate a moral dilemma. I'm not like your lady friend over there, devoid of feeling and thought."

"You don't know her," Eve says, surreptitiously necking a couple of painkillers with the wine.

"Oh, but I do, Eve. I do know her. And I know exactly how she works. She's like a clockwork toy you can take apart and put back together over and over again. She's entirely predictable, which is what makes her so useful. Enjoy her all you want, but

don't make the mistake of thinking she'll ever be human."

She is saved from replying by the arrival of the first course. "Scallops from Okhotsk," murmurs the waiter before slipping a porcelain plateful in front of her.

"Wow," says Nadia, squeezing a lemon segment over their scallops with such force that juice squirts in Eve's eye. "Oh fuck. Shit." They dab at Eve's face with a napkin. "First that girl this morning and now this. It's not our day, is it?"

"How long have you been, um, non-binary?" Eve asks them.

Nadia brightens. "Since I was in England, a few months ago. Have you ever been to Chipping Norton?"

"Never. My loss, I'm sure."

"I was an au pair there with a family. The Weadle-Smythes. I looked after their daughters. Fifteen-year-old twins."

"How did that go?"

"It was really nice. The father was only there at weekends; he was a Conservative MP who spent almost all his time in London. He had a girlfriend there, some sort of prostitute I think, but his wife didn't mind because it meant she could sit up all night watching Netflix. And Celia and Emma were so sweet. They used to take me out with them in the evening. We'd go to the local pub, get drunk and then go dog-fighting."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, they were a very traditional, upper-class family. The girls asked me if I had a boyfriend back in Russia, and obviously I said no. I explained that I worked in this quite macho world—I was vague about what I actually did—and didn't think of myself as girly and feminine, and didn't like to be treated that way. So they said why didn't I change my pronouns, which was kind of funny since I was sent there to improve my English. So I did."

"How did that go down with the parents?"

"The mother was like, 'why are you referring to Nadia as 'they,' girls? She hasn't split in two' and the father rolled his eyes and talked about the 'PC Brigade,' so yeah. And then suddenly I was called back here to Moscow to..." Their hand flies to their mouth. "Shit, you won't believe it. I was going to say that I was called back to shoot some woman, but then I remembered that the woman was you."

"Small world. And you missed."

"You ducked."

"Was that cheating?"

"You're so funny. Oksana always says I have no sense of humor."

"I'm sure you have other wonderful qualities."

"Yes, many. But we're even now, yes? I tried to shoot you—"

"Twice."

"OK, twice. But you took my girlfriend."

"She was never yours, Nadia, even when she was with you. She was always mine."

"That's not true."

"Yes it is. Tell me more about the gender thing."

"Yes, tell us about it," says Raymond, overhearing. "What is all that about? I mean, you do a man's job, and nobody makes an issue about it, so what's the problem?"

"Why is shooting people with a rifle and telescopic sights a man's job?" asks Nadia, spearing another scallop. "Anyone can learn to do it. I'm fed up with being called a female sniper. I'm just a sniper. A *torpedo*. I don't want the bullshit that comes with people thinking of me as a woman."

"Or the privileges?"

"What privileges? Men staring at my tits and talking to me like I'm stupid?"

"No one talks to you like you're stupid," says Richard, who has been listening to these exchanges. "People think you're clever because you have the best of both worlds. You're treated with respect as an elite assassin, and also admired as a very spectacular young woman." He raises his glass to Nadia with creepy gallantry.

Nadia regards Richard doubtfully. "You can say what you like, but my pronouns are my pronouns. If you don't use them, I'm not shooting anyone. I'm going to change my name, too."

"You're not becoming a vegetarian, are you?" asks Raymond.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

The waiter announces the second course. Eve's vocabulary isn't wide when it comes to the larger mammals, but it's something like elk or reindeer. Something that once had antlers, and has now been reduced to dark, bloody steaks in a red berry sauce. Their glasses are exchanged for larger ones and charged with Georgian wine that's so easy to drink she needs a refill almost immediately. On the other side of the table, Villanelle effortlessly manages to get under everyone else's skin. She studiously ignores Carolyn and Richard when they try to engage her in conversation, talks over them when they try to converse with each other, antagonizes Raymond with demure flirtatiousness, and mocks Nadia's accent and table manners at every opportunity. Eve struggles to keep up with the conversation as the effects of the stressful day, the wine, and the painkillers combine and begin to take hold.

Richard taps his glass with his knife, and Eve opens her eyes. She's so tired, so utterly exhausted, it's as much as she can do to stop herself sliding under the table. "Can we all just stand up a moment and walk to the window?" Richard asks.

Nadia helps Eve to her feet. They seem to believe they are

pals now. Seeing this, Villanelle looks as if she wants to leap across the table and stab Nadia in the throat with a steak knife, but she settles for elbowing Nadia in the ribs as she wedges herself between them at the window.

Loosening his tie, Richard starts to talk. With an expansive sweep of his arm, he indicates the blazing expanse of the city. After the dilapidated grandeur of St. Petersburg, Moscow is fortress-like and monolithic. It's impressive, but too inhuman in scale to be beautiful. Eve feels herself swaying. Villanelle puts an arm around her to steady her.

"Everything that you see before you is dead or dying," Richard says. "Nothing works. There are no big political ideas, no great leaders, nothing to give people hope. I'm not just talking about Russia, but Russia is the perfect illustration of what I'm saying. Everything that people value, everything that once made them proud, belongs to the past. Communism was flawed as a system, but there was an ideal there, once upon a time. An aspiration. People understood that they were part of something, however imperfect. Now there is nothing. Nothing except the systematic looting of the nation's assets by a rapacious, self-appointed elite."

His words have the sheen of frequent usage. He's spoken them before, perhaps many times. Villanelle is listening with a slight frown on her face, Nadia is glaring at Villanelle, Raymond is expressionless, and Carolyn is examining her fingernails.

Nadia leans around Villanelle. "What do you think of the name Charlie?" they whisper. "I really like it. Oksana was codenamed Charlie on the first job we did together, and I was *super* jealous."

"It's nice. Suits you."

"So what does the Twelve propose?" Richard continues,

turning away from the window to face the others. “What have all our plans and strategies been leading up to? A new world, nothing less. We put the corrupt old men out of their misery, and we rebuild.”

“He does like to talk, doesn’t he?” Carolyn murmurs to Eve.

“Mmm.”

“You really think Charlie suits me?” Nadia whispers from just behind her on her other side.

“Uh-huh.”

“The old dies, the new is born. That’s how history works. A golden age comes to pass—an era of prosperity, nobility and wisdom—and then over the course of millennia, things decline until that golden age is just a folk memory, a set of half-understood stories, a vague longing for what has been lost. And that’s where we are now. Feeling our way through the darkness.”

Eve suppresses a yawn.

“Not Alex?”

“No. Charlie’s perfect.”

“You’re right. Everyone’s called Alex.”

Villanelle jostles Nadia away with her shoulder.

“But we can find it again, that golden age, because history is cyclic. All that is needed is a few good people. Men and women with the vision to see that the old must be destroyed to make way for the new, and the courage to do it.”

Richard’s voice continues its urbane flow. Eve remembers reading somewhere about a skill called “oiling,” which is the art of courteously, but firmly, persuading others to your point of view. Richard is oiling them now, but his words are beginning to run together. Eve pulls out her chair, and as she lowers herself to the cushioned seat, Raymond flicks an irritated glance at her.

She feels heavy-limbed and uncoordinated. It's as much as she can do not to lie down under the dining table and close her eyes.

"And that, my friends, is where we come in," Richard says. "We are the advance guard of the new age. And we're not alone. All over the world, there are people like ourselves, aristocrats of the spirit, waiting for the moment to strike. But our task is perhaps the hardest, and the most dangerous. With one decisive action, we have to set the whole process in motion. And so I ask you all—Villanelle, Eve, Nadia, Raymond, and of course you, Carolyn, old friend—are you with us? Are you ready to go down in history?"

"I really must get back to my duties in London before anyone notices anything amiss, but I assure you I'll be with you in spirit," says Carolyn.

Villanelle shrugs noncommittally.

Raymond narrows his cold gaze. "All the way."

"Sure," says Nadia. "But from now on it's Charlie. Nadia is my deadname."

Richard gives them the ghost of a bow. "Very well, Charlie it is. Eve, you look... uncertain."

"Let me get this straight. This morning, the plan was to kill me to get me out of the way, but now you want me to join your team?"

"Why not? We could use your input. And correct me if I'm wrong, but I sense that you would welcome the challenge of a new world order. The old one didn't do a great deal for you, after all."

"You sure I'm not too... what was it you called me this morning, Carolyn? Ordinary?"

"Eve, we were all in a different place this morning. I think

you're exceptional."

Eve shrugs. "OK."

As if she had the ghost of a choice.

Somehow, the meal draws to a close, and Villanelle steers Eve back to her room. She can hardly place one foot in front of the other. Villanelle is asleep within a couple of minutes, her arms out-thrown, her mouth wide open, but Eve is so tired that she can't sleep. The stitches don't help. The painkillers and the wine have kicked in, reducing the pain to a hot, dull throb, but she still gets a warning stab if she moves too suddenly.

What did I just agree to? Are any of us going to get out of this alive? she thinks. From Richard's apocalyptic tone, and his talk of the danger of the mission, she would guess not. None of the foot soldiers, anyway. Richard and Carolyn, of course, are another matter. If one thing is certain, it's that when the smoke clears, they'll both still be standing there, hands clean, smug smiles in place.

And yet Eve said yes. Whatever the project involves, it must surely include the murder of at least one prominent figure. It seems strange that they would want her to be part of the team. They probably just want her on board to make Villanelle happy, or as a way of controlling her.

On the one hand, she knows that Richard's speech is brassy, echoing bullshit. That all this talk of golden ages and spiritual rebirth is just cover for what will undoubtedly turn out to be one more squalid political coup. On the other hand, there's something perversely thrilling about being locked into a conspiracy with Villanelle. For all its horror, this is her world. Eve knew that when she abandoned her own. And was it really so ridiculous, Richard's talk of destruction and rebirth? Hadn't she done the same thing herself? Destroyed her old life to make

way for her truer, darker self?

She turns over in bed at the same time as Villanelle, and they collide in a confusion of limbs.

“Go to sleep, Eve,” she murmurs blearily.

“I can’t sleep. I’m too busy being scared shitless. And my back hurts.”

“I know.”

“They’re going to kill us. They’re just making us do one last job for them first.”

“Probably.”

“How can you be so blasé about this?”

The bedclothes shift as Villanelle raises herself on one elbow. “You have to live in the now. I’ve told you this before. Right now, we’re fine, and we need to sleep. You especially. Tomorrow, when we’ve cleared our heads, we’ll make a plan.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“What do you mean? Scared of what?”

“Of everything that might happen.”

“No. I’m not scared. We’ll find out soon enough what they want from us, then we can figure out our next move. Right now, they need us, and that’s all that matters.”

Eve reaches out in the dark and feels her face. The line of her cheek and her mouth. She touches her lips, and Villanelle bites her finger gently. “You’re perfectly fine with this,” Eve marvels. “We’re on this insane death spiral, totally out of control, and...”

Villanelle shrugs and rolls onto her back. “You know how I am.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t get messed up about this stuff. It’s a psychopath thing. Read the textbooks.”

“I have read the textbooks, and they were all written about

male psychopaths. A lot of what they say doesn't even apply to you. And even if some parts do, I've spent enough time with you by now to know there's a lot more to you than just your psychopathy, anyway."

"You should never tell a psychopath they are a psychopath. It upsets them."

"You said it first. Anyway, it would hardly be the first time I've upset a psychopath. We both know I have no sense of self-preservation."

"If you did, you wouldn't be lying here with stitches in your back right now."

"I wouldn't be lying here at all. I never would've agreed to work for Carolyn. I'd probably just be bored out of my mind at a government listening center at Cheltenham or wherever they decided to dump me after you killed Viktor Kedrin and made me lose my job."

"See? I did you a favor." She pulls Eve closer and kisses her temple. "I know I don't fit the classic textbook definition of a psychopath. I used to think maybe I did, because everyone always said so, but now I think they were all wrong."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Well, for one thing, they say psychopaths aren't capable of love. And maybe my version of love isn't exactly the same as everyone else's, but I do feel it, at least for you."

Eve is too surprised to respond at first. Villanelle's hand slips under her shirt. "It feels like your heart is going to beat right out of your chest," she says.

"You love me? Why didn't you say so?"

"I just did. Why didn't *you* say so? You do love me, too, don't you?"

"I... yes, of course I do."

“Well, then, that’s that. Let’s go to sleep. Do you want to be the big spoon or the little spoon?”

* * *

Breakfast, by unspoken agreement, is conducted in near silence, the only sound in the dining room the murmur of the waiters as they dispense joltingly strong coffee. Outside, the snow flies past the windows, caught in the rogue currents surrounding the building. Villanelle piles her plate with scrambled eggs, sausages, and pastries. Looking out, she can barely see the ground. Just the black sweep of the highway and the gray-green curve of the river.

Despite what she keeps trying to impress upon Eve about living in the now, after their conversation the previous night, she’d lain awake allowing herself to think about what their future might hold. She finds it hard to imagine them growing old together, in part because she can’t see past the uncertainty of the days to come. All she knows is that Eve’s concern that they have been conscripted into a suicide mission has now infected her own thoughts, and she doesn’t have enough information to even begin to formulate an escape plan for them, which has put her in a wretched mood.

To make matters worse, Eve has been acting cold and distant ever since Villanelle snapped at her for confronting her about said wretched mood. She stares over Villanelle’s shoulder as she eats, avoiding her gaze. Charlie looks at them as if keen to talk, but on seeing their expressions, turns away and starts carefully spreading themselves successive squares of toast and apricot jam. On Eve’s other side, Raymond devours soft, flaky pastries and ignores the brewing drama.

Carolyn has already gone, and by the time Richard arrives, they've all finished eating and are sitting in sullen silence. Eschewing the food, he pours himself a cup of coffee and takes his place at the table.

"We have ten days," he announces. "Ten days to prepare for an operation that will require supreme daring and technical skill. If we succeed—*when* we succeed—we change the course of history." He spreads his hands and looks at each of them in turn. "I want you all to remember the words of Field Marshal Suvorov, which I believe were much admired at your former regiment, Raymond?"

"They were indeed," Raymond says. "'Train hard, fight easy.' Painted on the CO's door."

"We'll be leaving midday tomorrow," Richard continues. "Destination to be announced in due course. Today is for supply and paperwork. We'll be measuring you up for clothes and equipment, and taking photographs for passports, et cetera. It's a tight turnaround, but our people are used to working around the clock. Your documents, clothes and hand luggage are being delivered in twenty-four hours. Your weaponry is waiting for you at the training destination."

Villanelle steals a glance at Eve, who is listening with a look of disbelief which mirrors Villanelle's own feelings about Eve's inclusion. Villanelle can't imagine Richard and Raymond, knowing what they know about Eve, being so suicidally unwise as to award her any but the most minor, walk-on role. She has had no real training, and has already demonstrated that she can barely handle her Service-issue Glock. What part could she possibly play in an operation requiring "supreme daring and technical skill"? She would be a liability, and it would be crazy to think otherwise. Yet Richard is clearly including her in this

briefing.

The day passes slowly and miserably. Eve continues to ignore her, so she flirts listlessly with Charlie, making sure that Eve can see, and stares out the windows. With its stale, climate-controlled atmosphere, the apartment is oppressive. Everyone is on edge. The snow continues to fall all day, and although it's freezing on the streets, Villanelle would give anything to be out there, breathing the clean, cold air. Impossible, of course. The windows don't even open. Not that she hasn't tried.

Dinner is once again superlative. Villanelle leaves the table after the main course and goes to stand by the window, and Charlie follows her, having mistaken the earlier flirting as genuine interest. She pretends to pay attention while Charlie prattles on, and watches Eve out of the corner of her eye, still hoping for some sort of reaction. Eve has barely touched her food, but has drunk the best part of a bottle of Château Pétrus. She is pouring her fifth glass, by Villanelle's count, when Richard leans across the table. "Pétrus is the unofficial house wine of the Twelve," he says. "You're going to fit in perfectly."

"I'm definitely looking forward to drinking a shitload of this stuff," Eve says, slurring. "Assuming I make it back alive."

"Oh, you will," he replies. "You're very hard to kill. It's one of the things we like most about you."

"You don't like anything about me," she says, swaying aggressively toward him and spilling a crimson splash of wine on the damask tablecloth. "You just need me because you need my girlfriend. Cheers."

He smiles. "But is she? Your girlfriend, I mean. She seems to be getting on very well with Nadia."

"It's Charlie now, actually," Eve corrects him.

Sensing an opportunity, Villanelle grabs Charlie's hand and

pretends to laugh at some clever joke.

“What’s so funny about wanting more non-binary representation in government?” Charlie asks, but Villanelle doesn’t answer, because her efforts have finally paid off, and Eve is already out of her chair and moving unsteadily toward them.

“I need a word,” she says to Villanelle.

“She’s busy.”

“Fuck off, Charlie. Villanelle, come with me.” Eve takes her by the wrist and drags her down the corridor.

She slams the bedroom door behind them, then grabs a fistful of Villanelle’s shirt in each hand and shoves her up against the door with such force that, for a moment, she’s shocked into wide-eyed immobility. “Enough, OK? Enough of your stupid sulking, and enough of this shit with Charlie.”

