Summary

“Do you two know each other?” Elena asks, passing Eve a fresh cup of coffee. “You and the new lawyer, I mean.”

For a second, Eve imagines telling her everything. Saying, remember that night Niko left last year, and I thought we were really done? Well, I went out, got drunk, met her, and we fuc--

Eve can’t even make her pretend-self confess it all to Elena, not under the stark fluorescent lighting of their office. She can’t come up with a good lie, either -- a whole two seconds after seeing Villanelle again, her brain is still busy numbly cataloguing her every too-fast breath and rushed heartbeat. “Uh, I’m pretty sure we ran into each other at a conference, once?”

“Oh.” Elena pauses. “I wish I had her jacket. Her outfit is amazing.”

Eve’s smile would probably be a little less fake if she could entirely convince herself that she’s also thinking about Villanelle’s clothes, and not what’s underneath them.

But she and Niko are trying, right? So she smiles harder.
A breakup. A hookup.

For a year, Eve does her best to forget it all.

Then chance brings a new hire to the office, and everything gets a lot more complicated.

Notes

yes eve goes back to niko at the end of this chapter (yuck) but that was necessary for the premise. we're in for a whirlwind of gay pining and near-sex-experiences until the tension nearly KILLS them (but we'll settle for le petit mort) with a happy ending, bc that's what im in the Mood to Write

I had to bend their characters a little to fit them into the no-murder-au slot, but I've tried my best to keep them faithful :D

See the end of the work for more notes
When Niko shouts, he gets taller and broader and puts all his breath into every word, so his sentences expand to fill whatever room they’re in. Eve imagines his *I can’t do this anymore* in thick bold font, swelling gradually larger until it takes up all the space between them.

And there is so, *so* much space between them. They’re masters at making it now, at leaving gaps in their routines and days and interactions; it seems to Eve that their marriage is just two passing people trapped by chance in the same amber, held apart but in place.

For them, Friday afternoons are normally quiet and distant, because they’ve worked out that they’re less likely to argue if they’re in different parts of the house.

But they’re not in different parts of the house, they’re in the kitchen, and somehow *please move, I’m trying to make tea* has wrenched apart their fragile peace, and they’re definitely arguing now.

Well, Niko’s arguing, his monologue gathering momentum as Eve just -- stands there. And she should be listening, processing, but instead, she’s watching. She watches his lips pull tight and this teeth grit, watches his arms wrench about as his anger unspools too rapidly for any semblance of his usual measured control.

Eve should be angry, too. How dare he put this on her, make this out to be her fault; who decided that she needed her shortcomings spat out, itemised?

But instead, Eve feels -- smooth. As if his uncut fury is polishing away her rougher edges, and this thing pressing into her ribs, it only takes a second for her to recognise it as *relief*. Eve should be collapsing, crying, scrabbling for a handhold as the last fifteen years crack under their feet, but she isn’t. The smoothness aerates, becoming one lax, elastic breath out. Like a sigh held so long that Eve started mistaking it for part of her lungs, at last expelled.

And then Niko is turning on his heel and stomping out of the kitchen, down the hall, and out the front door, slamming it behind him. A full stop.

Eve stays exactly where she is, frozen, waiting for the pressure in the house to change, for his absence to create some kind of vacuum.

But --

Everything is just as it was.

He’s gone.

Eve has pictured them ending over and over, but she’s not quite sure what to *do* with herself now, because she never really got around to thinking about the *after* of it all.

She stares at the faux-marble finish of the kitchen counter, at the stack of cookbooks and their clunky old radio, which is playing some shitty alt-folk track: the lilting of a middle-aged white guy as he croons his way through a chorus about a mountain range he’s probably never even been to. God, Eve hates alt-folk; it’s only Niko who likes it.

And Niko isn’t here anymore.

“*How the wind used to change when you called out my name, and I* --”
Eve reaches over and turns it off. The watery guitar chords cut out, and the silence is -- well, it’s borderline hedonistic, how she languishes in it.

The exhaustion that’s clogged her muscles since forever starts to seep away, to dissolve and dilute, and all the energy she didn’t have during their fight fizzles up to take its place.

“Okay,” Eve says aloud, to herself. “This is okay.”

There’s no reply. It’s just Eve here; she can do as she pleases. She can talk without interruption. She can order Indian without asking for only medium-hot, and turn the thermostat up.

But why stop there? Why not take a taxi to a lovely restaurant and have a meal on her own, or go to Elena’s and watch terrible soap reruns on the couch, binging on rocky road ice-cream? Why not go see a horror movie at the nearest cinema, with nobody beside her to flinch at the gore, or grumble at the smell of popcorn?

And suddenly, the evening stretches so broad with possibility in front of her that it’s splitting with its own wideness -- she isn’t stuck here anymore, in the brik-a-brak vice of this shoebox house.

All of those ideas are fine, but they’re not enough. This is her first night of real freedom, and she’s going to cash it in for all it’s worth. Eve wants to be greedy. It’s clawing at her, crawling over her skin: an abrupt and vicious craving for everything she’s lost and she needs back.

Yes, this raw, new silence around her is nice.

But Eve wants something fast and loud.

Even from the sidewalk, Eve can hear the heady pounding of the club’s music, so dense and thick that it changes the humidity of the night. She joins the line by the door, and a glance around confirms that everyone else is probably only five or ten years out of college. Honestly, though, Eve doesn’t care if she’s the oldest person in the whole building, or how ridiculous she seems -- she’s not here for anyone but herself. She’s in a dress that makes her ass look so good that she never wore it in front of Niko out of spite, and she’s going to have a drink or five, maybe dance, and ride out this new-freedom high until it burns away.

She can be ridiculous, tonight, and figure the rest out tomorrow.

The bouncer, when she reaches him, is in his mid-forties, and well-built. “I could just about card you,” he says, grinning at her. “How are you doing tonight?” It’s not sleazy, but not entirely appealing either. It’s genuine, at least, and Eve realises that she could flirt back if she were so inclined. There’s nothing and nobody stopping her, anymore.

But she didn’t come here for that. “I’m doing well, thank you,” she responds, polite, friendly.

He takes the hint, rueful, and waves her on through.

Inside the club is packed, bodies against bodies, and everything is sweat and laughter and dimness.

Eve hasn’t been somewhere like this since her early thirties, and it’s more overwhelming than she’d thought it would be. With a grimace, she quickly weaves her way through to the bar. It’s a large,
cordoned-off area as far from the house speakers as you can get -- so the bartender can take orders and propositions can be made, Eve supposes.

She manages to get a spot at the counter by waiting for a couple to leave and immediately claiming one of their vacant barstools. The bartender is only a few feet away, absently tossing a martini shaker as he listens for orders, and Eve tries to flag him down.

“Hi, excuse me, can I get --”

But then someone else is brasher, or another someone else is shoving their way front and centre, and the bartender is always drawn away, over and over. It’s as if every single person in the club suddenly needs a drink, ASAP, and jeez, did Eve miss a news alert about London officially instating prohibition in the morning?

This would be a lot less annoying if she wasn’t so sober. “Sorry, can I please --”

“Hey.” The voice beside her is both sharp and soft, a liquid accent, too polymorphic and refined for Eve to identify. It’s all of two seconds before the bartender notices the speaker, and focuses on her. “Champagne. Do you have Krug Grande Cuvee?”

The bartender pauses. “Uh. No?”

“Veuve Clicquot, then. Thank you.”

Eve turns. The woman next to her is honey-blonde, about twenty-five, twenty-six, and even in the brutal neon lights, she’s beautiful. Beautiful and striking, with a matte stillness that’s magnetic in the freneticism of the club. Her hair is wound up in a messy bun, and she’s wearing a suit that wouldn’t be out of place in a boardroom, but somehow fits here perfectly well.

And she’s looking right at Eve with this steady, consuming gaze that makes Eve far too aware of her own body. She doesn’t say anything. Just looks.

Eve swallows, and gestures vaguely at the bartender, who’s prying the cork out of a new bottle. “You’re a natural at that, huh?” she jokes, weak and thready. “I haven’t had much luck.”