“*I’m the bad guy here? You’re the one assaulting me* right now.” She could easily break Eve’s grip on her and reverse their positions, but to do so would undermine what she’s saying. “And this is after you spent the whole day ignoring me,” she adds.

“You’ve been acting like a little shit since you woke up this morning. What did I even do to piss you off?”

Villanelle narrows her eyes. “Is this how you’re going to be every time I’m upset about something? You knew what you were getting into with me. You knew better than anyone.”

“Fuck you. That’s not good enough. You can’t just go through life saying ‘I am what I am, deal with it.’ Especially when you claim you’re more than just a psychopath. If that’s the case, stop acting like you’re the only one whose feelings matter.”

“You’re the one who said that, not me. Maybe you’re wrong, and this is all I am. Maybe I don’t want to be what you want me to be, has that ever crossed your mind?”

“Yes, every day. Every single day since—”

“Since you gave up everything to be with me? Are you going to drag that one out again? Because you aren’t the only one who made sacrifices, Eve. I had a very nice life before you came along. And I would still have that now if I’d just smothered you with a pillow in Shanghai or pushed you into traffic the first time we actually met. But I didn’t. And that’s working out really well for me now, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Wow, thank you *so* much for not murdering me when you had the chance.”

“And for your information, I wasn’t pissed off with *you* this morning. I was pissed off with *them*, and with this whole situation. You’re the one who decided to make it all about you.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that? You told me to fuck off when I asked you what was wrong.”

“You didn’t ask me what was wrong. You said, and I quote, ‘Why are you being such an asshole today?’”

Eve lets go of her and takes a step back, visibly deflated. “We’re not very good at communicating, are we?” she says.

Villanelle just glares, which only serves to reinforce Eve’s point.

Eve walks over to the window and slumps forward, leaning her forehead against the cool glass. “Everything is so fucked,” she says, all the fight drained from her. “The only reason I’m still here, the only reason I’m even alive, aside from you deciding not to kill me on multiple prior occasions and Charlie fucking it up twice, is that Carolyn and the rest of them think you care what happens to me. They need you, so they keep me around.”

Villanelle sighs. “Eve, I do care what happens to you. Last night...”

"What about last night?"

"You know what I said."

"You said you loved me."

"I meant it."

"And then, what, you panicked? You thought you'd given me something, some kind of power, that I'd use against you?"

"It really isn't all about you, Eve. And it definitely wasn't about that." She sits down on the bed and tugs at a loose thread hanging from her shirt. "I hate being trapped like this. And I'm tired of everyone just using me as a weapon all the time. I don't want to do it anymore."

"Villanelle..."

"Don't. I'm done talking about it. And I don't want to talk about my feelings or process them or any of that bullshit, either."

"OK. We don't have to." She pauses. "Are we OK?"

"I don't know. Are we?"

"We have one more night here. Two at the most. Then God knows what." Eve steps away from the window and moves over to the bed to stand in front of Villanelle, wrapping her arms around her and stroking her hair. "Like you said, now's all there is."

"I'm sorry," Villanelle says, closing her eyes and pressing her face into the hollow between Eve's breasts. "I'm messed up. Just fuck me, OK?"

8

The clothes arrive the next morning. Boxes of weatherproof jackets and parkas, winter hats, trousers, thermal underwear, and boots. None of it ostentatious, but all designer-branded and clearly expensive. Then a cabin suitcase for each of them, and folders containing used Russian international passports, driving licenses, credit cards, and other identifying papers in the same names.

“Where do you think we’re going?” Charlie asks Eve.

“Hawaii?”

They leave at midday, and as they step out of the lift in their designer outfits and follow Richard through the building’s endless succession of lobbies, no one gives them a second glance. They could be an upscale tour group, or prosperous Russians setting off on holiday. Outside, it’s wonderfully cold, and Eve turns into the wind for a moment so that the snowflakes fly into her face. Then, all too soon, they’re climbing into a Porsche SUV with dark-tinted windows. Raymond drives, Richard takes the front seat, and Eve sits between Villanelle and Charlie again.

They drive northwest, following the signs to Sheremetyevo airport. Visibility is limited, and the road surface treacherous. The outlines of broken-down vehicles are visible on the hard shoulder, hazard lights winking. Eve is nervous, but glad that

Villanelle is at her side. She's even glad, in a perverse sort of way, that Charlie is there.

They're crossing the outer ring road when a police vehicle swings in front of them, blue lights flashing. "Fuck's sake," Raymond mutters, bringing the Porsche to a halt in the slush. "What now?"

There's a sharp tap on the passenger-side window, and Richard lowers it. The features of the uniformed figure outside are obscured by his helmet and face mask, but his shoulder patch identifies him as an officer of the FSB, Russia's internal security service. Ahead of them, other vehicles similar to theirs have been stopped. Several drivers and passengers have been ordered out of their cars and directed, documents in hand, to an armored truck with iron-grilled windows and FSB insignia, parked on the side of the highway.

"What's going on, Lieutenant?" Richard asks the officer, as wind and snow blast into the Porsche's interior.

"Security check. Passports, please."

They hand them over, he checks them carefully, and peers at them one by one through the passenger window. Then he returns all the passports except Eve's. "Out, please," he tells her, pointing to the truck with a gloved hand.

It's freezing outside, and she pulls the hood of her parka over her head as she joins the line outside the truck. "Must be looking for someone important," she says to the woman in front of her, a grandmotherly figure in a pink woolen headscarf.

She shrugs, indifferent, and stamps her booted feet in the snow. "They're always looking for someone. They just stop cars at random."

Eventually, it's Eve's turn. She climbs the steps into the truck, and when she gets inside, stands for a few seconds, eyes

adjusting. It's dark inside after the snow-brightness. Two officers are sitting on metal benches opposite her, and one is in the shadows to her left. At a signal from the man in the shadows, the others leave.

"Eve Polastri. I'm so glad that the reports of your death were exaggerated."

She recognizes the voice, and when he moves into one of the shafts of light admitted by the iron-grille windows, she recognizes the man. Broad shoulders made broader by a military greatcoat, buzz-cut silver hair, a wry smile.

"Mr. Tikhomirov. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't surprised to see you here. But yes, as it turns out, I'm still very much alive."

"I saw the photograph. It was good, and would have fooled most people, but... what is it they say? Don't bullshit a bullshitter. In our world, as you know, nothing is what it seems, even life and death. Everything's a simulacrum."

Vadim Tikhomirov is a general of the FSB, although he is not the kind of man to advertise his rank. Eve first met him in complicated circumstances after Charlie had tried and failed to shoot her in the VDNKh Metro station in Moscow. On that occasion, Tikhomirov had not only gotten her out of Russia, but discreetly attempted to alert her to the fact that her boss, Carolyn Martens, was an asset of the Twelve.

Tikhomirov is the refined face of an often brutally uncompromising organization, and where his own loyalties lie, Eve is not sure. Is he, as he appears to be, a dedicated servant of the Russian state, and if so, what does that actually entail? Unquestioning obedience to the diktats of the Kremlin, or the playing of longer, more ambiguous games?

He leans toward her on the bench. "Eve, we have very little time. If we don't keep this short, your friends outside are going

to be suspicious. First, you've done brilliantly to insert yourself into a Twelve operation."

She stares at him. Does he really think that's why she's there? That she's still working for MI6?

"How do I know this? Let's just say that we have a friend in common in St. Petersburg. But it's imperative that we discover what the Twelve are planning, because if what I suspect is true, the consequences will be catastrophic, and not just for Russia. So you absolutely have to find out, Eve. And you have to tell me."

It's as cold as a butcher's fridge in the truck, and Eve zips her jacket up to her chin.

"You know who's in that SUV, don't you? Richard Edwards. Another Twelve asset, just like Carolyn Martens, maybe even higher up in the hierarchy than she is. Why don't you just arrest him?"

"Nothing I'd rather do, believe me. But I can't. I have to let him run. See who he leads us to."

"Isn't that a bit risky? I mean—"

"This is the Twelve we're dealing with, Eve. We need to take down the whole organization, and if we're going to do that, we need to aim a lot higher than Edwards. He's useful to them, but he's replaceable, and probably doesn't know that much anyway."

"I see." Her heart sinks.

"So, we need to keep our nerve, let them think it's safe to go ahead, and wait for the key players to reveal themselves. Then, and only then, can we make our move. First we have to know what they've been planning."

"And that's where I come in?"

"Exactly."

"So tell me what you want me to do."

"I'm going to give you a phone number, which you're going to memorize, and the rest is up to you. You're a highly resourceful individual, and I'm confident that one way or another, you'll succeed." He lets his words hang in the air. "So are you with me? I'm afraid that you have to decide right here, right now."

"On one condition."

"Tell me."

"Oksana Astankova."

"Ah. The infamous Villanelle. I thought we might get to her."

"Don't kill her. Please, I..." she stares at him helplessly.

He meets her gaze, his eyes thoughtful, and then turns to the door. Slowly, barely perceptibly, he nods his head. "I can guarantee nothing. I have to consider the optics. But if you do this thing for me, I will try to do this for you. Here is the number..."

He says it three times. Makes her repeat it three times.

"They've taken our guns, phones, pens, everything," she tells him. "They'll be watching us all the time. I don't know how I'm going to—"

"You'll find a way, Eve. I know you will." He stands up, bowing his head beneath the low roof of the truck. "And now you have to go."

As she stands in turn, a handsome young man in a winter camouflage uniform climbs into the truck, and she recognizes Dima, Tikhomirov's assistant. A long look passes between them.

"Please," she whispers. "Not her."

Tikhomirov looks at her, his expression sad, and raises his hand.

As Eve trudges back to the SUV, she repeats the number he gave her over and over in her head.

“So what did they want?” Richard asks, when they’re back on the motorway.

“They checked my appearance against a bunch of photographs of other women that they had on a laptop. I didn’t look like any of the photographs—other than all of us looking ethnically Asian, I guess—and the officers didn’t even ask my name. I asked them what it was all about, but they wouldn’t tell me.”

“So who was there?”

“An FSB officer, in his forties probably, and two other guys. A fourth guy came in from having a cigarette just as I left. I didn’t get the impression they were very interested in what they were doing.”

“They didn’t photograph you? Take your fingerprints? Take a copy of your passport?”

“Nothing like that, no.”

Raymond looks back at her and sneers. “Just checking out women to pass the time?”

“Maybe.”

Richard parts ways with them on the tarmac at Sheremetyevo airport, beneath a bruise-dark sky. He shakes their hands through the driver’s window of the Porsche, and gives each of them a taut, crinkle-eyed smile that doesn’t quite mask his relief that he’s not going with them.

The Learjet lifts off shortly afterward, heading westwards. Their immediate destination, Raymond tells them, is Ostend, in Belgium. No one inquires further.

Villanelle sits next to Eve, leaning against her, and they talk about the things they’ll do, and the places they’ll visit, when all of this is over. They both know it’s a fantasy, that they’ll probably never walk hand in hand by the River Neva in St. Petersburg, watching the ice floes drift past, or sit in the sun on

a spring morning in the courtyard of Villanelle's favorite café in Paris, but they promise themselves these things and more. Eve says nothing of her conversation with Tikhomirov. She tries not to think about it at all, and to ignore the ghastly sensation that they are sleepwalking toward a cliff edge. Instead, she loses herself in the moment, basking in the feeling of the soft weight of Villanelle's head on her shoulder.

After three and a half hours, they land at Ostend-Bruges airport. The light has almost gone, and as they leave the warmly upholstered interior of the Learjet, they're met with a bitter wind and driving sleet. A minibus is waiting for them on the tarmac, and they're driven a few hundred meters to a waiting Super Puma helicopter, where the pilot hands them noise-canceling headsets. The helicopter's rotors are already swinging as they board, and the lights of the airport vanish behind them as they gain height over desolate beaches and the wind-blurred expanse of the North Sea.

Villanelle tucks in next to Eve again, but with the engine noise and the headsets, conversation is impossible. Where they're going, Eve has no idea, although Villanelle's pensive expression suggests that she may have figured it out. They hold a roughly northwestern course toward England, but why would they be traveling there by helicopter? If their destination is London, they could have flown there directly from Moscow. She wonders if they are going to be landing on a ship.

After forty-five minutes, they start their descent. The helicopter's spotlights illuminate dark, wrinkling waves. "We're here," Villanelle mouths at her. "Look." She jabs a finger downwards.

At first, Eve sees only the surface of the sea. Then a gray rectangle swings into view, and the Super Puma's spotlights lock

on to it. A marine platform, its size hard to estimate, supported by two trunk-like columns. As they approach the platform, she sees that there's a helipad at one end, which two tiny human figures are illuminating with torches. Never in her life has she seen anything so unforgivingly harsh.

They touch down, and the Super Puma rests on the helipad for no more than thirty seconds as they climb out into the bitter, sleeting wind. It's so ferocious, Eve is afraid that if she loses her footing, she'll be swept away, and she clings to Villanelle's arm. Raymond shouts something to them, but it's whipped away in the wind.

They walk the length of the platform, heads down, to where three converted shipping containers are lashed to the decking with steel hawsers. Raymond guides them into the nearest of these, flicks on an electric light, and when they are all inside, including the two men who guided in the helicopter, closes the steel door.

It's not much, but it's a lot more homey than the last container they were in. Two double-glazed windows have been let in to the lengthways wall, framing views of the sea and sky. At one end, there's a trestle table and six folding chairs; at the other, a microwave, a chest freezer, and a kettle. A tray on the table holds jars of honey, Marmite, and strawberry jam. Above it, there's a bookshelf stocked with well-thumbed paperback thrillers by Mick Herron, Andrei Kivinov, and others, and a hardback copy of Mangan and Proctor's *Birds of the North Sea*.

"Welcome to Knock Tom," Raymond says. "It was originally a Second World War anti-aircraft emplacement, built by the British to protect the North Sea shipping lanes. So if you get bored and feel like a swim"—he points out of the further window—"the Essex coast is about ten miles in that direction.

But I promise that you won't be bored. We've got a lot of work to do and a lot of ground to cover."

"So let's get to it. First off, meet Nobby and Ginge. They are going to be your instructors and your watchdogs, so listen up and do what they say. They're former E Squadron sniper team leaders, so they know their stuff. Nadia and Villanelle, I know you have experience as solo operatives, but this project poses unique challenges. Our targets, plural, have the best security the world has to offer. Teamwork is going to be vital."

"Charlie. My name is Charlie. Since you're talking about teamwork."

Silence. Nobby and Ginge exchange grins.

Raymond looks as if he's swallowed a wasp. "Charlie it is, then. Moving on. We're going to be using two teams, each with a spotter and a shooter. The window of opportunity will be small, and the weather conditions challenging, so the role of the spotters will be critical. Our shooters will be Villanelle and, er, Charlie. Spotters will be Eve and myself."

"So what's wrong with these two?" Villanelle asks, jerking a thumb at the two instructors. "If they're so experienced, why do you need us?"

Raymond regards her with calm loathing. "Nobby and Ginge have retired from the stage. They prefer to pass on their wisdom to a new generation."

"It's that dangerous, then," Villanelle says, and smirks.

"I'm not going to pretend it's not dangerous. It's very dangerous indeed. That's why preparation is everything. We have a week in which we can concentrate fully on the task at hand. There's no WiFi here, so you'll have no active links to the outside world. We are going to be living and breathing our mission. Train hard, fight easy."

It's at this point that Eve loses hope. There's no way to contact Tikhomirov, and as she has no clue as to the identity of the targets, there's no point in thinking about how to do so. Raymond, moreover, clearly has no intention of telling them the details of the hit until the absolute last moment. Maybe he doesn't even know them. The fact that they have been flown all the way to the middle of the North Sea, rather than to a secure facility in Russia, tells her how concerned the Twelve are that no word of this operation should get out. They are confined to a tiny, isolated, storm-battered platform, with no possibility of escape, and no way of contacting the outside world.

"The two teams will be training separately," Raymond continues. "Villanelle and I with Nobby, Charlie and Eve with Ginge. Neither team will discuss the details of their mission with the other team. You all have separate quarters, three in the north leg of the platform, three in the south, and there will be no doubling up." He looks balefully from Eve to Villanelle. "This is not a request, it's an order."

Watching Raymond, with his mean little eyes, heavy jowls, and thin, fastidious mouth, Eve can't suppress a shiver. He's one of those men whose hatred of women is so deep, so central to his being, that it almost defines him. He knows where he stands with men. With Richard he's subtly obsequious; with Nobby and Ginge matey but superior. He's pretty sure where he stands with Eve, too, as she's too far out of her element and too intimidated by the circumstances to give him much trouble. But he has no idea how to deal with Charlie and Villanelle, who are every bit as hardcore as he is, and not frightened to let him know it. Eve turns to Villanelle, but her mood has shifted, and she is staring expressionlessly into space. It's impossible to tell what she thinks of the sleeping arrangements.

This briefing is followed by a meal of warm baked beans and luncheon meat prepared by Nobby, during which Villanelle remains wordless and withdrawn. Remembering their fight the day before, Eve tries not to take it personally. When the time comes to say goodnight, she reaches out and squeezes Villanelle's hand. Villanelle graces her with the briefest of smiles in response. Then she is gone, off to her own quarters without a backwards glance.

Eve's quarters, accessed by a vertical ladder from the deck, are a concrete-walled cabin in the interior of the north leg. Inside is a metal bunk bed furnished with a mattress, sheet, and blanket, all damp to the touch, and a locker containing cold-weather combat clothes.

Eve is bracing herself for the chilly business of undressing when there's a bang on the steel door. It's Charlie.

"So we're a team," they say.