The woman tilts her head. “Try not saying sorry before you’ve before you’ve even asked,” she advises. “Don’t apologise for wanting something.”

“Oh. Right.”

Her expression could almost be called a smile, but it isn’t, not exactly. It’s something else. Something subtler, richer. “I’ll teach you. What are you having?”

“A -- a gin and tonic.” It’s her regular order, but suddenly it’s unadventurous, pedestrian, and Eve wants to walk it back and ask for something exotic and complex that might make her seem more interesting than she is.

But the woman doesn’t comment, just turns back to the bartender and adds, “And a gin and tonic”, proffering her card. “Keep it open.”

The wink he flashes her is met with blankness, and he reels it in, setting their drinks down in front of them.

“You just -- bought my drink?”
“Mm.”

“I thought you said you’d teach me.”

“I believe in learning by example,” the woman explains, and god, with a voice like that, she must be able to talk her way into anything, anywhere.

Eve hesitates, then picks up her gin and tonic, taking a long sip. It tastes expensive, feels expensive. “I don’t think I really learned much,” Eve admits.

“I’ll have to buy you another drink, then. Give you a second demonstration.” She extends her hand and Eve shakes it. It goes on a second too long. “Villanelle.”

Eve’s knee-jerk response is, “Isn’t that a kind of poem?” She rolls her eyes at herself internally, because all she had to say was nice to meet you.


“You don’t like rules?” Some slept-through undergraduate elective distills from Eve’s memory, filters through the front of her brain: villanelles have five tercets and a quatrain. They’re about obsessions, her literature professor had said. We write these poems about our obsessions.

“No, I love rules.” Villanelle tips back her flute of champagne, and Eve gets caught by the movements of the fine muscles in her throat. “If there were no rules, I would dearly miss breaking them.”

It’s a trance, made of malt darkness and the gin and the pounding music and her deliberate, graceful words. Another thing Eve remembers from studying classic poetry, though: gorgeous, irresistible strangers are usually fey, planning to lead you out of your safe Victorian village and into some grotesque, deep-forest fate.

And this stranger can definitely be classified as gorgeous and irresistible.

“You’re having me on,” Eve says, flatly, draining her glass.

Villanelle smirks. “A little. I should think I’m not such an amateur as to fall back on lines about breaking rules when flirting with a woman.”

“You’re flirting?”

“Aren’t you?” Villanelle signals the bartender, and just like that, another champagne is set before her. She passes it to Eve. “Try it. It’s very good.”

“You don’t have to buy me drinks,” Eve insists.

“You’re at a bar. Didn’t you come here for a drink?”

“I did, but -- I mean, I can buy them myself.”

“But why would you, when someone like me is right here, very much willing to buy them for you?”

“Someone like you?”

Villanelle’s fingers brush Eve’s forearm, and it’s such a light touch, swift, but it leaves this burnished imprint on Eve’s skin that lasts long, long after she shifts away again. “Someone very elegant and
“charming,” she clarifies, seriously.

“That’s kind of an arrogant thing to say about yourself.” Although she can’t really dispute that it’s certainly true.

“Arrogance can’t be so terrible, if you find it attractive.”

Eve almost chokes on a sip of the best champagne she’s ever had. “I never said I find you attractive.”

Villanelle hums, and she doesn’t bother to object, but Eve couldn’t mistake this for her conceding, either. “So.” She considers Eve, appreciative, and it is so different from being leered at by Niko or the bouncer or anyone else Eve has ever met. “A wedding ring,” she murmurs.

“Oh. Yeah. I forgot to take that off.” Eve blinks. Forgot to? She wasn’t even planning to, but already, it’s too tight. Could she really just -- take it off? Isn’t there some sort of mandatory waiting period? Surely four hours would be a tad tasteless.

“Ah. Do you often remove your wedding ring and come to clubs late at night?” Villanelle enquires, and there’s not a flicker of judgement in her tone, in her eyes, but Eve feels compelled to justify herself anyway.

“No! It’s not like that.” A beat. “He left. Well, it was a mutual -- I mean, he was the one who physically walked out, but truthfully I’m -- uh. Whatever. He’s gone.”

Villanelle’s lips quirk up. “And you sound so despairing about it.”

The curl of sarcasm makes Eve smile, relaxes her. She wouldn’t be able to tell this to Elena without seeming callous, but -- “You know when you come home after a really long, hard day, and you just flop down on your bed and close your eyes and lie in the feeling of having no more problems to deal with, and nothing to do? I feel like that right now.” Something will cold-shower the sensation soon, will crack reality over her, but not yet.

“You make it sound so luxurious.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that.” Luxurious. The way Villanelle says it makes Eve think she’s been hearing it wrong her whole life; on Villanelle’s tongue it is decadent: a deserved indulgence.

“Oh, you should. You should revel. I think revelling would suit you.” Villanelle’s eyes darken, and Eve’s heart speeds up before she can remind herself that it’s all in her head. “You know, you still haven’t told me your name.”

It occurs to Eve that she could just -- lie. In five minutes, this conversation is going to wind down, and she’s never going to see this woman again; there will only be some fading impression of an endless amber gaze and fucking incredible champagne. Right at this minute, Eve can be whoever she wants to be. But -- “I’m Eve.” But she wants to be herself, and somehow that is thrilling, novel. Like perhaps herself is some gilded thing she shucked long ago, pared down and pruned until it slotted into hers and Niko’s suffocating spaces.


“What are you doing here?” she asks, the question tripping over itself.

Villanelle looks amused. “What do you mean? This club is open to the public, is it not?”

“Well, yeah, but -- you’re obviously loaded. We’ve drunk about a hundred dollars, and your outfit is
“Chanel,” Villanelle supplies, conversationally.

“Right. You could be anywhere. This is London. There must be plenty of high-rolling, password-entry parties happening.”

Villanelle shrugs. “Would you rather I go somewhere else?”

“No,” Eve answers, a reflex, before she can think about it, or at least make it seem like she’s thinking about it. No, she definitely wouldn’t rather that.

For Villanelle, it would appear that settles it, and perhaps it does. “Good.”

Then there’s more champagne and the music seems to get quieter and it’s like whiplash: talking to someone being this easy after everything with Niko becoming so hard. And after a decade of stagnation, treading water, always being in her comfort zone -- it’s nice, too, to briefly have the attention of someone so quintessentially unattainable.

Somehow, they’re doubling back to discuss that college poetry class, and why Eve knew what a villanelle was. That shifts into actually, she studied psychology not literature, then no, she never went into research like she meant to -- there were loans to pay off and rent wasn’t cheap and unexpectedly, Eve found herself in government for a few years. Eve would like to blame the drinks for why she’s rattling off half her life story, but in reality, there’s something hypnotic about Villanelle’s curiosity, her interest in little details.

“But you’re not there anymore,” Villanelle surmises, from the past tense.

“I left the department a few years ago,” Eve replies, obliquely. After Bill’s aneurysm, his empty cubicle in her periphery had killed her. “So I work for this huge marketing company now,” she finishes. “Tiny cog, big machine.”

Villanelle plies her with more questions, but eventually, Eve manages to flip the script. “And you? What do you do?” Eve’s guesses range from model to heiress and web all across the in-between.

Villanelle is a consulting lawyer, she informs Eve, and currently under contract with a fashion magazine, tugging the strings tight on some scandal. Scandal is another word that Villanelle seems to have crafted just to fit in her own mouth; she’s laissez-faire about it, as if this particular incident is hardly worth such a title. She’s from Europe, she explains, when Eve asks.

“A lot of people around here are,” Eve points out. “I meant where specifically.” If there’s a whole country of other people whose accents sound like Villanelle’s, Eve might have to move there.

“Nowhere, specifically,” Villanelle replies. “But Russia and Belgium and France, mostly. My uncle was a traveller. He took me with him. I have borrowed myself from many places.”

It’s an odd turn of phrase, and if the flash of minute frustration that flits across Villanelle’s face is anything to go by, it’s not quite what she meant. Still, it does make sense in a way Eve can’t explain -- she feels borrowed sometimes, too.

“I --”

And then Villanelle’s phone starts ringing, some obnoxious pop song that clashes boldly with the rest of her, but also doesn’t. She fishes it out of her pocket and sighs, dramatic. “I have to take this.”
“It might be too loud in here.” It’s not that Eve wants her to decline the call, necessarily, of course not, except --

“You’re right. I’ll go outside.” Villanelle stuffs what could easily be sixty or seventy pounds into the tip jar, then leans across the bar and says something to the bartender that Eve can’t make out over the noise of the other patrons. He ducks under the counter and comes up with the bottle of champagne he’d only opened for Villanelle, offering it to her.

She accepts it, holding it loosely by the neck, and turns back to Eve. “Come with me?”

The phone is still ringing.

Eve should say no, it’s fine, you go on. This was fun, thanks for chatting, goodbye, et cetera. She should down the last of her drink and go home.

“Yes.”

With her free hand, Villanelle tangles her fingers with Eve’s. Before Eve can really process that, decide how she feels about that -- she gets as far as a lot -- Villanelle is tugging her through the crowd, out an exit that says Staff Only, because apparently, such things don’t apply to her.

They step out into an alley. It’s about four feet wide and unusually clean, for this part of town. Eve glances at the smokey sky; there’s enough light pollution here that it’s almost like some gritty urban imitation of the northern lights.

Villanelle’s phone goes silent for all of two seconds before it starts ringing again. “Hold this,” Villanelle instructs, and then the Veuve Clicquot is being pressed into Eve’s hands as Villanelle’s fingers fall from hers. The condensation seems much colder directly contrasted with her warmth.

“Ah, okay --”

“Just a moment.” Villanelle steps away, accepting the call. “Da?” Then she’s slipping into a conversation so rapid that Eve’s not even sure she could carry it if it were in English, which it isn’t. Russian, maybe? German?

It’s only two or three minutes before Villanelle hangs up. Eve spends the time staring upward, trying to see if she can find a star.

She hasn’t been out this late on a Friday night in forever. She ought to be falling asleep.

“Sorry about that,” Villanelle says, tucking her phone away and crossing back over to Eve, leaning casually against the brick wall of the club’s exterior. Eve can feel her gaze, and she stays searching for that star, doesn’t make eye contact, just so Villanelle might look at her like that a bit longer.

Because god, it’s nearly two a.m., and Eve is so awake it burns.

Eve read somewhere once that humans are the only species that if you shout fire, they run towards it, rather than away. That’s probably some mangled myth, but it seems real right now: Villanelle’s fire if Eve’s ever seen it, and oh, how Eve wants to go towards.

So she takes a swig of champagne and asks, “Do you still travel a lot?”, rather than doing something idiotic and impulsive.

A lazy nod, a slow blink. Villanelle exudes hurry and patience, as if she lives at the crossroads of inevitability and all the time imaginable. “Yes, I have just come in from New York.”
“Is London home, or a holiday?”

“I’m here to see my uncle. He doesn’t go around so much anymore -- he is name partner in his firm. And he gets grumpy if I don’t stop by often. He’s who was calling.” Villanelle scoffs lightly, but it’s affectionate, undeniably. “Back to New York on Monday.”

There’s at once something like disappointment running over her, which is stupid, so far beyond stupid, and she can’t trace it back to anything but some fantasy so diaphanous and fleeting she hadn’t even realised that she’d thought it up. “I’d like to travel more myself,” she says.

“You must. Travelling is the very best thing in the world. It is the world,” Villanelle smiles, a dozen cities echoed in her eyes. “You can be exactly who you are around people who don’t know any better.”

Yes, Eve’s beginning to see that. “Where should I go first?” And she’s only teasing out the dream of it, but also -- one plane ticket is cheaper than two, and Niko won’t be there to complain about too much sun, and --

“Oh, Eve, I have exquisite taste, but it doesn’t matter what I think. Where would you like to go?”

There’s a pause, heavy and glossy. Before, when they were in the club, Eve could pretend that more people equals more warmth. But they’re out in the open now, and the chill is still pushed away by her blood pumping overtime. And there’s no excuse for it now.

“Nice, on the coast.” Another sip of champagne. “I’ve heard they have lovely beaches there.”

“They do. Not as lovely as Australia’s, but Nice is closer.” Her mind skips like a record and suddenly Eve’s wondering what Villanelle would wear at the beach. And would she swim, or sit in the sand and read, sunglasses pushed to the top of her head? “It’s tourist off-season, so now is a good time to go.”

Eve snaps back to the present, and laughs. “I’m not really going to go,” she says, every syllable scaffolded with incredulity. Villanelle’s eyebrow quirks up again. “I’m not,” she repeats.

Villanelle bites her lip, releases it. Unnecessary: mesmerising. “Why not?”

Eve needs another drink. Or needs to have drunk less.

“Because -- I can’t just drop everything.” She might not bring herself to gather it back up again.

“You’ve just dropped your husband. What’s a house and a job? For someone as interesting and clever as you, Eve, there will be a thousand opportunities for new and better things, if you seek them out.”

Villanelle makes it sound so effortless. “Just like that?”

“Eve.” Villanelle’s hand is on her waist, and Eve can’t figure out if she just put it there, or if it’s been there a while. She must’ve reached out when Eve stepped nearer. When did Eve step nearer, again?

Villanelle’s thumb swoops a shallow arch, suggestive, blazing through the thin material of Eve’s dress.

Everything comes a little further unstuck.

Eve plays this game in her head, sometimes, where she invents arbitrary signs to try and decode the
universe. Like, if it rains today, I’ll work overtime, and go home late. Or, if Niko smooths his moustache, then I’ll bail on having drinks with his friends. It’s almost always rigged, in some way, a glaring spectacle of confirmation bias. But occasionally, she uses it to make up her mind when she’s being torn in two directions, to shiver out of total responsibility in case she’s wrong.

*If Villanelle’s thumb does that half-circle again, I’ll kiss her.*

*If Villanelle looks at the ground, I won’t.*

*If Villanelle --*

"Eve,” Villanelle says again, her accent dragged over with gravel. *If Villanelle -- “Of course, ‘like that’. You can do things just because you want to.”*

And then Eve is kissing her, and she’s not wrong, not at all, because Villanelle is kissing her back. Champagne-tinged blood rushes to Eve’s head, swirls around until she’s dizzy, and all that’s left in her veins is sprawling hunger, shuddering and desperate.

Villanelle kisses like she could make a fucking career out of it, like if she curls her tongue just right she can blot out the stale decades that hover over Eve, tied around her wrist like sinking balloons.

And maybe she can.

It feels like she can.

But more than being pushed, Eve wants to push back, so --

So she presses in flush, her chest to Villanelle’s chest, and there’s heat carbonating in her lungs, or perhaps that’s the lack of oxygen, or both. She pulls an inch away to breathe, and Villanelle makes this tiny sound of loss that draws Eve right back in, air suddenly irrelevant again.

Villanelle’s hands slip to Eve’s hips, grip hard, but even that can’t anchor her, slow or steady her. Eve bites Villanelle’s lip, and there’s another sound, an even better sound, caught between a moan and a sigh.

Then Villanelle is turning them, fast and deft, and Eve’s back is to the bricks now. This is going to ruin her dress, but she doesn’t care, because Villanelle’s tongue is doing *that* in her mouth, and --

The bottle falls from a slack grasp.

They stop. Champagne bubbles on bitumen at their feet.

“That stuff is very expensive,” Villanelle says, the words delighted and entertained, dusted against Eve’s lips.

“Don’t be dramatic, most of it was already gone.”

Eve can feel Villanelle’s smile, too. “I’m going to kiss you again, okay?”

And it starts that way, yes, but then Villanelle’s mouth is on Eve’s neck, her fingers are twisting in Eve’s hair, Eve is untucking Villanelle’s shirt from her slacks, and when does the definition of a kiss stretch so far it bursts and becomes something else?