"Looks like it." Eve sits down on her bunk, loosens her boots, and kicks them off. "How's your cabin?"

"Same as yours, but I'm in the south leg, between Oksana and Nobby. Bit like being back in Butyrka."

"Sorry you're stuck with me as your spotter. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do."

"You're good at mathematics, right?"

"Are you just assuming that because I'm Asian?"

"Yes. Are you? Because the spotter has to make all the calculations. You know, range, wind direction, all that. And you have to keep us safe. You're the lookout."

"Great. And you?"

"I'm looking through the rifle scope. That's all I see, that little circle. Until I take the shot. Then we get out of there, fast. Who do you think the target is?"

"I have no idea, Charlie. I'm trying not to think about it."

"It's not you this time, anyway. That's got to be a nice change."

"Yes, there is that."

Charlie leans against the rust-streaked wall, arms folded. "Do you miss her? Oksana, I mean? When you're not with her?"

"Yes. But I'm not discussing her with you. What was it like in prison?"

"Really shitty. Lonely. Bad sex."

"Oh."

"I know. I thought I was going to be there forever. So I was like in heaven when I learned that I was going to get out. I mean, people say the Twelve are a patriarchal organization, but I think they offer real opportunities for women and gender non-binary people. The chance to grow as a person and live your dream. Which for me is shooting people."

"Has that always been your dream? Even as a child?"

"No, as a child I wanted to be a cosmonaut. Marksmanship was really just a hobby until the Twelve recruited me. I'd never even shot anyone before, and they still wanted me to work for them. Isn't that funny?"

"It seems like dangerous work. But I guess being a cosmonaut is, too."

"It's more dangerous for the people I'm hired to shoot."

"Not for me."

"I'm actually really good at it most of the time. I know you think I'm not, but—"

"That's not what I said."

"You didn't need to. Listen, I know you're not impressed that I missed you twice, but maybe the whole situation got too personal? Like I knew that Oksana liked you, or whatever, and that made me tense up? I have feelings, too, you know. I'm not

just some replicant, like Rachael in *Blade Runner*.”

“I know, Charlie.”

“But explain to me, why are you with a woman at all? I mean, you were married, weren’t you? To that Niko guy? Oksana always called him ‘the Polish asshole with the stupid mustache.’”

“He wasn’t an asshole, he was actually a decent guy, but yeah.”

“And that was OK?”

“It was.”

“So what happened? Did you just wake up one morning and say, ‘fuck this shit, I want some pussy’?”

“Not exactly.”

“So how was it, Eve? Tell me.”

“No offense, but I really don’t want to have this conversation with you. Or with anyone.”

“Come on, Eve. We’re a team now. Dish.”

She sighs. “I think... God, it’s hard to explain. OK, to start with, I was stuck in this frustrating job, which was going nowhere. I had this file of cases I’d compiled, just as a little side project to keep myself from going insane from boredom. Assassinations nobody was claiming credit for. Especially the ones that I thought may have been done by a woman.”

“Seems kind of sexist. Why did it matter if it was a woman? Why does everyone always think of assassination as a man’s job?”

“Well, it doesn’t have to be, but it usually is. There just aren’t that many women out there killing people, you know? So anyway, I had this file, and I realized there was this female assassin operating internationally who was targeting all these influential people, and she didn’t have a signature, but she certainly had style, and I didn’t know who or what was behind her, but she wasn’t slowing down, and that just interested me, I

guess. Here was this person who didn't obey any of the rules, who made life up as she went along, and did whatever the fuck she wanted and got away with it.

"Then I lost my job when she killed someone right under my nose, but Carolyn hired me to track her down, and when she learned I was after her, she made it personal. And as things went on, I kind of came to admire the whole game she was playing. It was so intimate. You remember that bracelet she bought me in Venice?"

"Of course I remember the bracelet. I was really pissed off with her about that."

"I know. And at that point I hadn't even met her."

"This is boring. Get to the sex."

"It wasn't really about the sex."

"It's always about the sex."

"Why are you so curious?"

"Because I'm fucking jealous, Eve. Because I want her back."

"Seriously? Do you really think any of us are going to walk away from this? That there's going to be some kind of happily ever after?"

"Don't you?"

"No. If we fail, we're dead. If we succeed, and the target's as high profile as they say, then we're dead too, because the easiest way to make sure nobody ever talks is to just kill us all."

"But why would any of us say anything? I wouldn't, you wouldn't, and Oksana definitely wouldn't. We'd just go on working for the Twelve."

"Charlie, if the FSB heard so much as a whisper that we were involved, they'd have us in an interrogation cell in Lefortovo before you could say Baileys Irish Cream. And then we'd talk, trust me. Any one of us would talk."

"I love Baileys, it's the best drink there is. And I'm sorry, but I want Oksana back. I mean, what have you and her even got in common? Nothing. I was watching you two earlier. She didn't even talk to you. You don't deserve her, Eve. I do."

"Go to bed, Charlie. I'm tired. I'll see you tomorrow."

* * *

Eve wakes up early and clambers down the ladder to the wash-room, or "head" as Raymond insists on calling it. It's tiny, but it's private, and there's a freshwater shower heated by a generator. Eve tries very hard to enjoy the sixty-odd seconds of steaming hot water she allows herself. She suspects she's going to spend most of the day feeling very cold indeed.

After breakfast—tea, bacon sandwiches—she teams up with Charlie and Ginge, a stocky, balding Welshman with a twinkling smile. "Lovely day for it," he grins, as the wind screams across the platform deck. He leads them to one end of the deck, where two makeshift hides, about ten meters apart, have been constructed from oil drums and tarpaulin. On the ground beneath the tarpaulin is a low mattress, and on the mattress is a sniper rifle with scope attachment, a metal ammunition box, and a waterproof rucksack. The edge of the platform is no more than two meters in front of them. Far below, the sea churns and boils, dashing itself against the platform's concrete legs.

"Right, now. Let's get comfy. You're on the gun, Charlie-girl. Eve, you're behind and to the right, and I'll just tuck in on the left. Proper cozy, isn't it?"

Eve sees Charlie tense up at being called a girl and then deliberately relax. They settle into their places on the mattress.

It's weird to be quite so close to Ginge and Charlie, but a relief to be out of the wind. It's still very cold, though, and her back aches badly. She wonders if she'll survive long enough to have the stitches taken out.

Ginge grins at Charlie. "Gather you've done a bit of sniper work before, then?"

"Some," Charlie answers warily.

"In that case, you'll probably know a lot of what I've got to tell you, but listen up anyway. This job is going to be a very tricky one. I'm not aware of the location of the firing point, or the identity of the target. But I do know that the window of opportunity is going to be very small, probably just seconds, the target will be moving, and the range will be in excess of seven hundred meters. So Charlie, you are going to have to act very fast and very decisively, while remaining very calm. Eve, your job is to make sure that she can do that.

"So first, your weapon. It's a British-made AX sniper rifle with a Nightforce scope. The rifle's light, it's smooth-firing, and it's very accurate. Altogether a tidy piece of kit." He opens the ammunition box to reveal rows of shining, brass-cased cartridges. "Caliber is .338 Lapua Magnum. High power. Send one of these your target's way and he's a mess. So, Charlie, what would you normally take into account when lining up a five-hundred-meter-plus shot?"

Charlie frowns. "Range, wind force and direction, drag, spin-drift, Coriolis..."

Ginge turns to Eve and smiles. "This making any sense to you, Eve?"

"Not a lot."

"Don't worry, it will do. Let's start with range. The further a projectile has to travel, the more it drops in the air due to

gravity, OK?”

“Got it.”

“Wind is also a factor. A strong crosswind will take a bullet off-course laterally, and a headwind will add drag. Cold air is denser than hot air, so that increases drag as well.”

“Right.”

“A bullet leaves the barrel of a rifle spinning at very high speed. This causes a very slight drift toward the direction of twist, which needs to be compensated for at long ranges.”

“Um. OK. I think I basically get that. And the other thing?”

“Want to talk us through the Coriolis effect, Charlie?”

“Sure. Say I shoot at Eve, right?”

“Again?”

They smile.

“Say I shoot at you at a range of a kilometer, the bullet’s going to be in the air for three or four seconds before it hits you, OK?”

“You mean before it hits whoever’s unfortunate enough to be standing close to me.”

“So while the bullet’s in the air, the Earth continues to spin. And you’re on the Earth. So even if you don’t move, you move. Get it?”

“Um... sort of. Yeah.”

“Righto then.” Ginge twinkles at her. Eve guesses that as a Special Forces sniper, working with Raymond, he took out human targets with exactly the same merry smile on his face. “In the old days, when I was in the game, we had to calculate all of these variables and adjust our sights accordingly. Fine if time was on your side, but awkward if it wasn’t. Today we’ve got a laser system that makes all these calculations automatically. You just look through the scope, and there’s your corrected aiming point.”

"So what am I here for?" Eve asks him.

"We'll get to that. First, let's set the rifle up. Charlie-girl, would you do the honors?"

"It's Charlie. Not Charlie-girl."

"Is that right?" The smile never falters. "Charlie it is, then."

Eve has never thought of them as a particularly dexterous person, but watching Charlie calmly set the rifle on its bipod, fit their face to the cheekpiece, check the scope, and work the bolt, she knows immediately that she's watching someone who's very, very good at what they do. As she watches, the weapon becomes an extension of their body.

"Eve, you get a lovely piece of kit, too." Ginge opens the waterproof rucksack and takes out an object like a truncated telescope. "This is a Leupold spotting scope, for keeping eyes on the target. It's got much more powerful magnification than the telescopic sights on the rifle, so you can actually see, close up, where the sniper's shot goes."

"Cool."

"So I'll tell you what we're going to do next. If you look out to sea, about one o'clock, you should be able to see a red buoy. It's quite small and near the limit of visibility. Got it?"

Eve squints and scans the water until she finally sees a tiny dot of red.

"Once you've got eyes on it," Ginge orders them, "look at it through your scopes."

He's right, the Leupold is an amazing piece of kit. The buoy looks close enough to reach out and touch as it swings from side to side on the waves.

"OK, that buoy is five hundred meters from the firing point, give or take, and that's the range we're going to be looking at today. I understand that the shot you're going to make on the

day is at a range of just over seven hundred meters. Your target will be moving and the atmospheric conditions will be challenging. So, shall we get to it?"

As Charlie and Eve rehearse the spoken procedure, Ginge sets up the targets. In the rucksack, there's a box of yellow party balloons, a ball of twine, scissors, a bag of small plumb-weights, and an air canister. Ginge inflates a balloon, ties it off with a length of twine, attaches a weight, and slings the whole thing off the edge of the platform. A minute later, it drifts into view, blown by the wind toward the buoy. Ginge, meanwhile, is preparing the next balloon.

Eve lets the first one drift for about a hundred meters, then picks it up in the spotter scope. The waves are not high, perhaps half a meter, but the rise and fall of the water is quite enough to make the balloon a hard target. At moments it disappears altogether. Beside her, Charlie seems to draw into herself, and becomes almost preternaturally still. Cheek to cheekpiece, eye to eyepiece, finger to trigger.

"Range four eighty," Eve announces. "Four ninety. Send it."

There's a sharp crack, instantly whipped away on the wind. The balloon continues its dance on the waves.

"Where did it go?" Ginge asks.

"I didn't see," Eve confesses. "There wasn't a splash."

"Don't look for the splash, watch the passage of the bullet. You should be able to follow the trace through the scope."

Charlie fires again, and this time Eve sees it. A tiny, transparent trail, spearing through the crosswind.

"One click to the right," she tells Charlie.

A third crack, and the balloon disappears. She lifts her eye from the scope and glimpses a pink balloon bobbing up and down a few meters to the left. There's a faint snapping sound,

and it vanishes.

"Looks like we've got competition," murmurs Ginge. "Raymond reckons that other girlie's a real dead-eye. One of the best shots he's ever worked with."

"We'll see," says Charlie grimly, and Ginge gives Eve a wink.

As the hours slip by, they settle into an efficient routine. Charlie maintains a kind of zen state, their breathing slow, their cheek welded to the gun, their features wiped of expression. There's just the wind, the snapping of the frayed edge of the tarpaulin, and the quiet glide of the bolt. "Send it," Eve says, and waits for the whipped-away crack of the shot. She tries not to think what they're preparing for. A .338 round is a hefty projectile and at a range of half a kilometer, an upper body shot will leave an exit wound the size of a rabbit hole. It's not quite the same thing as popping a balloon.

They continue to pop them, nevertheless, and so do Villanelle and Raymond. Ginge starts counting off their hits against the other team's, yellow against pink, but there's really nothing in it. At midday, they make their way to the canteen for tea and microwaved shepherd's pie. Villanelle barely speaks to Eve at lunch, but hunkers down in her chair next to her, eating swiftly and in glowering silence. Nobby and Ginge sit together with their backs to them, comparing notes in an audible undertone.

"Yours might be more of a natural marksman," Ginge murmurs. "But long-term I'd back mine. She's—"

"You're not supposed to call her 'she.'"

"Bloody hell, I'm not, am I? But you just did."

"Did what?"

"Called her 'her.'"

"Called who her?"

"Her. My one."

"You wouldn't think they'd care, would you? Being Russian and all that."

"They' as in both of them, or one of them?"

"Fuck knows. This PC lingo does my head in."

"You're a dinosaur, boyo, that's your trouble. You should be woke, like me."

Eve sips a cup of tepid tea. She no longer has any idea what she's doing, or why. Is she training to take part in a political assassination for the Twelve, or working as an undercover agent for Tikhomirov and the FSB? Her compass is spinning. The only real allegiance she has is to Villanelle. She's rehearsing a murder just to be at her side.

She returns with Ginge and Charlie to the firing point, and they continue until dark. The wind gets angrier as the light goes, and the desolation of the place seeps into her soul, or what's left of it. Charlie, meanwhile, is calm, patiently sending bullets to targets as Eve calls the shots. She learns how to choose the moment to speak, how to align her breathing with Charlie's so that they're exhaling as the balloon is lifted by the swell, and squeezing off the shot as it achieves a millisecond of stillness at the peak of the wave. For all the differences between them, they're a good team.

That night, as Nobby and Ginge exchange banter over the food preparation—impossible to call it cooking—Raymond informs them that it's Christmas Day. Pulling a liter bottle of brandy and six paper cups from a locker, he pours a large shot into each and hands them out.

They look at each other awkwardly. Villanelle bolts her brandy straight down and holds out her cup for more, which Raymond hesitantly gives her. She knocks that back, too, then wraps herself around Eve, planting wet, brandy-scented kisses

on her cheeks as Eve tries to squirm away, complaining about making a scene in front of the others. Whatever Villanelle was sulking about all day seems to have been forgotten.

Charlie sips their brandy and shudders.

“Don’t you like it?” Eve asks, as Villanelle unsuccessfully attempts to get Raymond to refill her cup again.

“I like it with hot chocolate, fifty-fifty. That’s how Emma and Celia used to drink it. By itself it’s too acid.”

“You’re very good on that gun.”

“Not that good,” Villanelle interjects. “Lucky for you, Eve.”

Charlie ignores her. “Thank you. It’s super helpful for me, having you spotting. At the moment it’s all just sea out there. But when we get to the real firing point, you’ll see how important your job is. Do you like working with me?”

The question takes Eve by surprise. For all Charlie’s lethal proficiency, they can be almost childlike at moments. She is just about to answer when Villanelle bounces up and starts to dance. They all watch in amazement as she bops around the tiny space, winding between them with her arms and hips swaying. “Come on, everyone,” she sings out. “It’s Christmas.”

No one moves. Instead, they watch open-mouthed as Villanelle throws open the steel door of the container and shimmies outside. After a moment, Eve follows her onto the unlit platform deck, where she’s still flailing around, her combat clothes flattened to her body by the salt wind. Eve grabs her, terrified she’s going to go too close to the edge, and she twists in her arms.

“What are you doing?” Eve shouts.

Villanelle starts to answer, but Eve has to put her ear to Villanelle’s mouth to hear her words against the roar of the gale. “Didn’t you hear what Raymond said? It’s Christmas.”

"I heard him, yes."

"Will you dance with me?"

Eve hesitates, then smiles broadly. "What the hell. Why not?"

They spin around, clutching desperately at each other as the wind and the sleet whip around them. Eve stumbles over Villanelle's feet and falls to the ground, dragging Villanelle with her, and they lie flat on their backs for a minute, laughing and howling at the sky. Then, hand-in-hand, with their eyes streaming and their cheeks and noses tinged pink from the cold, they make their way back to the container.

As they enter, the ping of the microwave announces that the food is ready. It's some kind of curry-based sludge from a packet. There's a moment's silence as Eve and Villanelle take their seats at the table, then Nobby launches into an anecdote about a woman he met in a club in Brentwood High Street, and Charlie starts telling them how they're sure they have a future as a Hollywood film actor, and what does Eve think, and Eve pulls herself together and says that stranger things have happened.

Physically, Charlie would make a good superhero, with their sculpted features, muscled arms, and statuesque body. And it may well be that audiences would overlook the homicide charge, the jail time, and the bizarre English accent. The problem, Eve suspects, would be the actual acting. Subtlety is not Charlie's forte. Witness the way that they're staring with frank, open-mouthed lust at Villanelle, who's licking the last of the curry sauce from her paper plate.

"Charlie," Eve says. "It's not going to happen."

Their gaze doesn't flicker. "Believe what you want, Eve. I've known her longer than you have. I know what she likes."

* * *

There's a bang on the steel door as Eve is getting ready for bed, just like the night before, but this time it's Villanelle, who lets herself in without waiting for an invitation.