Certainly by the time the alley suddenly seems inconvenient, exposed, and Eve is trying to recall whether her dress is difficult to get on and off, and --
Teeth graze her collarbone and a thigh pushes between her own. Eve’s nails dig into Villanelle’s back, dragging her closer, even though closer isn’t really possible.

If Villanelle --

The Staff Only door slams open ten feet from them, and Villanelle shifts quickly away. Eve wouldn’t have taken her for the type to care if someone saw, but maybe she’s being chivalrous, if they way she’s checking Eve carefully for a reaction is anything to go by.

The man -- their bartender from earlier -- gapes at them a second, and then turns on his heel and heads back inside the club, slipping his cigarette lighter back into his pocket.

The moment could be over, here. Eve could write it off as just the flare and fade of giddy rashness, a story to giggle through with Elena over wine one day.

But.

Villanelle laughs into the new silence -- perhaps at the bartender’s awkward expression, or at life, Eve doesn’t know. A streak of light -- moonlight, real moonlight, not a street lamp or the cast glow of a neon sign -- flairs abstract across her features, and everything doesn’t actually stop, it doesn’t, but it almost feels like it does.

It’s lust, Eve knows.

It’s alcohol.

It’s the recklessness of life upheaval.

But the thing about lust and alcohol and recklessness is that it always seems like a good idea at the time. Not just a good idea, but the only idea, like if Eve doesn’t do this, she might die.

“You know, I have some Krug Grande Cuvee in my hotel room. It’s even better than what we drank tonight.”

You can do things just because you want to.

And fuck, Eve wants to.

Eve wakes slow, too comfortable to move, to even blink. She’s not properly hungover, but she is still slightly braindead in that way that makes her bed seem softer than it actually is.

There’s an arm slung over her, but it just feels warm, not heavy and restrictive, and --

And it’s not Niko.

Last night sears across the front of her mind, relentless.

She’s sore. Not just after-sex sore, but after-really-fucking-incredible-sex sore.

It’s not quite morning yet, but the first flecks of sunrise are sifting into the hotel room, over every five-star thing. It’s just enough light to see Villanelle by, see the small frown on her face that slips
away again in sleep.

Shit. What is Eve supposed to do now? Would she want Eve to leave?

The idea nests hollow and stark in Eve’s stomach.

On the floor, a phone is buzzing.

She forces herself out of bed and grabs it off the carpet. Niko calling. Underneath: Niko. 7 missed calls.

Eve is wracked with the temptation not to answer, but something like habit has her tapping the green Accept icon anyway. “Hello?”

“Eve!” Relieved and familiar. The first time Niko and Eve had sex, he woke up before her, and the fact he was making breakfast spoke a clear-cut understanding that she’d be staying. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything. It’s just -- it’s been so messed up with us lately, hasn’t it? For so long.” A haggard exhale, more worn out than she feels. “We don’t see each other anymore. It’s like we’re just existing together, and that’s not enough. We deserve better. We deserve to love each other like we used to. I was talking with the boys last night, and Michael says he and Rhonda did couples’ therapy a few years ago, and they’re happier than they’ve ever been.” It sounds like he’s been practicing. “Happier than ever. Wouldn’t that be great, Eve? We could have that.”

Is this what Niko was thinking about last night, while she was fucking someone else? Was he running fifteen years of marriage on loop in his head, taking notes on their missteps and might’ve beens?

Eve stares over at Villanelle, beautiful and twenty-six and tangled in sheets that probably cost more than Eve makes in a month.

“I’m sorry for being a dick last night,” he adds, urgent, fervent. “I shouldn’t have just stormed off. And I know you must be at Elena’s right now, but -- come home? We’ll talk this out. Really talk. Because this can’t be it for us, Eve. I can’t let you go.”

The fugue Eve’s wrapped herself in doesn’t lift, it flattens. Crushes down. Because if this is it, how long before liberation becomes loneliness, before rent and bills paid alone become stifling?

Would it be better to keep last night as a thirty-carat memory, a medicine, an adrenaline shot to reinvigorate mundanity or to have it as the peak before a long, slow fall?

“Our life together,” Niko says, “everything we’ve built, it needs work. And we haven’t been working as hard as we should. But we can. We can breathe deep and try again, right? Put the hours in. Because I love you, Eve. So much.”

Her head fills with yesterday afternoon, with turning off the alt-folk station, the glut of relief rising over her. Fills too with the bitter-sweet of Veuve Clicquot, the heat of Villanelle’s hands and mouth, the violent prettiness of her smile.

Villanelle, who will go back to New York in a few days. Villanelle, who travels a lot, who told Eve herself that she likes to spend her time with people who don’t know who she is.

And Eve knows her, now -- only the tiniest piece of her, three-quarters blurred by so many kinds of intoxication, but even that’s probably too much.

Eve sighs.
What was she going to do, really? Quit her job and go to Nice? Spend the rest of her nights chasing a high like Villanelle and never finding quite the right hit?

Because it’s about context. The glory of freedom mingled with darkness and music and drinks. It couldn’t have all been Villanelle.

(It could.)

“Eve?”

Niko is --

Niko is there . Kissing Niko may not make London smog feel like northern lights, but Niko won’t be awkward around her in the morning, or disappear across the Atlantic in some shining haze. Niko will show up , and Eve knows in the sheerness of dawn, in a way it had been so inviting to un-know last night, that she’s not going to up and change her whole life. Villanelle had made it seem wondrous and so within reach, but it’s not. Not for Eve.

It’s too big, it’s too much, and her drive will get smothered under logistics and finances and complications.

But --

You can do things just because you want to.

You can do things just because you want to.

“I --” she starts, and Niko is offering their old selves back, so why does it feel like she is losing something?

If Villanelle rolls over right now, I’ll hang up the phone .

That can’t be confirmation bias, right? That’s up in the air. Entirely in the palm of the universe.

“Let’s put in a hundred percent again, Eve.”

Villanelle turns her face into her pillow, leaning, Eve’s heart thuds -- and then Villanelle relaxes, settles again into where she is, peaceful and delicate in sleep.

Eve swallows, dry. Okay, then. “Yeah. Yes. Yes, Niko, of course, I’ll come back.”

Maybe this is what Eve needed. Maybe one wild stolen evening is enough to pull taut again the slack feeling of her life.

Or maybe it’s not, but it’ll have to do.
Much is Enough

Chapter Summary

Eleven months.

Chapter Notes

villanelle isn't actually IN this chapter (sorrrryyyyy, it's the intermission year) but i tried to weave her through it as much as possible, so hopefully she still FEELS present, to some extent.

Q: margot, on tumblr you said that this chapter was over 6k words. why is it only just over 4.2k?

A: because during editing the chapter was starting to creep over 8k, and i thought a) that was way too long, especially when i know future chapters will probably be 3-5k, and b) i might not get so big a chapter completely up to a standard i was happy with by posting time. this was a tough call bc i knew a lot of you probably wouldn't be pleased with the chapter ending before villanelle's reappearance, but I want everything to be good for y'all, so hopefully this is a workable compromise.

chapter 3 will be up tomorrow.

IMPORTANT
*note - this is entrenched in eve's perspective, which means her excuses and rationalisations for things (i.e. not telling niko) are not my own beliefs, but reflect how i imagine she would grapple with everything. i feel her levels of honesty/involvement of niko are canon-typical, but let me know if you disagree.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eve wonders if Villanelle knew somehow that undressing Eve the way she did -- with all the fierce, rushed randomness that comes of heat-singed desperation -- would make leaving such a myriad and torturous thing.

Because every heady, gasping detail of last night is writ large across the hotel room, and Eve is forced to trace her way back through it all, run it over again in her mind.

She grabs her heels from by the door. (Remembers shoving Villanelle up against it, grazing lips over the hollow of her throat, feeling her halting swallow. Remembers biting the soft skin of her shoulder until Villanelle hissed, pain-pleasure, and time stretched and staggered around them.)

She finds her bra by the window. (Thinks of Villanelle’s breathless murmuring in Eve’s ear as she worked to free the clasp, slipping between languages as she made promises that she kept and kept and kept until she’d remade Eve’s muscle memory, remapped her body and carved it anew.)
She slides her dress back on and trails her fingers over the tear up the seam. (Flashes back to Villanelle deciding that it was all just *taking too long* and pushing Eve back onto the bed; pictures that wide febrile darkness in Villanelle’s eyes as she tore the fabric and got on her knees.)

God, Eve needs to *go*. Go, before she persuades herself that since she hasn’t gone home yet, her night isn’t actually over, and four hours of morning sex wouldn’t make this whole thing more or less messy.

Because it would. She’s already agreed with Niko.

Still, Eve does allow herself one small lapse, one look back -- a moment to stand in the swelling light and stare at Villanelle’s sleeping form with a strange mix of gratefulness and fury: Eve *knows* what she can feel, now, and that is beautiful and terrible by halves.

She makes it to the door before her resolve falters, and she stays with her fingers just barely brushing the handle for one, two, three. On three, she admits to herself that she’s not hesitating, she’s *waiting*, but Villanelle won’t be woken up by Eve silently willing it.

So Eve takes a breath and walks out, closes the door quietly behind herself, heads down the hallway, and presses the button for the elevator.

When it arrives, there’s already a woman inside. She’s auburn-haired, late twenties; her mascara is distinctly slept-in, and she’s barefoot, clutching pumps she’s apparently not prepared to recommit to now that the blisters and aches have set in.

She smirks at Eve. “Fun night?”

Eve’s so surprised at the question that she answers reflexively, truthfully. “Yes.” Although *fun* doesn’t really do it justice. “You?”

“Medium-average. The product did *not* live up to the advertising, if you know what I mean,” says the woman, who is apparently the chatty sort, even when hungover. “But hey, good for you.”

Villanelle probably wouldn’t recognise medium-average if someone wallpapered her hotel room with it.

“Thanks.”

And then the elevator doors are opening on the lobby, and abruptly, it hits that it took this stranger all of two seconds to pin down that Eve’s not a hotel guest going about her Saturday, but someone’s hookup skipping out.

Which she *is*, but if it’s that obvious --

Shit, Eve can’t go back home. Not like this. Not wearing an expensive dress that Niko doesn’t even know she bought, and definitely not with it half-wrecked, the clear collateral damage of --

She hasn’t done anything wrong, she reminds herself. Was it classy, immediately having sex with someone new the same night her marriage ended? Not particularly. But Niko had said *I can’t do this anymore*, had left, and his change of heart doesn’t retroactively make any of this cheating.

But Niko won’t see it that way. Or even if he does, it’ll still drive him crazy. He’ll want to talk about it. He’ll want to know *everything*, and inevitably, he’ll ask if Villanelle was better, because of course he will. And Eve, dutifully, will lie, but he’ll see through it, and she’s not sure they can afford enough couples’ therapy to get him over the fact that he’s never made her come so hard she blacked
out for a second. More specifically, to get him over the fact that Villanelle has.

Jesus, Eve can imagine it: sitting on a couch in some nice loft in the city, a foot of rigid space between the two of them as some friendly, patient woman watches on, assessing, logging the mechanics of their relationship. Can imagine: simplifying and underplaying, a tangled gymnastics of egos and resentment, trying to fashion this experience into something that their marriage survives.

The alternative is infinitely more appealing -- let Niko continue believing that she spent the night at Elena’s, and never, ever bring this up again.

Yes. Eve gets her privacy, and saves Niko from being haunted by the mental image of a model-hot twenty-six-year-old driving Eve wild out of her mind. Everybody wins.

As Eve crosses the atrium, she catches the security guard’s eyes lingering on her, on her legs, just a bit too long.

And then she steps outside into the cold, and oh, right, her dress has a homemade slit that runs halfway up her thigh.

(The seam-ripping had felt so deeply, absolutely necessary at the time.)

First things first, she supposes, and moves the whole outfit situation to the top of the rapidly growing list of problems she has to sort through.

It’s about six blocks of luxury boutiques and designer outlets before Eve finally comes across a clothes shop that will have stock within her price range. It’s a thrift store -- one of those gentrified ones meant for hipsters -- but it’ll have to do; this part of town is for the Villanelles of the world, not the Eves.

She heads inside, and while avoiding eye contact with the sales assistant, searches through the racks, taking the first coat that fits her up to the counter.

“Lovely morning, isn’t it?” the cashier chirps, guileless, and Eve gives him the brightest smile she can muster, because this man probably has to deal with all kinds of dickheads, and Eve refuses to be one of them.

She passes on the receipt and shrugs the coat on before she even reaches the sidewalk, then flags down a cab. She gives the driver Elena’s address instead of her own, and drops her forehead against the window, closing her eyes as he peels out from the curb and away.

The entire twenty-minute trip, Eve focuses on her breathing. Tries to blank her mind. But apparently that TedTalk she saw about mindfulness was a complete lie, because none of that does anything to block out Villanelle’s back arching, her hands tightening in Eve’s hair, the way she --

Eve pulls out her phone and reads a flimsy article on some second-tier royal with the same dedication that she would a binding contract.

And then she’s at Elena’s building, taking the stairs to the third floor rather than wait for that death-trap of an ancient elevator, and hoping she miraculously figures out exactly what to say.

Eve knocks on the door of Number 17. Waits. Knocks, waits. It occurs, belatedly, that Elena might not even be home; might’ve gone out clubbing like Eve did and not yet made it back.

But then --
“Clarissa, for the last time, your cat isn’t here, and --” The door opens, and there’s Elena, just barely this side of awake, clad in sweats and an old band tee. “Oh. Hey, Eve. Damn, did I forget --”

“No, no,” Eve assures her. “You didn’t forget anything.”

Elena looks the same as always; normal and cheerful and unchanged. Behind her, the front hall of the apartment is the same too, with its row of little hooks fixed to the wall, and the painting her sister did hung opposite.

It could be any ordinary day, and at once, last night -- the fight and the club and Villanelle, Villanelle, Villanelle -- almost starts to feel like something Eve made up to force a ripple through her millpond life. Like something that doesn’t hold up when in harsh light.

How could it have happened? How could it have been real?

“Eve?” Elena prompts, confused. Which is fair, because Eve’s not really in the habit of making social calls this early, unannounced.

“I’m sorry,” she fumbles out. “I should’ve texted first.”

Elena’s frowning slightly now, but she shakes her head. “It’s cool, don’t worry about it. Come on, it’s bloody freezing out here.” She steps aside and waves Eve in, shutting the door behind them, trapping the radiator heat in. She holds her hand out for Eve’s coat. “Is this new? It’s different from your --”

“Niko and I split up last night,” Eve blurts out, all haste and no finesse. She’s just got to tell her, because there’s no pretty way to put it, and as soon as she’s without her coat, Elena will see her dress and she’ll know. And better to have it said than seen.

Elena freezes. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

And then she’s perking up, asking, “So, what’s the socially-acceptable waiting period before shagging someone new?”

“Oh --”

“Because I wasn’t going to say anything while you two were together, but -- and don’t take this the wrong way -- you’ve always seemed like you needed to get really, properly fu--”

“But we just got back together,” Eve cuts her off. “He called me.”

Elena’s mouth drops open, then clicks shut, then breaks into a stilted smile. The whole sequence is quite a production. “Well, that’s great! And I bet Niko is fine in the sack -- not that I think about your husband in the sack, ever --”

“I know you don’t,” Eve says. “But, uh, I went and -- okay, I really thought we were done, alright?” And then she takes off her coat, hangs it up.

There’s a pause, infinite as it crawls over the back of Eve’s neck.

“Oh my god, you already shagged someone, didn’t you?” And just like that, Elena’s practically vibrating again. “Oh my god, Eve.”

Elena grabs her hand and tugs her through to the kitchen, nudging her onto a stool. “D’you want
some tea?”

“Please.”

Once Elena’s got the kettle on and two mugs set out on the bench, she’s back in front of Eve, regarding her with an appraising stare that is somehow smug, tentative and gleeful all at once. “Spill.”