"Wow," she says, surveying the tiny lodgings. "Your cabin is so much nicer than mine."

"Really?"

"No. They are all equally shitty."

"You're not supposed to be here. What would Raymond say if he knew?"

"Do you want me to leave?" she says, one hand on the door.

"No."

"It's fine, I'll go. I'm sure Charlie would appreciate some company."

"Don't you dare." Eve grabs her by the sleeve and pulls her toward the narrow bunk.

"I would never."

"You already have."

"OK, I would never again."

"Can you please tell Charlie that? Because they seem to think—"

Villanelle leans in and silences her with her mouth.

"You taste like curry," says Eve, when they separate just long enough to divest themselves of their clothes.

"So do you."

* * *

The next morning, Eve wakes at dawn. Villanelle is gone, having slipped away at some point in the middle of the night. She

dresses and makes her way up to the deck. Around her, the sea heaves itself into blue-black peaks and furrows, marbled with foam. The sky is a soft gray, the wind sighs. At the westward end of the platform, Nobby and Ginge are having a smoke, roll-ups cupped in their hands.

Eve has grown cautiously fond of their desolate outpost. Its physical boundaries are hard and unambiguous. For as long as they're there, they're alive. But she can't help but wonder, in the unlikely event that they stay that way, whether she and Villanelle will be able to sustain the tentative equilibrium they have been moving toward.

Villanelle's cheerful mood has carried over from the night before. She greets Eve warmly when she enters the canteen, pulling out a chair for her and kissing her on the cheek when she sits down. Charlie walks in a minute later, and Villanelle fixes them with a cold stare and drapes her arm over Eve's shoulders.

Charlie returns the stare with one of their own and takes a seat at the opposite end of the table.

"Did I miss something?" Eve asks, looking back and forth between them.

"Nope," says Charlie.

"Yep," says Villanelle.

"Which is it?" says Eve.

"Charlie was waiting for me in my bunk when I got to back to my cabin last night. Naked." Villanelle widens her eyes as if shocked by the impropriety.

"How many times do I have to tell you to fuck off before you get the hint, Charlie?"

"Why don't *you* fuck off, Eve? You know how this is going to end. You're too boring for her. Sooner or later, she's just going to dump you for someone more like her. Someone who actually

understands her. Someone like me. Stop wasting everyone's time."

"Don't I get any say in this?" says Villanelle, but Eve has already reached for the nearest hard object, which turns out to be an unopened can of baked beans, and hurled it straight at Charlie. The can catches them right between the eyes. They collapse sideways off their chair, slide to the floor, and stay there.

Villanelle gapes at Eve. "Nice aim," she says.

"Thanks," says Eve. "Maybe I should be the one sniping." She picks up the dented can, slips a finger through the ring-pull, and shakes the beans into a saucepan.

Raymond walks in, and seeing Charlie slumped on the floor, stops dead. "What the fuck's going on?" he asks, incredulous. "You been fighting?"

"You know how emotional we women get," says Eve, banging the saucepan down onto the Calor stove and lighting the gas.

On the floor, Charlie stirs and groans. "Don't lump me in with the women." There's a knot the size of a walnut in the center of their forehead, and a nasty-looking cut. A trail of blood runs into one eyebrow.

Raymond looks at them irritably. "So what happened?"

"Hit their head. They'll be fine."

"Better be. You're her spotter. Find the first-aid box and get a dressing on that wound."

Eve ignores him, and when Villanelle stands Charlie's chair up, helps them to their feet, and examines the bump, she ignores her, too. When the baked beans are ready, she takes the hot pan and a spoon outside to the deck, where she runs into Nobby and Ginge.

"Lovely morning for it," says Ginge, as he says every morning.

"Sure is," Eve says. She's never eaten an entire tin of beans before.

When Charlie and Eve meet at the firing point, they've got a bandage around their head and regard Eve warily. Ginge clearly knows they've had a fight, but tactfully makes no reference to it. Instead, as Eve makes the range and trace calls, her voice calm and steady, Charlie puts round after round through the sniper rifle. Visibility is good, the sea is calm, and there's almost no crosswind. Charlie seems to have suffered no serious damage, because they're soon knocking out the balloon targets at ranges close to a kilometer.

"I wish there was more wind," Charlie mutters to Ginge.

"Too easy, is it?"

"No, Eve keeps farting."

"Ah." He leans around and grins at Eve. "I had a dog with that trouble. Good dog, mind."

Somehow, the day passes. Eve holds on to her anger, keeping it icy and sharp inside her, and addresses not one word to Charlie that she doesn't have to. The sight of their bandage and the livid swelling beneath it consoles her a little. It was a brilliant reflex shot, if she may say so herself, and she's fairly confident that they're not planning any immediate revenge.

They don't need to. They already know their words found their mark, probing Eve's insecurities and dragging her concerns about the viability of a future with Villanelle out into the open.

At the end of the day, a hard wind gets up and thin spits of snow come whirling in from the east. Standing on the edge of the platform in her combat clothes, her face pricking with the cold, Eve feels herself consumed with sadness. She gazes at the sea for what seems like a very long time. The light fades, and

the feeling drains from her exposed face and hands.

Eventually, Villanelle comes to find her. She reaches out and takes Eve's frigid hands, rubbing them between her own to warm them. "Charlie was wrong, you know. About understanding me. You're the only one who's ever even come close."

"What about the part where you inevitably get bored and dump me? Were they wrong about that, too?"

"Yes. Nothing about you is boring. Even the boring stuff that you do every day that you wouldn't bother telling anyone else because it's really that boring is fascinating to me, because it's you, Eve."

Eve finally tears her eyes away from the water to look at her. "Assuming we survive this and they actually let us walk away, what then? We buy a farm, settle down, grow old together?"

"Why not?"

"Well, for starters, I don't know the first thing about farming. Besides, we'd never make it that long. We'd consume each other before we got old."

"That actually sounds kind of nice."

The next day passes swiftly. Eve continues to limit her exchanges with Charlie to calling the shots for them.

They have two nights left on the North Sea platform, then they return to Russia. At least she's assuming that that's the case, as her passport contains no visa for any other country. Over the course of the day, she runs through possible ways of contacting Tikhomirov. Her only chance to do this will be when they've landed in Russia, and are making their way through the border controls. It will be impossible beforehand, while they are under the eye of Raymond, and almost certainly impossible afterward.

She considers different scenarios. A diversion of some kind, in the course of which she throws herself at the mercy of customs or security officials. A medical emergency, perhaps, with her writhing on the arrivals' floor with simulated gastroenteritis. Could she carry that off? Unlikely. Raymond will be looking out for any hint of weird or erratic behavior. He will keep them on a very short leash, and he's undoubtedly practiced in dealing with the kind of functionaries one finds at Russian airports.

Perhaps she could steal a phone? The passport queue would be a possible place to lift one from a fellow traveler's back pocket or bag. All she would have to do would be to input Tikhomirov's

number and let it ring. He would know it was her and be able to identify her location and track the phone. The penalty if she was discovered, however, would be severe, and given how closely they would all be watched, discovery was the probable outcome.

They've been working their way through their evening meal for the best part of fifteen minutes when she realizes what's happening right in front of her eyes. Raymond's watching them from the head of the table, and making entries in a small spiral notebook.

He's writing. With a pencil.

When he's finished, Raymond shoves the notebook in his trouser pocket and tosses the pencil onto a worktop, between a box of plastic spoons and a glass jar filled with teabags. Looking up, he catches her eye, and they exchange tight, noncommittal smiles. Neither of them has quite worked out how they should conduct themselves with each other. He's tried to kill her at least thrice, and she's never disguised the fact that she finds him repulsive. It's not the ideal basis for a friendship.

She glances at the pencil. It's almost hidden behind the cardboard spoon-box, and as she looks away, a plan comes to her fully formed. It's dangerous, so dangerous that she can't bring herself to think of it in too much detail, but it's all she has. And weirdly, it brings her a sort of peace.

* * *

Sliding out of her bunk in combat clothes and socks, Eve opens the door inch by inch, terrified that a squeak of hinges will betray her. Outside the cabin, it's dark, but she's learned the layout. She's on a small landing, inside one of the platform's

cylindrical legs. Bolted to the wall opposite her is a ladder, which runs upward to the deck and downwards to the level of the sea. Below her is Ginge's cabin. Above her is Raymond's. She has to get past his door without him hearing her if she's to get to the deck.

Taking a deep breath, she begins to climb the ladder. Her socks are slippery on the cold steel rungs, and she can feel her heart pounding fearfully in her chest, but she forces herself to keep going. There's no sound from Raymond's cabin. She moves upward, and now she can hear the faint hum of the generator that provides the platform with power; it's housed in a hut next to the canteen.

As Eve hauls herself through the hatch onto the platform deck, a gale-force wind whips her hair into her eyes. Above her, the sky is a streaky blue-black; around her, the sea is a roiling gray, faintly illuminated by the warning lights at each corner of the platform. She crouches there for a moment. She can no longer hear the generator, only the scream of the wind and the crashing of the waves. Then, keeping low, she runs to the canteen and closes the door behind her. Inside, it's quieter, but no less cold. A couple of steps take her to the worktop, and she reaches around the box of spoons for the pencil.

A moment later, it's in her hand, and just as she feels its hexagonal shape between her fingers, the door swings open, and a torch shines in her face. The shock is so great that she stops breathing, and stares open-mouthed into the light.

"You deceitful little cunt," Raymond says. "I knew I was right about you."

Eve can't see his face behind the torch beam, but she can imagine the sneer. There's no way she can escape. He's standing between her and the door.

“You were going to try and get a message out, weren’t you? You saw me writing notes with a pencil and you thought, I’ll have that. Well you know what, you dumb bitch, that’s exactly what you were supposed to think. I left the pencil there knowing you’d come looking for it. You fucking women, honestly.”

Waves of fury wash through Eve. She feels weirdly focused and lightheaded.

“I wish I’d saved everyone’s time and killed you in St. Petersburg. You and your psycho girlfriend. But hey, better late than never.” He reaches out with his free hand and grabs her arm, wrenching her toward the open door. She resists, pulling back hard, and as she does so, she has the surreal impression that her body has been occupied by someone else. Someone strong, and ruthlessly efficient. Someone like Villanelle.

She continues to pull away from Raymond with all her strength, grunting with the effort, and then she jumps forward, unbalancing him so that he falls heavily backward and cracks his head on the steel door jamb. As he lies there, half-stunned and blinking in the raking torch beam, she shoves the pencil as hard as she can up his left nostril.

Raymond’s eyes widen, his fingers writhe, and a quavering sound issues from his throat. He tries to lift his head, but she keeps hold of the protruding end of the pencil and pushes downwards, forcing it further and further up his nose. The pencil sticks fast after about ten centimeters, so she puts her weight behind it, and it slips in another couple of centimeters. Taking the torch from Raymond’s hand, she shines it in his face. His eyes have rolled back into his head, his lips are fluttering, and a worm of blood is crawling from his open nostril into his mouth.

"Fucking women," Eve murmurs. "What can you do, eh?" The point of the pencil has almost certainly penetrated Raymond's brain, but not lethally. She needs something hard and heavy. "Stay there," she orders him, and shines the torch around the canteen. Lying on the bookshelf is a substantial hardback volume. She's reaching for this when Raymond half-rises to his feet, his eyes staring wildly. Grabbing the book with both hands, Eve draws it back, takes aim, and smacks the pencil in another inch. He sinks to the floor, his legs moving feebly."

"Eve?"

She drops the book with a shriek, and clutches her heart. "Jesus, Villanelle."

"What are you doing?"

"What the fuck does it look like I'm doing? Hammering a pencil into Raymond's brain with a copy of *Birds of the North Sea*."

"Is that good?"

"Definitive, according to the *Observer*."

"No, that you're killing Raymond. Was he annoying you?"

"He caught me stealing the pencil."

"I don't understand."

"I'll explain in a minute. Just hold his legs while I give it one last bash."

When Raymond finally stops shuddering, Eve subsides to an exhausted crouch against the container wall.

"Is he dead?" Villanelle asks, flicking the end of the pencil with her finger.

"Close enough."

She hunkers down opposite Eve, reaches for the torch, and switches it off.

"Night vision," she explains.

Eve can't see much, but she can feel the warm bulk of Raymond's body against her feet.

"So, a pencil, huh? Resourceful."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you. I went to your cabin and you weren't there."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"I missed you."

"Oh. Well, since you're here, could you give me a hand with this? I need to get rid of his body. Over the edge of the platform."

"OK. Grab a leg each?"

It takes them several minutes to drag Raymond out of the canteen to the westward end of the platform.

"Do you still want that pencil?" Villanelle shouts, as the wind screams in their ears.

Eve had forgotten that securing the pencil was the point of the whole exercise. She nods, and, kneeling beside Raymond, tries to pull it out of his nose with her fingertips. Raymond's eyes roll in his head, but she can't budge it. It's stuck tight.

Villanelle tries, but does no better. She looks at Eve. "The only way we're going to do this is if I hold his head, and you take the end of the pencil between your teeth and pull it out."

"That's a really disgusting idea."

"You're one who wants the pencil."

"Yeah, I know. Fuck."

"So do it."

They do it. Villanelle locks her fingers under Raymond's jaw, and Eve leans sideways into his face and closes her teeth on the end of the pencil. His lips are dry, his stubble rasps against her cheek, and his breath, now coming in shallow gasps, smells of brandy and curry. Eve pulls at the pencil as hard as she can, but

it doesn't move, and she's afraid of snapping the end off with her teeth. Eventually she lifts her head, gagging, and drags sea air into her lungs.

"Again," Villanelle mouths.

"You want to try?" Eve shouts at her, and she shakes her head.

Eve takes the pencil in her teeth again, braces her hands against Villanelle's biceps, and pulls as hard as she can. This time she feels something yielding. The pencil moves a millimeter or two, and as it finally slides out, she feels liquid warmth bathe her neck and chest.

"Fuck," she says. "There's blood everywhere."

"Don't worry about it. We'll deal with it. Sit back to back with me so I can kick this asshole over the edge."

Eve feels Villanelle's shoulders tense as she shoves with her legs, and when she looks round, Raymond is gone. She doesn't even hear the splash.

They spend the next ten minutes tidying up. While Eve washes off the worst of the blood with water from the canteen, Villanelle creeps into Raymond's room and finds her a clean T-shirt and combat shirt. Eve pulls these on, then they locate the Napoleon bottle, which is still half full, and take it outside. Villanelle pours the remaining brandy over the edge of the platform, and leaves the empty bottle standing on the deck. Eve knots her bloody clothes into a bundle and, using the torch as a sinker, throws them out to sea. Then, with the night's work completed, they depart the deck.

Behind Eve, Villanelle closes the hatch. Silently, rung by rung, she follows her down the steel ladder, past Raymond's empty cabin, to Eve's. Eve turns on the light, and they stand there for a moment. Eve starts to undress, but discovers that she is shaking so much that she can't unbutton her shirt. She tries to speak,

but she can't do that, either, because Villanelle has pulled her face down into the warm place between her shoulder and the slope of her breast, and has locked her there so tightly, with her cheek sealed against Eve's forehead and her hand in her hair, that Eve can hardly breathe.

"It's OK if you feel weird. You just killed someone for the first time. With a pencil." She holds her for a time, then lifts Eve's face opposite hers. "Are you OK?" she asks.

All Eve can do is nod.

"You still have blood on you," she says, tracing a finger along a smear on Eve's throat.

"I think I need a shower."

"It's the middle of the night. You'll wake Ginge up."

"I doubt that. And it doesn't matter if we do, anyway, now that Raymond's gone."

"We?"

"Come with me. I don't want to be alone right now."

Afterwards, in Eve's narrow bunk, with all traces of Raymond washed away, they huddle under the thin blanket and swap recollections of their first encounters.

"It was that hot, thundery night in Shanghai," Villanelle says. "We only saw each other for a second in the street, but I just knew. It was like looking at myself. That's why I climbed into your room at the hotel and watched you sleep. To make sure it was true."

"And was it? Is it?"

"You know the answer to that. You proved it tonight."

"In Shanghai, when you came to the hotel..." She trails off, unsure if she wants to finish her question.

"Yes?"

"Was that before or after you killed Bill?"

Eve feels Villanelle stiffen beside her. "After."

"Why did you do it? Why Bill?"

She hesitates before answering. "I think it was mostly that I wanted your full attention," she says finally.

"Well, it worked. You had it. I wanted to kill you. With my bare hands."

"Do you still want to?"

Eve takes a moment to consider this before she replies. "Sometimes. It feels like I'm betraying Bill, being with you. But I don't think I could ever actually do it. I couldn't bear to lose you, too."

"I'm sorry, Eve."

"Please don't do that. Don't apologize if you don't mean it."

"I do mean it."

Eve holds out her arm, inviting Villanelle to lay her head down on her shoulder, and traces delicate shapes on the bare skin of her back with her fingertips. They stay this way for several minutes before Villanelle speaks again.

"Did I ruin your life? Do you think I'm a monster?"

"You're so many things."

"Doesn't answer my question."

"I think we all have monsters inside of us. It's just that most people manage to keep theirs hidden."

"Well, I haven't."

"No. Neither have I."

"Are you going to tell me why you wanted that pencil so much?"

"Can we talk about it tomorrow? I don't want to think about that right now."

"OK." Villanelle shifts so she can tilt her head up and brush her lips along the line of Eve's jaw. "I wish we could just stay

like this forever.”

“Me too. One day.”