So Eve does. “I went to a club,” Eve replies, stiffly, and she can actually see the comment that Elena’s forcibly suppressing. “I didn’t go for that, okay? I just wanted something different, you know?”

“Yep.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“Mmm.”

Yeah, Elena’s not going to budge on this. Eve sighs and pushes on. “I met someone, and we went back to their hotel. I woke up, Niko called, we sorted things out, and I took off while they were still asleep,” she summarises, bare-bones.

Elena grins salaciously. “Aren’t you just a walking Sex and the City episode?” She fishes two tea bags out of a drawer and drops them into their mugs. “So. Details?”

“That’s it.”

“That’s it? That was, like, the history textbook version. I want the steamy biopic version.”

“Elena, I’m your boss,” Eve tries, as if that’s stopped her from divulging past encounters or complaining about the current state of her sex life before.

“And my very dear friend,” Elena wheedles. “Come on. I’m basically already an archive of your dirty secrets.”

Elena wouldn’t judge her. Wouldn’t even tease her, if she thought Eve was properly cut up about it. It’s just --

Eve’s not sure that it’s the best idea to relive it again. Because it’s not out of her system, not yet -- might not be for a really, really long time -- but it can at least be out of mind, right? If she leaves it at Villanelle’s hotel, seals it off like a forbidden room in a sprawling house, then maybe she’ll remain intact. She might even manage to start forgetting, somewhere down the line.

Elena seems to have picked up that Eve’s reticence isn’t just part of the game, the back and forth of banter and confession, because she grabs Eve’s hand again, squeezes. “Are you okay?”

And -- Eve’s more than okay, less than okay. She just needs to process. It’s only been a handful of hours. This unfinished feeling, this leftover lust, it’s like silt; either it will be carried away by the current, or it’ll drift to the riverbank, and be compacted, covered over.

“Can I use your shower?” Eve asks, instead of trying to sort through any or all of that. “I can’t go back to Niko like this.”

“Of course. I’ll get you a towel. You wanna borrow some clothes, too?”
“Please.”

Eve stands up, weaves through the sitting area, and she’s nearly at the bathroom when Elena’s voice, gentle, stops her.

“Eve?”

She turns. “Yeah?”

“I know it’s really none of my business,” Elena says slowly, “but you might want to tell Niko about this. Even just the Cliff’s Notes. It’s going to be a lot more difficult to seriously mend things if you’re keeping stuff from him.”

Eve blinks. “Thanks. I’ll consider it,” she mutters, escaping into the bathroom and closing the door behind her, leaning back against it and counting up to ten, adagio.

She strips out of her dress carelessly -- it’s already ruined, and it’s not like Eve could’ve ever brought herself wear it again, even if it wasn’t.

The tiles are cool under her feet when she steps into the shower cubicle, and she fiddles with the taps, seeking brutal contrast with the water: warm, hot, too hot.

Under the spray, she closes her eyes, and washes herself in a cursory, vacant, robotic way. Even so, she can’t help cataloguing the evidence wreaked across her body. Eve Polastri, People’s Exhibit A: fingerprint bruises on her hips, tender; graze lines made by blunt nails dragging up her spine, soap-stung; a blood-sucked hickey at the curve of her breast, twinging. Each is a touchstone, a shortcut back to a second rendered technicolour-vivid in her memory.

Tell Niko, tell Niko, tell Niko.

What could she possibly tell Niko that would allow him to make sense of this?

Eve scrubs away Villanelle’s perfume, the smell of sex, the laundry scent of thousand thread-count sheets.

She dries off, changes into some of Elena’s jeans and a spare sweater, and at last, with some of her senses reset by copper and lavender, Villanelle seems a little less indelible.

Eve doesn’t need to tell Niko, because all this? It’s undoable. It’s erasable.

It’s a loop on a rollercoaster, and she can return to flat level tracks unscathed, having felt the screaming teeth of gravity one time.

She’ll be fine.

Eve makes it home just before twelve. There’s a key in her purse but some sudden instinct makes her raise her fist to knock.

But then Niko’s opening the door before she can, sweeping her into a hug, holding her like he really meant it about not letting her go.
She wraps her arms around his waist and rests against his chest. It’s been a while since they had this shade of prolonged closeness, genuine and not perfunctory, and it’s something Eve’s missed.

Maybe not missed the Niko of it all, exactly, but having someone who wants her in their space, who gives casual contact unsparingly, heedlessly and often.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, quieter in person.

Eve wonders what she’d be doing right now, if she’d told him no, on that phone call. Would she and Villanelle have had sex a few more times before Eve took her cue from some vague allusion to a lunch meeting or a deadline? Or would the intensity and seduction of the previous evening have dissipated as Villanelle opened her eyes? Either way, Eve would probably be at Elena’s by now, having been offered both the couch and an invitation to day-drink. They’d be eating ice cream -- Elena rattling off Niko’s shortcomings to cheer her up, and Eve trying not drown under the daunting weight of leasing a new apartment, changing her last name, refiling her HR paperwork.

Or would she be on a plane to Nice, with Villanelle’s number programmed into her phone?

Eve almost laughs at the ridiculousness of that idea; wishful, wistful.

Oblivious, Niko says, “I think this will be really good for us”, as if this was somehow his plan all along: brought together by being apart. For a heartbeat, Eve entertains it, suspends disbelief at Niko ever manipulating anybody, and debates whether this was some sort of demonstration. But of course it wasn’t. “It’s shown us what we don’t want.”

And oh, Eve tries really hard to want to believe that’s true.

Niko spends the next few days being overly courteous, overly generous, overly kind. Eve emulates as best she can, responds and returns and matches his energy, and it’s extended performance art, every minute of it. Evenings, matinees; exhausting.

There’s a careful exchange of chores done without asking and favourite meals made and elaborately obliging discussions over what to watch. They’re guests in their own home and in each other’s lives, tourists of a better time, and Eve couldn’t say whether it’s funny or sad.

Exactly one week after she sleeps with Villanelle, Eve and Niko go to their first therapy session. Their counselor is a man named Harrison who wears nice ironed shirts and is upfront about none of this being a guarantee.

“This is very helpful for a lot of couples,” he says, “but the results really only come when you start being honest.”

And Eve thinks about coming right out with it, then and there. Harrison could mediate the ensuing meltdown, and hell, if it really goes south, he undoubtedly has more than a handful of divorce lawyers’ cards on deck.
But.

But they’re here to repair, not rebreak. Niko is nodding enthusiastically at Harrison, taking her hand, and oh, what would be the point? What would be the point when she can’t bring herself to feel guilt or regret, and those are the first two things that Niko would need?

She nods, too, and stays quiet.

Eventually, the bruises and scratches and all the other ways Villanelle wrote herself across Eve are completely healed and faded.

Which is great. It is. Eve’s glad she’s gone.

When she’s sure, really sure there’s nothing, she gives some of Harrison’s advice a go, and sleeps with Niko to see if it helps them to appreciate one another again.

And if she gets into it by imagining a different room and different hands and a different kiss, then it’s only accidentally, and only for a second or two.

Harrison teaches them about communication, emphasises the importance of sharing a wavelength. He gives them exercises for relearning each other’s worlds, and techniques for dealing with conflict.

And it does work.

They stop fighting.

But fighting was never the problem, for Eve. Sometimes, she even needs that -- to scream, to argue, to slam the flat of her palm down on the table.

It’s that arrested feeling she hates, that endless, laborious sensation of treading water, not relapsing or progressing. It’s liquid dread, each hour as viscous as molasses but the months blurring together, alike and indistinct.

While planning to repress Villanelle entirely was perhaps too ambitious, Eve does get better at thinking of her less and less.

At first, she flickers through Eve’s brain once a day, but then it’s once a week, and then once every few.

Then just when sleeping with Niko is starting to feel too step-one-step-two-step-three, and she needs something to wake her up, turn her on. Just when Eve sees those of heels in the back of her closet,
and her cheeks flush, unbidden. Just when she passes a mannequin wearing that dress, and there’s the echo of Villanelle mumbling something about replacing it before she ripped the stitching, as if Eve cared about anything that wasn’t the fact that Villanelle was pressing that sentence in kissed increments up the inside of her thigh.