“One day.”

* * *

When Raymond doesn't show up for breakfast the next morning, no one takes much notice. The empty brandy bottle at the edge of the platform has been noted, and Nobby and Ginge make sympathetic references to hangovers and mornings after. By eight thirty, however, the two men are looking at their watches and exchanging concerned glances. Ginge offers to go to Raymond's cabin and wake him, and when he returns, he looks grave.

He and Nobby confer, then the whole team splits up and searches every inch of the platform. It doesn't take long. The two office containers are locked, but a glance through the windows tells them they're unoccupied.

“There wasn't a boat or inflatable craft or something he could have taken?” Eve suggests helpfully, and Ginge shakes his head.

“No. And even if there was, it was blowing at least force eight last night. The boss wouldn't have been crazy enough to try anything like that.”

“Only possible conclusion, he went over the side,” Nobby says. “Probably after downing that bottle.”

“Deliberately?” Eve asks.

“Nah. Why would he? He was well up for this project and obviously wanted to see it through. Probably went to take a piss and lost his footing. Easily done.”

Ginge nods. “Question is, what do the rest of us do now? We've got twenty-four hours until the chopper comes to pick

us up.”

“Carry on as before?” Villanelle suggests. “It doesn’t need to change anything.”

“I can be your spotter today,” Nobby says.

“Sure. Whatever.”

Ginge looks from face to face. “Everyone OK with that? We carry on as we were? Meanwhile I’ll see what I can do about the lock on that front office. Pretty sure there’s a satphone in there and that the antenna works.”

“Who you gonna call?” Nobby asks. “Ghostbusters?”

“Our employers. Give them a heads-up about the boss.”

“Rather you than me.”

“Got to be done, boyo.”

They return to the firing points. The sea and the sky are calmer today, and visibility much improved. Charlie’s nailing pretty much every target at seven hundred meters plus, now. One shot, one kill, as Ginge continually impresses on them. From what Eve can see, Villanelle’s hit rate is every bit as consistent.

* * *

Eve and Villanelle spend their last night on the platform in Eve’s cabin again. Eve tells Villanelle about her encounter with Tikhomirov, and how he asked her to contact him if she discovers what the Twelve are planning, and she says that, if possible, she intends to do exactly this. The more important their target is, she argues, the less likely it is that the Twelve will let them walk away when the job’s done. They’re more than expendable, they’re a liability.

If she can make contact with Tikhomirov, on the other hand,

and provide him with enough information to intercept them before they fire a shot, he may see an advantage in keeping them alive, and letting it be known that they were acting as his agents all along. Villanelle is briefly angry that Eve didn't tell her earlier, and deeply suspicious of any alliance with the FSB, but agrees that in the long run, they are probably marginally better off relying on the state security service than the Twelve.

"And this is what you wanted the pencil for?" she asks.

"Yes. To try to get a message to him."

Eve relays her plan, such as it is, and Villanelle considers it in silence.

"It could work," she says eventually, stroking Eve's cheek with delicate fingers. "I still kind of want to go through with the hit. I'd love to pull the trigger on someone really high profile. Just to sign off."

"I thought you said you didn't want to do it anymore."

"I don't want to do it for *them*. This one would be for me."

"I wish you didn't enjoy it so much."

"I'm good at it. When Konstantin was still alive... Those kills that I carried out for him were perfection. Perfectly planned, perfectly executed. Fucking works of art, to be honest."

"That's not all it's about, though, is it? I mean, you're good at lots of things."

"I'm good at everything. Except humility, maybe. But I could probably be good at that, too, if I tried."

"And you're not a sadist. You don't get off on watching people suffer."

"Not particularly." She slides her hand down Eve's back and spansks her lightly. "Apart from you, obviously."

"Very funny. But seriously. I want to know. What is it about killing that excites you so much?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that just in case you've forgotten, you're a murderer, too, now."

"Well, yeah, OK, but Raymond was..."

"Was what?"

"You know what. I didn't enjoy it. It didn't excite me or anything. I just did what I had to do in order to survive. I had no choice."

"And I did? You really think I could say 'no, sorry, Konstantin, I can't carry out your contract. I've got a hairdressing appointment at Carita in the morning, then lunch at Arpège, and in the afternoon I was planning to hack into Eve Polastri's email, masturbate, and eat a box of Fauchon marrons glacés'?"

"You did that?"

"What, eat a whole box of marrons glacés?"

"Hack into my email and masturbate."

"I tried. But it wasn't interesting. No sexy messages. No nude selfies."

"Why would I take nude selfies?"

"For me to find, obviously. I wasn't going to finger myself over your bank statements. But back to you, Eve. You're so many things. You're an ex-spy, although if we're being honest, not a great one. You're the ex-wife of the Polish asshole with the stupid mustache. You're clever, a bit nerdy, and surprisingly needy."

"What? You're way needier than I am."

"You're a scaredy-cat, but also weirdly brave. You're sexy and adorable and amazing in bed and you're a really, really terrible cook."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen inside your fridge. It was tragic."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, you have zero fashion sense."

"Hey, I can put together a decent outfit if I need to. I just prefer to be comfortable."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"Because comfortable is what you make people with a terminal illness."

"Isn't freedom of movement kind of important in your line of work? Didn't they cover that in assassin training?"

"No. I was trained to look devastating. Obviously."

"I'd still rather be comfortable."

"So weird. Anyway, the point I'm making is that if I took all these things away from you, if I peeled it all away, layer by layer, there would still be you. Underneath everything, there's Eve. And you know that about yourself, you know exactly who you are. But I don't have that. If I take away everything I've done, and all the people I've been, or pretended to be—all the layers—there's nothing. No Villanelle, no Oksana, no self at all, just a..." She's silent for a moment. "Have you seen that movie, *The Invisible Man*? You couldn't see him, but you could see the effect he had on the things and the people around him. That's how I feel. The only reason I know that there's a me at all is that I see the trail I leave. I've changed history, and if it wasn't for me, the world would be a different place. I see the fear and the horror in people's eyes, and that tells me that I exist."

"So it makes you feel powerful?"

"It makes me feel alive."

"And you want to feel that way one more time before you give it up for good?"

"Maybe."

"But if that's what it takes to make you feel alive, you'll never walk away. There will be one more kill, then one more, and one more after that. Until someone kills you."

"I'll walk away, trust me."

"Why would you?"

"Because it isn't the only thing that makes me feel alive. Not anymore."

"What else does?"

"You, Eve. You do. You look at me and I feel seen. I feel like there's someone there, underneath all the bullshit. A real Villanelle. Maybe even a real Oksana. A real me."

"But that obviously isn't enough, since you still want to do this."

She shrugs. "You're only as good as your last. If it's some real high-end evil motherfucker, I wouldn't want the job to go to anyone else."

"What if it's someone not evil at all? What if it's a woman?"

"You think women can't be evil? You should have met my mother."

"The thing is, we don't have any choice about any of this. When the time comes, they're going to deliver us to our firing points, and we're just going to have to do it or get killed. If I try to get a message to Tikhomirov, at least we have a chance."

"What would you even tell him? We don't know anything useful. No who, no where, no when, no why."

"You're right, we don't. All we know is the range. And that's not very helpful."

"Do you think Nobby and Ginge know the target?"

"They don't need to, so no, I don't think they do. They're just old army buddies of Raymond's. And I doubt he knew, either."

"It's going to be soon."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know how the Twelve work. Everything's arranged so you're not just hanging around. You're given time to prepare, but not too much time, because the longer you keep people waiting, the more likely it is that there will be some kind of security issue. Whatever we're doing, it's going to be happening within a couple of days of our leaving here."

"We don't have much time, then."

"No, we don't. So stop talking and come here."

The helicopter comes for them at midday. Aboard are two Twelve paramilitaries, both carrying sidearms. They jump down onto the platform, carry out a thorough search of the entire installation, nod cursorily at Nobby and Ginge, and shepherd the rest of them on board the Super Puma. As they swing away into the wind, Eve peers downwards, suddenly fearful that Raymond's body will appear, arms outstretched, borne up by the choppy waves. But there's nothing, no accusing corpse, only the diminishing figures of Nobby and Ginge on the platform, and the gray wastes of the sea.

At Ostend, the two men keep them on a short rein, fast-tracking them through security and passport control and marching them out onto the tarmac, where the Learjet is fueled up and waiting. Eve squeezes Villanelle's hand as they take off, and keeps hold of it. Their destination, as expected, is Moscow. The engine noise is little more than a discreet hum, but Eve is too nervous to talk.

When faced with danger, Eve and Villanelle are polar opposites. Eve foresees terrible outcomes, and becomes possessed by fear, while Villanelle's sense of impending threat is so shallow as to barely register. As her body prepares itself for action, her mind remains calm. It must be the same for Charlie, who

lounches back in their seat, chewing gum that they've somehow extracted from the soldiers, and studiously ignores the others.

"Are you all right?" Villanelle asks.

Eve nods. There's so much to say, and she can't say any of it.

"Glad you left England with me?"

She laughs mirthlessly. "Did I really have a choice?"

"I'll keep you safe, Eve. Just trust me, OK?"

"I'm worried now. What do you know that I don't?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying. However this thing plays out."

"If you know something, talk to me."

"I don't know anything. I'm just saying. Trust me. Trust us."

"I'm scared shitless."

"I know."

Scared or not, Eve proceeds with her plan. After breakfast on the platform, she surreptitiously tore a blank strip from a page of *Birds of the North Sea* and glued it into the back of her passport, using a couple of dabs of honey. Now, as soon as they're airborne, she takes out her hard-won pencil and writes, heading the message with the telephone number that she's memorized, and asking the person reading it to call the number urgently, on a matter of state security, and deliver the following message to General Tikhomirov: *2 shooters, this week, range 700m.*

Shortly before they begin their descent to Moscow, one of the paramilitaries collects their passports, securing them with an elastic band. They seem to circle the city forever, and as they go through landing and disembarkation procedures at Sheremetyevo, Eve is so terrified she almost vomits. If the paramilitary examines the passports, as he well may, that will be the end. If she's lucky, it'll be a bullet in the back of the head. She doesn't want to think of the alternatives.

Entering the airport buildings, they're fast-tracked through a small VIP customs hall. There are two officers, dressed in bulky green winter uniforms. An older woman with tiny, granite eyes, and a shaven-headed young man whose broad-brimmed cap is several sizes too large for him.

Their paramilitary chaperone takes their passports from his pocket and removes the elastic band, and as he flicks through the pages of the top passport before passing it to the woman, Eve feels her knees begin to shake. Her face goes white, and Villanelle puts an arm around her and ask if she's all right. She nods, and the other Twelve guy peers at her suspiciously. "Low blood sugar," she stammers. "I shouldn't have skipped breakfast."

"Give them all to me," the granite-eyed woman orders. Her name tag identifies her as Lapotnikova, Inna. Taking the passports, she opens the first, looks up, and beckons Charlie to the counter. Eve is second in line after Charlie. She watches Ms. Lapotnikova slowly page through the forgery, and come to a halt as she reaches the page with the note. She reads it expressionlessly, and slowly looks up at Eve, one eyebrow raised questioningly. Eve nods imperceptibly, and she discreetly pulls out the note and returns the passport. Then, handing the remaining three passports to her colleague, she unhurriedly leaves the room.

For a moment, Eve is weak with relief, then it occurs to her that she may simply have gone to call airport security. Perhaps she thinks Eve is some deranged conspiracy theorist. Either way, she's finished. Under her suddenly too-hot clothes, she feels a sweat bead running down her spine. She tries to look casual, and Villanelle squeezes her hand. "Relax," she mutters. "You look like you're trying not to shit your pants."

Lapotnikova returns just as the customs officer in the big hat is handing back the last of the passports. She ignores Eve and returns to her seat. Eve wants to hug her. They are through. Eve has done everything she can, and now the rest is up to Tikhomirov, although whether her message will be the slightest help to him, she doesn't know. She's guessing not.

They're driven back to Moscow in the same SUV, this time by one of their armed guards. The second guard sits in the passenger seat with his pistol in his lap, presumably in case one of them tries to filch it from its holster. Eve is in the back seat, as usual, between Villanelle and Charlie. The symbolism of this arrangement is not lost on Charlie, who stares pointedly out of the window the entire journey.

As they approach central Moscow, they're forced to negotiate street barriers, road closures, and diversions. "What's going on?" Eve asks the driver, as the traffic slows to a standstill.

"New Year's celebrations," he answers, irritably negotiating a three-point turn.

"Tonight?" She's lost all track of the date.

"No. Day after tomorrow."

They're delivered back to the twelfth floor of the gray skyscraper and shown to their old rooms. Eve is scared, in a generalized sort of way, but mostly just very, very hungry. Whatever tomorrow holds, there's tonight's dinner to look forward to, followed by a night in a full-sized bed with Villanelle. For now, that's enough.

Below them, as dusk falls, Moscow lights up. The New Year decorations are in place, and the streets, cathedrals, and skyscrapers are a blaze of gold and silver and sapphire. Gazing out of the window, Eve thinks how wonderful it would be to be able to explore the city with Villanelle, unburdened with

fear and horror and dreams of death, and lose themselves in the dazzle and enchantment of it all.

At dinner, Richard questions them closely about Raymond. Charlie does most of the talking, explaining that the general consensus was that he'd been drinking late at night, and had fallen off the platform.

"You knew him better than anyone, Villanelle. How did he strike you?"

"He was like he always was. I never liked him, but he was professional, and ran things properly. Everything was well organized, supplies, weaponry, all that. And then one morning he just wasn't there."

"Eve?"

"What can I say? I couldn't stand the guy, but like Villanelle says, everything ran smoothly. I just kept out of his way."

"Nadia?"

"My name is Charlie. And yeah. What the others said. But I'm pretty sure he was drinking. I was making myself coffee one morning before breakfast, and he came in smelling of alcohol, like it was coming out of his skin. Obviously I didn't say anything to him, but—"

"Did you tell either of the instructors?"

"They didn't ask me. And after he disappeared I didn't want to say negative things about him in case people blamed me. But it's true."

They're looking at Eve, not with hatred or jealousy, but something she can't quite decipher. They give her the ghost of a nod.

Richard brightens. "Who'd like some wine? It's the Château Pétrus."

"What, again?" Villanelle says.

He smiles. "We must celebrate your return. Seasonal greetings, and all that. I believe our little North Sea getaway is quite chilly at this time of year." He fills their glasses. "Good luck to you, ladies."

"And to me," says Charlie.

The next day passes with stifling slowness. They're not permitted to leave the twelfth floor, or to do anything except pace around like zoo animals, breathing the building's recycled air. There are no books, no newspapers, no computers or phones. Villanelle and Eve have temporarily run out of things to say to each other, and Eve spends most of the afternoon sleeping, with Villanelle curled up beside her. After dinner, Richard announces a film show, and they follow him into a projection room with a screen covering most of one wall. "It's not long, and there's no sound," he tells them, as they take their places. "But it's quite an eye-opener."

There are no titles, just a recording date and a time code. Then a silent, wide-angle shot of a hotel suite from a fixed camera, almost certainly concealed. The quality of the film isn't great, but this is clearly a very upscale, thousands-of-dollars-a-night sort of place. The color scheme is parchment and oak, the curtains are ivory silk, the lighting is discreet. Two men in suits, holding whisky tumblers, sit in armchairs on either side of a marble fireplace. Both are immediately recognizable. One is Valery Stechkin, the president of Russia, the other is Ronald Loy, president of the United States. Both have the rouged, powdered look of the recently embalmed. A third man, with the watchful demeanor of a bodyguard, stands by a door.

"Not lookalikes?" Eve asks Richard.

"Absolutely not."

Stechkin and Loy stand, place their empty tumblers on the

mantelpiece, and shake hands. Loy then walks Stechkin to the door. The film cuts and then reprises from the same viewpoint with lower lighting as the door opens and three young women walk in. They're all blonde, long-legged, and spectacular in a listless, stoned sort of way. Loy leans back in his chair, nods, and issues an order. The women undress, drape their clothes over the vacant armchair, and start kissing and caressing each other's breasts with much eye-rolling and simulating groaning. "Get on with it," Villanelle mutters.

Eventually they're treated to the full three-way performance. It's pretty dispiriting. Loy doesn't join in, but sits back in his chair, his expression disdainful. When one of the women experimentally waggles a glistening strap-on in front of his nose, he responds irritably, batting it away with a tiny, childlike hand.

The film cuts to a bedroom furnished in the same rich, fustian colors. The bed itself is enormous and covered in gold damask. The three women walk into the shot, followed by Loy. He orders them to climb onto the bed, where they bounce up and down in desultory fashion before coming to a halt, crouching down, and as one, beginning to urinate onto the gold coverlet.

From the chair, Loy stares at the women through narrowed eyes, as if watching them was some wearisome but essential presidential duty. Halfway through the process, one of the women overbalances on her high heels and tips forward, sliding off the bed in a torrent of piss.

"It's all in her hair," says Charlie. "Yuck."

"And those suede boots are ruined," adds Villanelle.

"That's too bad. They're really nice. Or they were."

"They're Prada. In Paris, I had two pairs. One in camel and one in anthracite."

"That girl on the left's been peeing for almost a minute," Charlie says. "She should go on *Russia's Got Talent*."

Finally, blessedly, the scene comes to a close.

"Oh, boo," Villanelle protests. "I was really enjoying that."

The lights come up in the room, and Richard looks at them one by one. "Villanelle, I'm happy that you liked the show, but it wasn't intended as light entertainment. That short clip has had a greater impact on world history than any political event, debate, or policy decision in the last decade. Holding this trump card, this *kompromat*, has enabled Stechkin to steer the White House as he chooses. Not just to steer it, but to throw it into a catastrophic reverse. Meanwhile, the Russian Federation over which he presides like a latter-day Roman emperor is sclerotic and corrupt to the core.

"I'm telling you this because I want you to believe in what we, here, are trying to achieve. The new world we dream of will not be brought about by democratic process. That dream is dead. It'll be brought about by decisive action, and you three are going to be the prime movers of that action. Your targets are Ronald Loy and Valery Stechkin, the presidents of the United States and Russia. They die tomorrow."

"And the girls?" Charlie asks.

"What girls?"

"The girls in the film."

"What about them?"

"We don't have to kill them?"

"No, of course not."

"Phew."

"So when do we get a proper briefing?" Villanelle asks. "Tomorrow is cutting it pretty close. We need to scout out the firing points, prepare the weapons, all that."

"Everything's checked and ready. You don't have to worry. You'll be taken to your locations, where you'll find everything you need, and any last-minute details will be dealt with in situ. So get a good night's sleep."

Unsurprisingly, Eve can't do any such thing. She lies with her back to Villanelle, who has her face buried in Eve's hair, and tries unsuccessfully to find a gleam of hope in what lies ahead.

"I know why I was chosen to be part of this," she tells Villanelle. "It's so if everything goes wrong, they can point at me and say the whole thing was cooked up by MI6. I'm their fall guy."

"Mmm. Also, the only way they were going to get me—the best—was to take you, too."

"I just wish we could get out of it somehow."

"We can't, Eve. But it's not like you're going to be pulling the trigger."

"I know. I just don't want either one of us to end up dead. Or imprisoned for life."

"We're not dead yet."

"Not yet."

Her arm tightens around Eve's waist, and she presses her body closer. "Trust me."

"I do."

"Good. Now go to sleep."

* * *

In the morning, Villanelle isn't there when Eve wakes, nor are the clothes she'd laid out the night before. Eve paces the corridor, and looks in all the rooms that aren't locked, but she's gone, and Eve feels wretched. At breakfast, there's just her and Charlie. They sit in silence. Charlie wolfs down a full cooked

breakfast. Eve manages a bread roll with gooseberry jam and coffee.

Afterward, no one comes for them, although there are the usual anonymous figures going in and out of the offices. So they sit in the restaurant area, staring out of the windows. It hasn't snowed since they arrived back in Moscow, and the sky is a cold, hard blue. On the building's exterior, icicles hang from the window ledges.

"We should get our cold-weather gear ready," Charlie says. "Thermals, gloves, hats, all that stuff. We might have to lie up for hours at the firing point."

They're right. Eve assembles the warmest clothes she's been issued, and leaves everything else in her room. She is under no illusion that she's ever going to see it again. Hours pass, lunch comes and goes. Eve feels a nauseated apprehension, but Charlie's appetite is unflagging.

Afterward, they fold their arms and look at Eve. "You killed Raymond, didn't you?"

"What?"

"I knew him a lot better than you did, and he wasn't a drunk. He hated the idea of losing control."

Eve shakes her head. "Sorry, but that's crazy. I mean, seriously, why would I kill him? And more to the point, how?"

"I don't know how. But I'll tell you what's crazy. That story of him drinking half a bottle of brandy and falling off the edge of the platform. There's no way he'd let that happen."

"Look, I don't know what happened to him, OK? End of story."

Charlie smiles. "I'm not going to say anything, Eve. You and I are a team. We have to have each other's backs. But I just wanted you to know that I know. OK?"

"Whatever, Charlie."

They come for them in late afternoon, when the light is beginning to fail. There's Richard, incongruously dressed in a Russian army greatcoat, a hard-eyed young guy with a submachine gun slung over his leather jacket, and an older man in a crumpled coat carrying what looks like a miner's helmet.

Richard greets them, and introduces his companions as Tolya and Gennadi. "All set?" he asks, and Eve and Charlie indicate that they are. Dry-mouthed with apprehension, Eve follows them to the end of the corridor, where Richard inputs the door exit code and summons the lift. They descend in silence to a basement, two floors below ground level, and step out into cold darkness. Richard touches a switch, illuminating a dusty, damp-smelling Aladdin's cave of packing cases, electrical generator components, construction materials, ladders, rusting fridges, and traveling trunks, among which Eve can distinctly hear the scurrying of rats.

They follow Richard through this detritus to a steel door set into a central column. He tilts his head toward an overhead camera, waits for the facial-recognition software to execute, and pushes the heavy door open. Ahead of them, an iron spiral staircase descends into darkness. A click, and a succession of fluorescent lamps flickers into life. Richard and Gennadi lead,

Charlie and Eve follow, Tolya brings up the rear. There's an icy, sulfurous updraft which grows stronger the further they descend, and Eve is glad of her thermals and cold-weather gear.

Finally, they reach a concrete floor. Richard takes a torch from his pocket, and Gennadi puts on his helmet and switches on the headlight. They lead the others into a dark tunnel, the lights illuminating weeping brick walls and an iron walkway. From beneath the walkway comes the sound of rushing water. It's rank-smelling, and as far as Eve is concerned, creepy as fuck.

"What is this place?" she whispers.

"People call it the reverse world," Richard says. "That water you can hear is the Neglinka river, diverted underground in the eighteenth century. There's a whole network of tunnels, sewers, and watercourses down here. In the old days, there were also KGB listening posts. Gennadi used to work in one. He's one of the few remaining *kroty*, moles, who know their way around the network."

"You could get lost down here and no one would ever find you," Gennadi tells her, his headlight beam sweeping across a crop of grayish mushrooms growing from the brickwork. "I've seen skeletons down here. Most of them from Stalin's time. You can tell by the holes in the back of their skulls."

"Jesus."

"Jesus never came down here," Gennadi says grimly.

The brick tunnel comes to an abrupt end, and they step out into a chamber supported by arches of discolored brick and lit by strings of low-wattage electric bulbs. Iron walkways run the length of the chamber and bridge a deep channel through which river water is flowing. With a shock, Eve sees men and women moving in the dark shadows by the wall.

"Who are they?" she asks Gennadi, and he shrugs.

“Addicts, ex-convicts, hermits... Some of them live down here for months at a time.”

There are about twenty of them in the group. Pale, ageless figures, dressed in threadbare uniforms and coats, who stare at them incredulously as they approach. One, a thin young woman with pinched features, points a finger at Eve accusingly, her mouth working in silent anger. Eve is shaken to see people living in a place like this, but Charlie seems unfazed. Perhaps if one has done time in a prison like Butyrka, nothing ever seems weird again.

They follow the beam of Gennadi’s headlamp along the narrow pathway beside the river channel. Shining stalactites hang from the vaulted brick ceiling. At intervals, drops of water fall from these to the river surface, the percussive sound echoing in the silence. They continue for ten minutes, perhaps more, and Eve becomes aware of a distant rushing sound. This gradually builds in volume until they reach a weir, where the river cascades over the lip of the channel into a pool some five meters below.

“OK, difficult bit,” Gennadi says. “Tunnel is behind waterfall.”

“I’ll go first,” Richard says. “I’ve done this before.”

Handing Gennadi his torch, he begins to descend a steel ladder affixed to the vertical face of the ledge on which they’re standing. At any other time, the sight of a senior MI6 officer in an overcoat and tie climbing into an underground river would be noteworthy, but Eve has seen so much that is terrifying and strange in recent days that she barely gives it a thought. And then Richard appears to vanish.

Eve stares at Gennadi, and he grins. “You go next. You’ll see.”

Nervously, she begins a torchlit descent of the cold, wet rungs. Beneath her, in the darkness, the river churns and roars. Then

Gennadi angles the torch beam behind the waterfall, and she sees that there's a gap just wide enough to slip through. Beyond it, just visible in the wavering beam, is the interior of yet another tunnel. Richard steps into view and extends an arm. Eve takes it, and as she half-steps, half-leaps toward the tunnel, he hauls her inside.

"Fuck," she gasps.

"All right?" Richard asks.

"More or less."

When the others have crossed safely, Richard turns to a door facing them a short distance up the tunnel. This is protected by a number code, which he taps in, masking the keypad with his body. As the door swings open, he and Gennadi shake hands. "Go safely," says the mole, raising a hand to them before stepping back behind the waterfall. Soon, the beam from his helmet is no longer visible.

A pale light, however, shines from behind the half-open door. They're on a walkway near the top of a huge cylindrical shaft. Below them, staircases descend in a series of zigzags for at least a hundred meters. Richard loses no time, beckoning the others to follow him. They descend the stairways at speed, passing floor after floor, their boots thudding on the metal treads. The deeper they go, the eerier the place looks. The steel-ribbed walls are coated with flaking red anti-rust paint, while the fittings look decades old. Scuffed dust and flattened cigarette ends suggest that others have used these stairs recently, and after a time, a faint hum becomes audible from below. It takes them about ten minutes to reach the bottom of the stairs and a makeshift atrium where an armed guard waits for them, the winged shield on his uniform identifying him as an officer of GUSP, the former 15th Directorate of the KGB. The espionage nerd in Eve can't help

being a tiny bit thrilled at this. In London, they knew GUSP as the most secretive of the Russian security services. They had no idea what they actually did.

Richard shows identification, and the officer nods them past. An automatic door opens in front of them, the sulfurous smell is suddenly stronger, and they follow a corridor into a scene so unreal that both Eve and Charlie stop dead. They are on the deserted platform of an underground railway station. Both to the left and the right, the track vanishes into unlit tunnels. Opposite them, on a wall faced with glazed tiles, is a bronze hammer and sickle a meter high and an enamel sign reading D6-EFREMOVA.

“What is this?” Eve asks Richard.

“Efremova station,” he answers. “Part of the D-6 underground network. Officially, D-6 doesn’t exist. Unofficially, it was built by Stalin to link the Kremlin to underground KGB command posts, and to evacuate the Politburo and the generals from Moscow in the event of nuclear war. Work on it has continued in secret ever since.”

“I’ve heard the rumors,” Charlie says, looking around them. “Everyone has. But I thought it was just *dezinformatsiya*.”

Richard smiles. “You know what they say. The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist. That’s the KGB all over.”

“So what happens now?” Eve asks Tolya, who has yet to utter a single word.

In answer, he nods toward Richard.

“It’s very simple,” Richard says. “We wait for our train.”

So they stand there, Richard dressed like a commuter bound for a day’s work at a London investment bank, Charlie and Eve zipped into their black cold-weather gear like skiers at an

Alpine resort, and Tolya looking like a Mafia enforcer.

“So if the D-6 network is a secret Russian government asset, how do you and the Twelve have access to it?”

Richard frowns thoughtfully. “Eve, there are things I’m not at liberty to explain. Let’s just say... It’s complicated.”

He’s saved from further explanation by the arrival of the train. It’s a single carriage, clearly many decades old, with an electric locomotive at each end. They climb aboard. The interior is functional but worn, with a single flickering light, threadbare upholstery, and discolored windows part-covered by curtains. They sit down, the doors close with a faint hydraulic hiss, and the train draws away from the platform into the darkness.

“Remember this journey,” Richard tells Eve and Charlie, as Tolya looks on silently. “No one would believe you if you told them you’d ridden the deep rail. They’d think you were crazy, or a fantasist.”

Soon they pass through another station—Eve glimpses a sign reading D6-VOLKHONKA through the grimy glass—but the train doesn’t stop until they reach D6-CENTRAL. The whole journey has taken less than ten minutes. Stepping from the train, regretfully in Eve’s case, they exit into an atrium very like the one at Efremova, except that this time there are half a dozen GUSP officers guarding the deserted station. In the place of Efremova’s stairways, a succession of escalators rises within the steel-walled shaft. It takes several minutes to reach the top level, where they alight into a dusty, littered hallway with several exit corridors radiating from it.

Richard leads them to the furthestmost of these, which is signposted NIKOLSKAYA. There’s a light switch on the concrete wall, though he ignores it, preferring to follow the pale beam of his torch. Eve can feel a cold breeze and the beating of

her heart.

The corridor goes in a dead straight line. There's smashed glass on the ground and puddles of dark water. At one point, the torch beam catches a pair of shining eyes, and a cat bolts out of the shadows. Finally, they reach a dead end. There's an aluminum stepladder leaning against the wall, which Tolya stands up and climbs before pushing open a steel hatch over his head.

"This is where I say goodbye, good luck, and good hunting," Richard tells them. "Tolya, you know what to do."

Tolya nods, and effortlessly pulls himself up into the darkness. Charlie follows. Eve climbs the ladder, jams her elbows through the gap, and with Tolya's help, manages to haul herself onto a cold stone floor, where she collapses for several seconds.

"You OK?" Charlie whispers, not unkindly.

"Fine. Thanks."

Tolya gives them a couple of minutes to acquire their night vision. "OK," he says eventually, speaking for the first time. "More climbing."

They make their way upward in near darkness. They're inside a tower, musty-smelling and ancient. A narrow stair ascends through three wooden floors, past high Gothic windows through which bright lights are visible, to a small, eight-faceted chamber. The windows are narrow and have not been cleaned in years, and several of the smaller panes are cracked or missing, admitting ice-cold air and the sound of singing and shouting.

Eve peers outside. Some sixty meters below them lies the glittering, illuminated expanse of Red Square, teeming with New Year revelers. On the far side of the square is the GUM department store, its towers and turrets strung with golden bulbs, and in front of the store, shimmering beneath a bank of

spotlights, is an outdoor ice rink around which skaters are whirling, weaving, and occasionally colliding as pop music booms from loudspeakers. In any other circumstances, this festive scene would be intoxicating; tonight, it's terrifying. Eve feels as if she's catching her first glimpse of the stage on which she is going to be performing a leading role, despite knowing none of the lines.

The D-6 underground railway, she realizes, has enabled them to bypass multiple layers of security checks and CCTV surveillance, and insert themselves, unseen, into the interior of the Kremlin itself. She calculates that they must be in one of the historic towers on the eastern wall. On the floor, in a hard shell case, is the AX rifle, the Nightforce scope, and a suppressor. Beside it is a box of Lapua .338 Magnum rounds, a Leupold spotting scope in its case, two wireless headsets, a thermos flask, and a plastic sandwich box containing sandwiches, a chocolate bar, and caffeine tablets.

As Charlie sets up the rifle, and Eve busies herself with the spotter scope, Tolya switches on one of the headsets, speaks briefly, and passes a set to each of them. There's ten seconds of dead air, then a flat, disembodied voice requires them to identify themselves as "Charlie" and "Echo." They do so, and are told to prepare their equipment and report when ready. Tolya then wishes them good luck, and takes the narrow stairway downwards to the floor below to keep guard. The thermos contains hot sugared coffee, and she pours herself a cup.

"Charlie ready."

"Echo ready."

"In your location, there are eight windows. With your back to the entrance, note the window at eleven o'clock. You will see that two of the lower panes have been removed. You will direct

your telescopic sights and spotter scope through these.”

“Done.”

“Done.”

“Opposite you is a red-brick museum with white turrets and roofs. From your position, draw an imaginary line to the ridge of the highest roof. You have approximately one meter clearance, minus the depth of the snow on the roof. Tell me when you have done this.”

“Done.”

“Done.”

“Continue along that line for four hundred meters, between the high buildings, and you will see ornamental gardens on your right. Cross the highway and your line cuts through the northeast corner of a square with a circular fountain at its center. The last hundred meters takes you to the front of a building with eight pillars in front of three double entrance doors. Do you see?”

“Yes, Echo seen.”

“Charlie seen.”

“Echo, give me your range to the central pillar.”

“Seven hundred and thirteen point five three.”

“Charlie, confirm.”

“Confirmed.”

“Echo, how is visibility?”

“Excellent.”

“Crosswind?”

“Negative.”

“Very well. The time now is nine minutes past six. At half past seven, the car carrying the two targets will descend the one-way street running alongside the eastern side of the theatre. You will be given warning of its approach. It will halt by the

eastern pillar, and the targets will exit the car and walk behind the pillars to either the first or the central doorway. Your target is the Russian. Repeat, your target is the Russian. There will be bodyguards and others with the group, so correct identification is paramount. You will have, at most, fifteen seconds in which to identify and dispatch your target. One shot, one kill. Heard?"

"Echo heard."

"Charlie heard."

"Good. Keep this channel open. Remain at the firing point. Remain silent and vigilant. Be aware that you are potentially visible from below."

"You know what that building is?" Charlie asks. "The one with the pillars?"

"A theatre?"

"*The* theatre. That's the Bolshoi."

It gets colder, and colder still. They finish the coffee, and Charlie takes a caffeine tab. "I'm glad we've got Stechkin."

"Why?" Eve asks.

"Because he's shorter than Loy. They've given me the harder target."

"So Villanelle's got Loy?"

"Obviously."

Eve's elbows and knees gradually lose all feeling on the floor. "I have to pee," she says, after a time.

"So pee," Charlie says.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. On the floor?"

"It'll go through the boards. Onto Tolya."

"In the sandwich box, then."

"There isn't room."

"There is if you take the sandwiches out."

“OK, don’t look.”

“Fuck’s sake, Eve. As if I’m interested.”

By the time she’s finished, Charlie’s eaten all the sandwiches and half the chocolate bar, too. “What the hell?” Eve asks, zipping herself up.

“Preventative measure. When the moment comes, I don’t want you wriggling about and telling me you need a shit.”

“Fuck off, Charlie. You’re just greedy. What about you needing a shit?”