Niko is happier.

Eve’s relieved; he’s a decent man, a better person than she is, and he deserves to have the life he wants.

She just wishes that life didn’t have to come at the cost of a million little micro-corrections, Eve catching parts of herself and smoothing them away, curling and contorting and collapsing to fit.

Once, she brings it up in therapy, after Harrison requests she contribute more. “I feel a bit trapped,” she murmurs. “I don’t really know what I expected from us but I guess I figured that --”

Niko looks so wounded, so surprised, so taken aback. It grates that Niko is ready to supply all the ways Eve is lacking, but any complaint of hers is somehow too vicious, too much. Still, the words there would be more than this, and I wouldn’t be so constantly numb in my marriage dissolve on her tongue.

She salvages her sentence quickly. “-- that getting more stable would give us more time and money, but we don’t have many opportunities for adventure.” It’s not a total lie.

Harrison suggests practicing gratefulness, noting down and reading aloud to one another what they are satisfied with, and encourages Eve to take active measures to enrich herself.

“Like yoga?” she mumbles, wrinkling her nose.

“If you’d like. Anything that brings you joy, or a sense of productivity and accomplishment, like an exercise, or a project,” he says. “It’ll refresh you, invigorate you, and you can reinvest that in your relationship with Niko.” Taking in her expression, he adds, “It doesn’t have to be yoga, Eve. It might be writing or jogging or knitting. If you’re stuck, try resurrecting an old hobby.”

Of all Harrison’s tips, that turns out to be the most useful to Eve.

Her college textbooks are beyond out of date, so Eve turns to the internet. She buys a couple of personal-use database licenses and starts wading through psychology journals, reading up on new advancements and studies and promising emerging theories.

That feeling Harrison promised, it comes. Eve looks forward to those hours trawling through publications, dissecting their findings, linking them back to other ideas.

She does try and include Niko, a bit, too. Well, she sits in the same room as him, glued to her laptop while he grades papers or watches TV, and it passes for quality time. And yes, okay, they’re not actually talking, but Eve’s starting to believe that’s not the worst thing for them. Rehashing their cookie-cutter days for the thousandth time -- how Eve checked boxes and filed forms, and Niko explained the same maths to the same kids -- isn’t helping anyone. Beat-by-beat reruns of their hamster-wheel lives are just depressing, and the less of that there is, the better.
Time rockets onwards like it’s got something to prove, and gradually, Villanelle and that night are so unmoored from the present that it seems pathetic still reflect on it occasionally.

Besides, it wasn’t even all that, Eve rationalises. Alcohol and adrenaline made it seem better than it was, and the boredom since has further buffed and shined the memory.

For the most part, she lets it go.

There’s just one backslide, between Christmas and Niko’s birthday, when the monotony is particularly gruesome. On some piercing whim, Eve finds herself at a bar, paying a shocking amount for a glass of Veuve Clicquot.

She drinks it slowly.

Whatever rush she was hoping for, it doesn’t manage to give her more than a cheap, wilted imitation of, and she’s left with alcohol and bygones on her lips.

Niko says they are doing so much better, the two of them.

On her less-good days, Eve agrees; they are doing better the way water-carved rocks are better -- wedged unmoving into the riverbank, made smooth by being relentlessly worn away.

But eventually, things really do improve. Spending time with Niko becomes less arduous, more enjoyable; touches are less rote, more intentional.

Yes, there are things about her that he’ll never like, things she has to rebrand and reshape and rename to be the woman he thinks she is, but isn’t that always the way, with every relationship? Isn’t that adulthood -- fumbling through life with a dozen different selves slithered on, in an effort to actually be enough for someone, anyone?

Eve starts to feel better about them, too. Maybe it’s the therapy. Maybe it’s passing all these tiny milestones (her birthday, Easter, New Years) and realising she would’ve otherwise spent them pretty much the same, only without someone to buy groceries on their way home when she’s too tired. Maybe it’s just that she’s stopped trying to imagine Niko into something he’ll never be, stopping trying to feel something that isn’t real, that isn’t how real people ever feel.

Well, it’s how they feel occasionally -- once, say -- but only when in a slipshod haze of inebriation and rose-tinted stupidity.

Regardless of the cause of their upward trajectory, Eve is content, is practicing contentment. She can’t be all of herself, so she’ll settle for most of herself. She can’t love all of Niko, or all of how he loves her, so she’ll settle for some of it.

And in a matted hessian of communication exercises and conflict resolution techniques and gratitude journals and active intimacy, their marriage is once again enough.
Niko was right, all those months ago. It’s work, it’s constant work, but they can manage it.

Chapter End Notes

spoiler alert: they can't manage it, and shit's about to get hella gay up in hereeeeeeey eet
tune in next time for villanelle's return!

QUESTION. i have left this as rated mature. should it be rated explicit? (like based on
this chapter, not future possibilities. i'll deal with that when i get to it). im not sure,
because i dont want to mislead readers in either direction

also @ everyone who left a comment last time, you're all fantastic, and i got super
excited over each one. it makes me really hype to write when i know people are reading
and enjoying it, so seriously, thank you so much :D i will get around to replying to as
many as I can in the next few days

**note - i have never been to couples therapy, only some regular therapy. i made
guesses and did some googling. as a general rule, therapy in fanfiction is by no means
reliable or accurate.
The windows behind Carolyn’s desk offer a sinfully expensive view of the London skyline, made more extravagant by the fact that Carolyn herself faces away from it. This means that Eve, sitting opposite her, gets the full enjoyment of the cityscape -- something that makes their otherwise tedious monthly progress reviews quite pleasant.

Only Eve hasn’t been called to the executive floor for her department’s monthly progress review. Actually, Carolyn’s email didn’t specify why she was being summoned at all.

But there has been gossip for months, fledgling rumours slowly creeping their vines and roots through supply closets and corridors and elevator shafts, wrapping around ankles and wrists.

So it’s not really a surprise when Carolyn confirms it, in a concise little speech: M-SIX International will indeed be merging with Peel Marketing Solutions. The initial negotiations are complete, and now they’re down to the nitty-gritty of actual integration.

Eve takes a moment to let it sink in, then says, “What does that mean for my team?” Client acquisition research is hardly the star of the show. She, Kenny and Elena don’t schmooze or network or broker deals themselves; they just pull together information packets on the possible risks and rewards of potential clients and send them off to the higher-ups for approval and implementation. For all Eve knows, Peel might want to try replacing them with an algorithm. “Layoffs?”

Carolyn watches her impassively, and god, Eve wishes she could get a better read on her. Then --
“No, quite the opposite.”

“Raises?”

“No.” Yeah, that was a long shot. “Additional personnel. Peel Marketing has a corresponding acquisition research group, and you’ll be blended into one larger department.”

It’s not ideal -- Kenny, Elena and Eve have a dynamic that works -- but with the extra billing Peel’s firm will bring, they’ll need more hands. “Okay.” Well, being team coordinator was nice enough while it lasted. “Who’s the new boss?”

“You are. You’ll be heading up the joint unit. It’s a fairly negligible pay increase, but it is technically a promotion.”

Eve blinks. “What?” She’s good at her job -- as efficient and dedicated as someone can be when they aren’t driven by bone-deep passion or greed or company pride -- but not so much that she’s the obvious choice to be moved up the ladder.

“Relax, Eve. Your responsibilities will be much the same; you’ll simply have more employees under your purview.”

“Where’s the but?” Eve asks. Because Carolyn isn’t one for wasting time, and if they’re having a one-on-one meeting instead of a phone conversation then she must have something to say that she knows Eve won’t like.

Carolyn sighs. “As you can certainly imagine, Eve, the merging of two multi-multi-million dollar companies is something of… well, a legal clusterfuck.”

“Uh. Yes.”