“Self-control. In Russia we don’t have this culture of instant gratification. You can finish the chocolate, though.”

“So much for teamwork and having each other’s backs. Thanks a lot.”

“Pleasure.” Charlie twists toward her, and grins nastily. “You’re just pissed off because I did your girl before you did. You got my sloppy seconds.”

“That’s history, Charlie. Right now we’ve got a job to do.”

Eve’s voice is steady, but fear is coiling in her guts. She’s given up thinking that there’s going to be any intervention by Tikhomirov, or any stopping of this thing. The process has begun. All she wants now is to do what they have to do and get out fast.

Looking outside, she can see that this is not going to be easy. More and more people are arriving every minute, shouting, jostling, and singing. In an hour, Red Square will be packed solid. Every few minutes, a snowball traces a slushy arc over the heads of the crowd, to be greeted with shrieks and laughter. From further away, she can hear ragged cheering, the crackle of fireworks, and the pounding bass of Dima Bilan’s latest hit.

“Do you know how we’re supposed to get out of here?” she asks Charlie.

"Tolya will take us."

"So do you know how to get back to the building where we've been staying?"

"Yes."

"Charlie, talk to me. What's the getaway plan?"

"Tolya knows. Right now I need you to do your job and check for crosswind."

Eve inches closer to the right-hand of the two windows with missing panes, making sure that neither she nor the vapor of her breath is visible from below, and gazes along their line of fire. The Lapua round will fly at a declining angle over the roof of the museum, clear the banked snow there by less than half a meter, thread between two monumental nineteenth-century blocks, traverse two squares and ornamental gardens, and find its target on the pillared frontage of the Bolshoi. Through the Leupold scope, Eve can see people lining up to make their way through the theatre doors into the entrance hall, almost half a mile away. The optics are so fine, and the night air so cold and clear, that she can see the expressions on their faces. She can even read the posters announcing the evening's performance. *Schelkunchik*. *The Nutcracker*. She lowers the scope and everything is miniature again, and the Bolshoi a distant white matchbox.

At quarter past seven, their control comes back on air. "Targets en route, currently ten minutes away from destination. Stand by Echo, Charlie."

"Standing by."

Charlie loads, the snick of the AX's bolt action barely audible, and settles themselves, while Eve briefly aims the Leupold scope at snow-covered bushes five hundred meters away. There's not a tremor, not a flutter of a leaf. They have perfect, windless

conditions.

Eve tries to calm her heart. Breathe in, hold for four counts. Breathe out, hold for four counts. Breathe in... It's not working. Her heart is punching her ribs, her mouth is dry, and her neck aches from peering through the Leupold. She scans the target area. The walkway outside the theatre has been cleared of people. The left and right entrance doors have been closed. A deputation of three men and a woman waits by the center door.

"Can you confirm head-shot range on that middle door?" Charlie asks her.

"Seven hundred and fourteen point nine."

"Targets approaching. Two minutes from destination."

Eve senses Charlie settling into the weapon, stock to shoulder, eye to scope. She can hear their slow, controlled breathing through the headset.

"Car has stopped. Prepare to execute."

Stechkin is out first, and stands beside the car door for a second as Loy steps out after him. Then both are obscured by bodyguards as they approach the entrance and climb the side steps. "Wait until the door," she tells Charlie. "They'll stop to shake hands."

Behind the pillars, the group moves fast. Through the scope, she catches glimpses of Stechkin, with his asymmetrical gunslinger gait, and the implausible blond swirl of Loy's hair. As they approach the delegation at the door, both men halt. Stechkin's profile is in clear sight.

"Send it," she murmurs, her voice weirdly calm, but Stechkin slips from view. From below them, partially muted by the headset, comes a sound like fireworks, and then there's a thump of feet on the stairs. Eve freezes, Charlie turns, and a burst of automatic fire smashes into their chest. In back of them,

weapons leveled, are three men in FSB combat dress. From behind them steps a fourth and obviously female figure, in a black ski jacket and ski mask. Approaching Charlie, who is writhing and gasping in a spreading pool of blood, she pulls off her ski mask and draws her Makarov handgun. "This is for Kristina, bitch," she says, and fires a single round between Charlie's eyes. She watches them die, then looks at Eve bleakly.

"Dasha."

"Eve."

The three FSB men help Eve to her feet. She's shaking so much she can hardly stand, and when they're joined in the overcrowded octagonal room by Vadim Tikhomirov, she just stares at him.

"Dead?" Tikhomirov asks Dasha, indicating Charlie, and she nods.

"Then we're square," he tells her.

"We're square," says Dasha, unzipping her jacket, holstering her gun, and giving Eve a tight, pale smile. "Thank you all, and goodbye."

Tikhomirov inclines his head. "Goodbye, Miss Duzran."

As she's leaving, Tikhomirov's phone sounds. He listens for a minute, mutters something inaudible, and shakes his head.

"Where's Astankova?" he asks Eve.

"I don't know."

"We thought we'd worked out where the second firing point was. I've got a team there right now, but there's no one there."

She's alive, Eve tells herself. *She's alive.*

"The good news is that Loy and Stechkin are safely inside the theatre," he goes on.

"How did you know they were the Twelve's targets?" she asks him.

"They had to be. I knew as soon as I got your report. For which I thank you, by the way. You were brave and brilliant, and I could not have asked more of you." He reaches out his hand, and mindful of the sad, bloodied figure of Charlie on the floor in front of them, Eve shakes it.

"And now, while my men clear this mess up, I should get you to a place of safety."

Eve follows him down the stairs, past the lifeless body of Tolya. When they reach the ground floor, he opens a door for her, and then, frowning, closes it again.

"Let's suppose, just for the sake of argument, that there is no second firing point. That the whole idea of two sniper teams is, and always has been, a ruse. A diversion, sold to you in the knowledge that you might be an FSB plant. What then?"

Eve attempts to pull her shocked and scattered thoughts together. "Two things, I guess. First, that your intervention here has proved them right, that I was an informer, and second..."

"Go on, Eve."

"Second, that..."

His voice hardens. "Say it."

She whispers it. "That the real attack is happening somewhere else."

"Exactly. And there's only one place that's likely to be. Where the intended victims are. The Bolshoi Theatre."

Taking Eve's wrist, he leads her more or less forcibly into a dark, arched passageway, and from there through a massive, studded door into Red Square. It's jammed, and the dazzle of the lights, the blare of pop music, and the acrid smell of fireworks envelops her in an instant. Tikhomirov pulls her through the crowd past a set of road barriers, to where a black SUV with FSB insignia is waiting. His assistant, Dima, is at the

wheel.

“Teatralnaya,” Tikhomirov orders. “Go fast.”

Even with the sirens howling, and some very aggressive driving on Dima's part, it takes them almost ten minutes to reach the front of the theatre. The entrance doors are closed, and the sumptuous foyer is silent except for the sotto voce chatter of the front-of-house staff, who surround them officiously as they enter and then stand back respectfully when Tikhomirov identifies himself. He makes a call, and thirty seconds later, two FSB officers in dress uniforms hurry down the central staircase, salute, and assure him that all is well, and that the appropriate security measures are in place. Tikhomirov looks unconvinced, and summons one of the theatre managers to take them into the auditorium.

They're led up a short flight of steps to a horseshoe-shaped corridor with numbered doors. "These are the lower boxes," the manager explains, opening the furthestmost door. "And this box is always kept in reserve. You're welcome to use it for the duration of the performance." He withdraws, as unctuous as a courtier, and Eve looks about her. The box is tiny, and upholstered in scarlet. Tchaikovsky's music soars from the orchestra pit, while on stage, a Christmas party is in progress, with the dancers in Victorian-era costumes. It's all so captivating that she momentarily forgets why they're here.

Beside her, she senses Tikhomirov relax. On the far side of the stage, in a larger, much grander box, all swagged velvet and gold tassels, sit Stechkin and Loy. Stechkin looks inscrutable, Loy appears to be asleep.

"Wait here," Tikhomirov whispers. "Sit down."

He's back two minutes later. "It's all fine. There are two armed officers outside the presidential box. Nobody can get in."

Eve nods. She's shattered. She'd love to close her eyes and drown in the music, but part of her is wondering, as Tikhomirov is surely wondering, where Villanelle is. If she and Charlie were the diversion, what was the plan?

The first act comes to an end, the curtain falls, and the house lights come up. Opposite them, Stechkin stands and guides Loy out of sight.

"There's a private reception room attached to the presidential box," Tikhomirov says. "They won't be disturbed there."

"I'm sure they've got plenty to talk about. I just hope the interpreter can dumb it down enough for Loy to understand."

He rolls his eyes and smiles wearily. "No shit."

They remain in their seats. Tikhomirov keeps a phone connection open to his officers, but they have nothing to report. He begins to tap his foot, and, eventually, he stands. "Shall we walk?"

"Sure."

They leave the box and make their way around the long, curved corridor. It's slow going; the passage is narrow and crowded, and several of the patrons are elderly. Halfway round, they encounter the house manager, who is speaking irritably into his phone.

"Anything wrong?" Tikhomirov asks.

“Nothing unusual. A woman has locked herself in a toilet stall and passed out, apparently drunk.”

“Where?”

“In the ladies’ restroom, downstairs.”

“Take us there, please. Hurry.”

Anxious to oblige, the manager leads them down to the foyer, where a harassed-looking attendant is waiting.

“Show me,” says Tikhomirov.

The restroom is crowded with female patrons, through whom Tikhomirov barges unceremoniously. A bell sounds over the theatre’s PA system and a voice announces that the curtain will rise on Act 2 of *The Nutcracker* in five minutes. When they reach the locked stall, Tikhomirov puts a broad shoulder to the door and breaks the lock. Inside, a young woman is slumped on the floor. She looks well off, with fine-boned features, little or no makeup, and an expensive haircut. As Eve and the manager hover behind him, Tikhomirov puts his nose to her mouth, and rolls up one of her eyelids. Over the loudspeaker, the three-minute bell sounds.

“Well, she’s not drunk, and this isn’t an overdose.” He rifles through her pockets. “And what’s more, she hasn’t got any bag, money, or identifying documents on her. Do you recognize her?”

“No,” Eve says, truthfully. “I’ve never seen her before.”

What she doesn’t tell Tikhomirov is that the clothes the woman is wearing, the black jeans, gray sweater, and gray-black Moncler camouflage jacket, are identical to those Villanelle was wearing when she left the building this morning. Eve prays she doesn’t look as sick and faint as she feels.

The one-minute bell sounds and Tikhomirov frowns. “What was that you said to me earlier?”

"When?"

"Ten minutes ago. About Stechkin and Loy."

"That they... had plenty to talk about. And that the interpreter would need to dumb it down for Loy."

"Yes. *Yes!*" He gets to his feet, ignoring the unconscious woman and the manager, and runs for the exit, dragging Eve after him. "Come on, Eve. Run."

They tear through the gilded foyer, up the stairs, past ushers and program sellers, and back into the corridor serving the boxes. It's almost deserted now; all the patrons have taken their seats for Act 2. At the right-hand end of the corridor, two bulky FSB officers stand outside the door to the presidential anteroom and box. They salute when they see Tikhomirov.

"No one's gone in, General," one of them says. "Not a soul."

"Never mind that," Tikhomirov barks. "Has anyone come out?"

"Only the interpreter, sir."

"Jesus. Open the doors."

The four of them burst into the anteroom. It's bright scarlet with a ceiling of tented silk. There's a drinks table, holding open bottles of champagne and malt whisky, and three silk-upholstered chairs. Two of these are empty, the third holds the seated body of Valery Stechkin. He's dead, his neck wrenched unnaturally sideways, and his mouth gaping in a horrible simulacrum of pleasure. The body of the American president, meanwhile, has been arranged in a kneeling position in front of his Russian counterpart. Loy's neck is also broken and his head has been positioned, face down, in Stechkin's crotch. For several long seconds, the four of them stare, incredulous, at the last and greatest work of the artist known as Villanelle.

"Find her," Tikhomirov whispers to the two men. "Find the

fucking interpreter.”

He closes the door on the dead presidents, pulls out his phone, and starts giving orders. Other FSB men arrive at a run and are dispatched around the building. After a few minutes, Tikhomirov lowers his phone and stares at Eve. “You need to go. Find Dima. He’s in the car outside. He’ll take you somewhere safe. Go now.”

It’s like walking in a dream, or a nightmare. The corridor seems to last forever, her steps noiseless on the scarlet carpet. As she steps out onto the mezzanine floor, the orchestra is playing “The Waltz of the Flowers.” Her parents had a scratchy old record of *The Nutcracker*.

Then there’s shouting, as six FSB men burst into the foyer from the direction of the orchestra stalls. At their center, writhing and kicking, is a female figure in a dark suit. It’s Villanelle, and she’s fighting for her life. A rifle butt smashes into her head, but she fights on, her face bloody, teeth bared like an animal, and with a furious twist of her body, manages to wriggle out of the suit jacket that two of the men are holding, and sprints for the main door. She makes it, and hurtles down the steps toward the square. Very calmly, one of the FSB men steps into the open doorway, raises his rifle, and fires an aimed burst. The rounds hit Villanelle between the shoulders—spots of red on the white shirt—lifting her momentarily before pitching her onto her face in the wet snow. Eve tries to run to her, screaming now, but her feet won’t carry her, hands hold her back, and all that she sees is the dark, unfurling flower of Villanelle’s blood.

Of what follows, Eve’s memory is fractured. She remembers being bundled into a vehicle by men carrying guns, and driven fast through the city. She remembers it being very cold when

they reached their destination, and being hurried across a courtyard and up a flight of stairs into a small room with an iron bed. She remembers letting go. Submitting, finally, to the knowledge that she is breaking apart.

It's not only Villanelle, although it will always be Villanelle. It's the things Eve has seen and done. She followed Villanelle into the *mir teney*, the shadow world, not realizing that she couldn't survive there, that unlike Villanelle, she couldn't breathe its poisoned air. She remembers, so clearly, the sensation of riding away with her on the volcano-gray Ducati. Of fitting herself to her back, of holding her tight as they flew into the night. Eve had never encountered anyone so dangerous, or so lethally reckless, but Villanelle was the only person in the world with whom she felt safe. And now that she is gone, there is nothing left of Eve.

When she finally starts to weep, she can't stop.

An hour after sunrise, Eve is brought food and coffee on a tray by Dima, Tikhomirov's assistant. He doesn't speak, and instead moves quietly and swiftly. Looking out of the window, she recognizes the courtyard below and realizes that she is inside the Lubyanka complex, the headquarters of the FSB. The door to her room is unlocked; there's a corridor outside with a bathroom, and stairs leading downwards, but she doesn't go further than the bathroom. She spends the day curled up on the bed, staring at the rooftops and the falling snow. Later, a man in civilian clothes comes in and gives her an injection, following which she sleeps deeply. On the second day, a female doctor comes in, asks her to undress, subjects her to a medical examination, and removes the stitches from the healed wound on her back. She spends another day lying on the bed, too tired and numb to think. In the evening there's another injection, and the soft rush into forgetting.

The next morning, Dima arrives with her breakfast and stands by the door, his arms folded, as she eats and drinks.

"You're going on a driving trip," he tells her. "To Perm, fifteen hundred kilometers away. You will be on the road for two days."

"Why?" she asks. "And why Perm?"

"You need to leave Moscow. It's too dangerous here, and you

will be in safe hands. Also..." He looks at her sympathetically. "We thought you might like to see the city where Miss Astankova grew up."

No such thought has occurred to her, but she nods blankly. She has to go somewhere, and it might as well be Perm as anywhere else. Dima takes her breakfast tray and returns shortly afterward carrying a suitcase and a winter coat. The suitcase contains new but nondescript clothes, toiletries, and a plastic folder of documents.

An hour later, she is sitting in the passenger seat of an unmarked 4x4 vehicle, some kind of Lada, beside a plain-clothes officer. Alexei, as he introduces himself, doesn't say much, but radiates tough, unhurried competence. As he swings the Lada through the narrow, slushy streets east of Lubyanka Square, he conducts a speakerphone conversation with a woman named Vika, telling her that he will be away on official business for four days, and asking her to take Archie to the vet if his limp persists.

Twenty minutes later, they are on a motorway, headed east. The windscreen wipers thump back and forth, and a snow-blurred landscape rolls past, dull gray and frozen white.

"Music?" Alexei suggests, and he turns on the radio, which is tuned to a classical station. A violin concerto is playing, all spun-sugar romanticism, not Eve's sort of thing at all, but she feels the tears running down her cheeks. Alexei pretends not to notice. "Glazunov," he murmurs, transferring a packet of cigarettes from his tunic pocket to the glove compartment. "Heifetz recording."

As the movement ends, she wipes her eyes and blows her nose on a tissue, sniffing loudly. "I'm sorry," she says.

He glances at her. "Please. I don't know the details, but

General Tikhomirov told us that you did a brave thing for us. A brave thing for Russia.”

She wonders what the fuck he told them.

“Undercover work is hard,” he says, speeding up to overtake a line of slow-moving vehicles. “It’s stressful. We are in your debt.”

“Thank you,” she replies. It seems wisest to leave it at that.

Warm cars always make Eve sleepy. After a time, she closes her eyes, and dreams of Villanelle, rising up out of the steamy Shanghai street, with her cobra gaze fixed on her. She tries to reach her, but the pinprick of monsoon rain quickly becomes the slap of bullets into her flesh. They fall into the North Sea, and there, suspended in the icy half-dark, are Charlie, Raymond, Tina in her velvet coat, and a naked and gray-lipped Asmat Dzabrati, all of them watching as the currents draw them apart until only their fingers are touching, and Villanelle drifts into invisibility. Eve tries to call after her, but the seawater rushes into her mouth, and she wakes up.

Alexei tells her that she’s been asleep for more than three hours. They stop at a service station for sandwiches, coffee, and Milka chocolate. Then Alexei fills the Lada with diesel, takes his cigarettes from the glove compartment, and hands her a loaded Glock. “Five minutes, OK?”

“Sure. Am I in danger?”

“Not at all. But I agreed not to leave you unarmed and unprotected until we reach Perm.”

“Right.” She pockets the Glock, goes for a pee in the foul, frozen toilet, and wonders about shooting herself. Is this her future? Moving from place to place, never settling, never resting, never forgetting? That afternoon, they drive for a further six hours in a hissing column of trucks and cars. To

either side of the motorway, and endless vista of snowbound plains and shadowed forests unrolls beneath cloud-packed skies. At intervals, they pass small administrative settlements.

Alexei seems as disinclined to talk about himself as Eve is. Instead, they listen to music, about which he appears to know a great deal. As each piece starts, he gives her a thumbnail sketch of the work in question. His favorite composer, he tells her, is Rachmaninoff, who saved his sanity in the days and nights following the Dubrovka Theatre siege, his first experience of action, in which a hundred and thirty hostages died.

Alexei points to the passenger-side glove compartment, where among the crumpled cigarette packets and spare Glock magazines, Eve finds a cracked plastic case housing a CD of Rachmaninoff's first piano concerto. As the music plays, Alexei glances at her, as if to check that it's having the appropriate effect. Perhaps it is, because while she finds it complex, and its themes difficult to follow, the act of listening to it occupies her to the exclusion of everything else. It doesn't anesthetize her grief, but it acknowledges and orders it. It gives it a place.

Evening comes early, bringing with it a sharp wind that scours the snowfields and sends crystalline trails flying through their headlight beams. They stop for the night at a featureless town in the Svechinsky district. Their hostel is a single-story cinder-block building attached to a motorway service station. The rooms are unprepossessing, but Alexei tells her that the food in the all-night café is good. She tries to eat, but she can't swallow. Tears run down her nose and drip onto the plate.

Alexei puts down his fork, passes her a paper napkin, and tells her about his home life. He's divorced, and met Vika a year ago at a fellow officer's birthday drinks. Vika works in the Moscow State University library. She's also divorced, with a football-

crazy young son who Alexei says “has been running wild too much.” They live in a block near Lubyanka Square exclusively occupied by FSB officers and their families. A neighbor takes Archie for walks during the day.

Eve half listens, grateful not to have to talk, and walks to her room with the Glock weighing down her coat pocket. In the wash bag, she finds a box of sleeping pills. She takes one, climbs into bed, and listens to the rumble of the trucks outside. Sleep comes blessedly fast.

In the morning, they start early, and drive for a further nine hours. Today, the sky is clearer, and sunlight pushes through the cloud cover, illuminating the frozen fields and the ice-silvered lakes. The terrain begins to change as they approach the Perm Krai. This is deep Russia, and as the snow’s glitter fades, the rivers and forests are briefly suffused in soft, glowing pink.

The Azov Hotel is a tiny, one-star place in a side street off Ulitsa Pushkina in central Perm. Alexei pulls up outside shortly after 10 p.m., walks her inside, stamps the snow from his boots, and has an inaudible conversation with the elderly man behind the reception desk.

Eve’s room has been paid for, Alexei tells her, and she will be contacted there at some point over the next few days. Reaching into his coat pocket, he hands her a wallet containing a wad of banknotes and a Gazprombank debit card. She probably looks as lost as she feels, for Alexei gives her a quick, soldierly hug, squeezes her hand, and wishes her courage. Then he climbs back into the Lada, backs out onto the street, and drives away.

Her room is small, with a liver-colored carpet and a single window overlooking the street. Drawn net curtains admit a thin, diffuse light. There’s a divan bed covered by a crocheted blanket, a wooden chest of drawers, an armchair with faded

upholstery by the window, and a miniature fridge that throbs so loudly that she turns it off within ten minutes of moving in.

On the windowsill, behind the curtains, she discovers a pack of tarot cards. Left behind, she assumes, by a previous tenant. She has no idea of the supposed meaning of the cards, but she spends hours sitting on the bed, turning them over one by one, and gazing at the strange, enigmatic images. The angel on the judgment card looks like Villanelle. Eve is the ten of swords, pierced through and through.

This room, and the snowbound streets around the hotel, become her world. She sleeps late, eats her lunch at the café across the road, and walks until it gets dark. On her first day, she makes her way up Komsomolsky Prospekt. She's glad of the light and warmth of the department stores, but something about the family groups in their coats and headscarves and snow boots upsets her. She feels that she no longer belongs among them, and seeks out quieter routes in the neighboring park and along the River Kama.

The Café Skazka is dim and steamy, and the middle-aged couple that run it are friendly, acknowledging Eve with a smile and a raised hand when she comes in, and leaving her to linger over her tea. On the fifth morning, their daughter, who works in the café at weekends, refills her cup and offers her a day-old copy of *Pravda*.

She hasn't read a newspaper since arriving in Perm, and she's hurried past the shops and bars that have TVs playing, because they always seem to be showing images of the murdered presidents. She's not ready to learn about it, or to read about Villanelle dying, although God knows she's thought about little else. She accepts the offer of the paper, nevertheless, touched by the kindly meant gesture, and once she starts reading, she

can't stop.

The lead story, in effect the only story, offers new revelations from "government sources" concerning "the crime of the century." It tells how a transnational anarchist organization planned the assassination of the American and Russian presidents, and how the Russian security services eliminated the killers in two fierce fires. There are graphic images of the dead conspirators. Oksana Astankova, "a notorious contract killer," is described as the leader of the cell, and pictured lying on her back in the snow in front of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, her face and chest dark with blood, surrounded by members of the FSB's Alpha counter-terrorist group. An automatic pistol is clearly visible in her right hand. A photograph captioned "Nadezhda Kadomtseva, the second assassin," shows Charlie's body, torn apart by submachine gun fire, lying next to their sniper's rifle at the window of the Nikolskaya tower on the Kremlin wall, "to which she had illegally gained entry."

The story continues on an inside page. According to official government sources, the assassination of the two presidents was very nearly prevented by an undercover operative of the British Secret Intelligence Service, working in collaboration with the Russian security services. The unnamed female officer had penetrated the group, but tragically had been unable to relay the details of the plot to her FSB handlers in time to prevent the assassination. No details are known about this individual's identity or present whereabouts.

The article affirms that the FSB, under the leadership of General Vadim Tikhomirov, has been waging a long, covert war against terrorism and anarchy. "With such people, there can be no compromise, and no negotiation," Tikhomirov is quoted as saying. "Our priority is, and always will be, the security of the

Russian people.” In the accompanying photograph, he looks sage and reassuring. A little like the actor George Clooney, but steelier around the eyes.

* * *

On the sixth day, at eleven thirty in the morning, Eve is sitting cross-legged on the unmade bed, still undressed, turning over the tarot cards, when there is a knock on her door. She assumes it’s the cleaner, a haunted-looking teenager named Irma who slips fearfully around the hotel with an ancient vacuum cleaner, and she calls out to her to give her a minute. When the knock is repeated, she sweeps up the cards, wraps the crocheted blanket around herself, and opens the door an inch.

It’s not Irma, but the hotel proprietor, Mr. Gribin. “You have a visitor,” he informs her.

She splashes her face with water, dresses, and walks warily downstairs. Standing in the lobby, facing toward the street, is a woman in a long overcoat. Hearing Eve descend the stairs, she turns. She’s about forty, with soft, tired eyes and a thick mane of dark, curly hair.

“Good morning,” she says, extending a hand toward Eve. “I’m Anna Leonova.”

Eve stares at her.

“I was Oksana’s French teacher,” she says. She glances at Gribin, still hovering lugubriously.

Eve belatedly extends her hand. “Yes, I know who you are.”

“Would you like to go somewhere to talk?”

They walk to the Café Skazka and order tea.

“Why are you here?” asks Eve. “And how do you know who I am?”

"A man named Dima came to see me a few days ago. He told me about you, and said it might be helpful for you to speak with someone who knew Oksana before. I was the only one who did. She never allowed anyone else to get close."

"That doesn't surprise me. What was she like?"

"She was probably the most gifted student I ever had," Anna says. "Language flowed through her. She had an instinctive feel for it. But she was broken inside. Terribly broken."

"What else can you tell me about her?"

"She was so intelligent and funny. And rude. I liked her." She smiles bitterly. "I shouldn't have been surprised by what happened, though. By what she... became. By what she did."

The café owner's daughter places a cup of tea in front of each of them.

"Were you ever afraid of her, Eve? Truthfully?"

Eve picks up her cup, touches her mouth to the scalding tea, and puts it down again. "Never. I loved her."

"Knowing what she was capable of, you loved her?"

"Yes."

"Knowing that she could never love you back?"

"She loved me. I don't expect you or anyone else to understand that, but it's true."

Anna regards her thoughtfully. "Did you see the article in *Pravda*, two days ago?"

"I did. And I saw Oksana die. She wasn't holding a pistol. She was unarmed, and they shot her in the back. Not in the chest like the photograph suggests."

Anna shrugs. "I believe you. Photographs lie. And this is Russia. Even the illusions are illusions." She interlaces her fingers on the table in front of her. "She used to write to me from prison. She said she was going to get out and come back

to me. She had a... fixation, as I'm sure you're aware. Then the letters suddenly stopped coming, and two weeks later, a man came to my apartment and told me that she had died. He said he wanted to break it to me personally."

"Who was he?"

"He didn't tell me his name. But he said he was aware of my relationship with Oksana. She had been spinning lies again."

"They weren't really lies, though, were they?"

"I was her teacher. I was married."

"So? I'm not judging you. I just want to know as much about her as I can."

Anna just shakes her head and gazes out the window. "I used to spend every night dreaming that she was alive so I could shoot her myself."

Eve doesn't know what to say to this.

"I'm sorry," says Anna. "That's probably not what you want to hear right now."

"Not particularly, no."

They sip their tea in silence. It's approaching lunchtime, and a steady stream of customers comes into the café. "Are you going to have something to eat?" Eve asks her.

"No, I'm flying back to Moscow this afternoon, so I should go. But before I do, I have something for you." From her bag, she takes an envelope and hands it to Eve. Inside is a small photograph of several girls in school uniforms, among them Oksana. She looks about sixteen, and the photographer has caught her off guard. She's half-turning, open-mouthed and laughing. There's something lank-haired and feral about her, but also a childish joy.

"She looks so happy," Eve says, feeling the tears welling. "You're sure I can keep this?"

"I can remember exactly when it was taken. There had just been an announcement that the whole class had passed the term exam, and that a girl called Mariam Gelashvili, who had slipped on the ice that morning, had fractured her ankle."

"Why did you tell me that?"

"Now that I have, do you still want it?"

Eve slips the photograph back into the envelope. "She's gone, Anna. I'll never get to see her smile again. Moments like this are all I have."

* * *

After they've said their goodbyes, Eve makes her way to the park, as she has done every other afternoon this week, and wanders aimlessly until evening. It's snowing heavily by the time she returns to the hotel. Gribin is seated behind the front desk as she steps into the lobby, and he greets her with a nod, which she returns.

She trudges up the stairs to her room. Her hands are frozen and her fingers feel clumsy. It takes a few seconds of fumbling with the key before she manages to fit it into the lock, and then the door swings open to reveal a figure seated on her bed, partially illuminated by the dim light shining in from the corridor.

"Hi, Eve."

It's her, and Eve can't speak.

She stands, pulls Eve to her, and presses Eve's face into her shoulder. She can't be here, and this can't be happening, but Eve can smell her body and her hair, and can feel the strength in her arms, and her heart beating beneath her cheek. "I'm sorry, Eve," she whispers. "I'm so, so sorry."

Eve pulls back to look at her. She's thinner in the face, and looks tired. Her clothes are plain: a sweater, jeans, snow boots. A parka coat has been tossed over the back of the faded armchair.

"I thought you were dead."

"I know."

Eve starts to cry, and Villanelle looks anxious for a moment, then pulls a tissue from her pocket and tentatively holds it out to her.

"I did tell you to trust me," she says.

That was a year ago. Today the world is a different place. Tikhomirov is president of Russia, and in Europe, a new cohort of nationalist leaders has arisen, an advanced guard of the new world order, all of them bearing the mark of the Twelve. Villanelle and Eve have new identities and live in one of the outer suburbs of St. Petersburg. Their apartment is quiet, with views over a park, which is pretty in summertime and beautiful, if melancholy, in winter. Villanelle is at university in the city, studying for her linguistics degree. She's a few years older than the other students, and Eve suspects that they find her a little strange (on the single occasion that she met her there, two of the young men on the course looked actively scared of her), but she promises that she is making friends. Eve divides her time between reading, walking, and working for an online translation bureau.

In hindsight, she marvels at the subtlety and prescience with which Tikhomirov played his hand. She's often thought of that day on the motorway to Sheremetyevo, when he spoke of simulacra. What confused her for a long time was why, if he knew the details of the Bolshoi Theatre assassination plot in advance, as he must have done, he felt it necessary to go through the motions of using Eve to discover the same information.

Why, if he knew what part Villanelle was to play, and he must have done to have mounted the operation to fake her death, did he pretend to fall for the diversion?

It was only when Tikhomirov was elected president that everything made sense. The death of his forerunner, Stechkin, was not something that he had been working to prevent, but to achieve. To this end, he'd played a long game. Having discovered the Twelve's assassination plan (presumably through Carolyn Martens, whose capacity for betrayal appears to be limitless), he'd done a deal with them. The Twelve would get their show killing and Tikhomirov, having heroically, but unsuccessfully, attempted to thwart them, would replace Stechkin as president. If Tikhomirov's failure to prevent the assassinations was to be forgiven, following the inevitable investigations, it had to be made to appear that he'd had much less information to work on than was in fact the case. Eve's role was to be his undercover agent, but also his backstop. That's why he let Villanelle live. To keep Eve silent. And, if necessary, on message.

Should she have guessed this earlier? Should she have realized that no halfway professional sniper team would have included someone as inexperienced and as temperamentally unsuitable as herself? Probably, but she was so fixated on remaining close to Villanelle that she missed it altogether. Villanelle swears she knew nothing of Tikhomirov's plot until the morning of the assassination, when she was whisked away by Carolyn and given the details of her new mission, but Eve suspects she would have kept it from her even if she had known what was to come. Perhaps, in the end, it's just as well.

There's much that Eve doesn't know, and probably will never know. How did the Twelve find them in St. Petersburg?

Did Dasha betray them, and if not, what was the basis of her arrangement with Tikhomirov? More generally, who has the whip hand now, Tikhomirov or the Twelve? Is he their instrument, or are they his? Inevitably, images of that grotesque *tableau mort* in the Bolshoi's presidential anteroom quickly surfaced on the Internet. As a statement of the Twelve's power and reach, and as a warning to other world leaders, it couldn't have been more effective.

In return for the part that they played, knowingly or unknowingly, in the president's rise to power, and for their continued silence and compliance, a monthly payment is made into the bank account that Eve and Villanelle share. The sum is not large, but it meets most of their needs. Eve saves the money she earns from translation for foreign trips. In September they went to Paris. They stayed in a small hotel in the Fifth Arrondissement, ate their breakfasts in the tiny courtyard, and visited the shops around St. Sulpice to try on clothes they couldn't afford. They didn't go anywhere near Villanelle's former apartment.

Dasha Duzran is thriving. They met her unexpectedly on Sadovaya Ulitsa, near Villanelle's university, where Dasha has opened a nightclub. They went along to the club one evening, and she gave them dinner in the VIP suite, but the conversation didn't flow, and Villanelle became agitated. They were all too conscious, perhaps, of the weight of each other's secrets.

Winter has arrived again, and in the park below their apartment, the trees are bare and the fountains freezing. Eve is reading, and Villanelle is completing an assignment on her laptop beside her. She is a very competitive student and will be expecting a top grade. Neither of them has spoken for an hour, nor felt the need to. When she finishes her work, Villanelle closes the laptop, reaches out, and takes Eve's hand.

They've often talked about that evening at the Bolshoi Theatre. Not so much about the events in the scarlet anteroom, but about what followed. While the theatrics might have been necessary, Villanelle tells her, they were horrible. The blank cartridges, the blood pack under her shirt, all of it. What she remembers most keenly is hearing Eve scream. At that moment, she remembers, something shifted inside her. "I could feel what you were feeling."

Last night, Eve awoke in the early hours of the morning, tears streaming down her face. She was certain that Villanelle was dead, and that the events of the last year had all been a dream. It took almost a minute of Villanelle holding Eve and saying her name to convince her that she was alive. Villanelle doesn't experience these terrors herself, but she sees their effect on Eve, and knows that what Eve needs at these moments is to know that she is real, and there.

This morning, they took the Metro to Nevsky Prospekt. The pavements were crowded with shoppers, their breath vaporous in the cold air. They had lunch in Café Singer, above the House of Books, then crossed the road to Zara, where Villanelle picked out dresses for Eve to try on and bought a sweater for herself. By the time they came out of the building, the brightness had gone from the sky and the first snowflakes were drifting down. Arm in arm, they walked down to the embankment. They spent a long time there, but no one took any notice of them. They were just two women gazing out over the frozen Neva river, in the fading light of a Russian winter afternoon.