“There will be hubbub, Eve. Corporate eyes will be on us. Journalists will be scouting for the scandal scoop. They’ll be hungry to print that M-SIX is going under and needs a bailout from Peel Solutions, or that this is some insidious step in a larger buyout plan.” Carolyn pauses, as if to give Eve a minute to appreciate the ridiculousness of what Eve quietly considers to be rather reasonable concerns. “Our shareholders need to be sure of Peel’s company, and vice-versa. At such a crucial juncture, the rats will check the boat for leaks, and as the one-percent are wont to do, they will unleash their hoards of private investigators on us. With partners and paperwork in the spotlight, Eve, this is when issues come scuttling out of the dark.”

“I’m not covering up any sordid corporate secrets, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I know that, Eve. If you were, it’d be because I asked you to,” Carolyn responds evenly. “What I’m getting to is that Peel and M-SIX have hired a consulting team. Lawyers. They’ll be run as an external party, but be primarily based internally -- they’ll be using the ninth floor offices.”

“Is that why they got renovated?” The refurbishments just before Easter were what convinced Elena that the whispers of a merger were true, although back then, Eve and Kenny still been on the fence about it.

“Partially,” Carolyn concedes, then continues, “These consultants will be checking the gift horse’s mouth, as it were. Accounting for weaknesses, ensuring everything is ticking along, course-correcting as we go.”

Eve frowns. “We have lawyers already. Couldn’t we run this in-house?”
“Yes, but they’re our lawyers, and if anything falls through, we want them with fresh, uncompromised eyes, and total commitment to M-SIX. Peel has the same stipulations. So as pricey as Betkin, Vasiliev & Associates are, they will play the field evenly, and they’ll bring a valuable objectivity.”

“Betkin,” Eve repeats. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“They’ve consulted for us occasionally in the past. He and I were in university together, during a semester exchange.”

“And Peel doesn’t count that as bias in our favour?”

Carolyn blinks. “If Peel eliminated everyone I’m connected to, Eve, he wouldn’t have been able to hire a competent lawyer this side of the equator.”

That sounds about right. “Okay. So what does any of this have to do with me?”

“Betkin’s people will be going through every department with a fine-tooth comb, Eve, even yours. One might say especially yours -- research into possible future clients and their histories is a somewhat manipulative and dicey practice at best, as you would know. As your team’s leader, you’ll be responsible for liaising with the consultants: walking them through your past projects, breaking down budget distribution, any old slip-ups or prospective minefields, that sort of thing.”

So every decision Eve’s made in the last five years is going to exhumed and autopsied by some overpaid Cambridge grad with a superiority complex, essentially. “Awesome.”

“Be accommodating.” Carolyn instructs, then stops. “But not too accommodating, Eve. At M-SIX, we have backbones. And come to me if something doesn’t feel right. I want Peel’s money, Eve, but I don’t trust him. Or Betkin, not entirely.”

Oh, this whole thing is really going to suck. “You got it.”

It’s another month before the effects of the merger trickle all the way down to Eve’s department. Frank’s team gets completely overhauled, which is honestly overdue, but Eve still feels bad about three of the guys being fired to make room for Peel’s equivalents. Mutual downsizing, Frank tells her, in an over-coffee conversation she doesn’t manage to wriggle out of for nearly ten minutes.

Eve’s additions arrive early on a Thursday morning, clutching cardboard boxes stacked high with manila folders and picture frames and tiny desk plants. She can see why no one in their field had to be let go -- Peel only has two acquisition researchers to send: a pregnant woman in her thirties, and a young man who must be barely a few semesters out of college.

“I’m Jess.”

“Great to meet you. I’m Eve. This is Kenny, and Elena.”

Eve shakes Jess’s hand first, and then the man’s, who introduces himself as “Hugo”, and looks Eve up and down in a way that she wouldn’t classify as ‘professional’.

Jess grimaces. “He went to Oxford,” she says, somewhere between long-suffering and amused. “Get
ready to hear about it.”

Hugo rolls his eyes, but sets his box down so he can relieve Jess of hers, carrying it over to the first of the two new desks that maintenance brought in yesterday.

Eve gives them a tour around the floor, which they share with Frank’s offices, pointing out the bathrooms, fire exits, kitchen (please don’t microwave fish, we have a rule), and the secret couch for emergency naps.

Then everyone settles in, workspaces are set up, and they just --

Get on with it.

It all goes far more smoothly than Eve could’ve dared hope for. She *likes* Jess and Hugo, and Kenny and Elena like them, too. They’re cooperative and enthusiastic -- but not too enthusiastic, which suits everyone perfectly.

They’re technically still operating as separate entities -- Jess and Hugo have their own projects and their files haven’t been consolidated with M-SIX’s yet -- but it’s far easier for all of them to get this head start, to get used to each other now and be phased gradually through the merger than it is to have everything change at once.

Since way back before even Eve was hired, their department has had the unspoken understanding that if you meet checkpoints and pull your weight, no real questions about how you spend your time will be asked -- who’s to say if you finished early, and got a bit off-task? On their more efficient days, Hugo has his half-assed pursuit of Instagram fame keeping him busy, Jess edits her husband’s novel draft, Elena writes satirical advice columns, and Kenny forges on with building his app from scratch.

And Eve? All her research notes her database rabbithole are starting to coalesce into something that could be a *something*.

But it’s a very tentative *could*.

It’s almost obscenely early -- any time before one p.m. feels obscenely early, on a Monday -- and Eve is in the breakroom with Jess, drinking decaf in a gesture of solidarity. She’ll have to chase it with real coffee, soon, but it’s the thought that counts, she reasons.

Hugo stumbles in looking rather unkempt, and Eve debates whether he’s just hungover, or if he didn’t even go home last night at all. The rakish smirk he flashes her has her leaning towards the latter.

“The glitterati are here, by the way,” he informs them, his words shaped oddly around a green straw as he slurps down some whipped cream-based Starbucks monstrosity. “Want a sip?” he adds, when he catches Eve eyeing it.
“I’m good,” she mutters, even though it’s straight liquid sugar and caffeine, and she could really use both of those things right about now. It’s not even eight o’clock yet. “And the glitterati?”

“Vasiliev and Betkin’s fleet of lawyers,” Hugo clarifies, leaning back against the counter. “The Prada-Power Squad.”

Jess narrows her eyes. “If you call them that to their faces --”

“You’ll give me twenty bucks? I’ll do it for twenty bucks. I’ll do it loudly for --”

“You live in Camden, Hugo. You need twenty bucks like I need to get kicked in the bladder for the millionth time by a foetus,” Jess replies, and Hugo feigns hurt.

“My parents live in Camden.”

“You live with your parents.”

“Only sometimes. And only by choice. Because they live in Camden, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

And then Elena is walking in, looking about as tired as Eve feels, although Eve doubts she has the excuse of having spent the previous evening dealing with passive-aggression over Indian takeout because she doesn’t want to go visit her husband’s parents. Yep, Eve’s got the market cornered on that one.

“Hello,” Elena greets. “What are we talking about?”

“The new lawyers are in,” Hugo supplies. “I saw them on my way through. They’re setting up in the big conference room.”

“I thought they were getting the ninth floor?”

“They will,” Eve says, slotting a new pod into the coffee maker and turning it on again. “It’s likely just for a briefing. You know, to make sure everyone’s on the same page.” She digs a knuckle in her temple, willing away the headache that’s already half-formed.

Jess pats Eve’s shoulder in sympathy; they all know she’ll be the one dealing with most of the demands and disruptions. “Ugh.”

“Look on the bright side,” Elena says. “You might’ve missed your chance to marry rich, but I haven’t. And if I net one of Betkin’s daddy’s-money boys, then I’ll fly you out to visit me in my Swiss chateau.”

“I feel like you’ve thought about this too much.”

“Eve, we’re supposed to be maximising opportunities ,” Elena sing-songs, quoting the Peel/M-SIX Merger Objectives email blast they’d all been hit with the day before.

Once the coffee is gone, they shuffle off to their desks, slogging through inboxes swollen overnight, and refining their benefit analysis of the Palace-Friedman account.

At around ten, Frank strides in, and after a beat Eve realises that it’s not just her imagination -- he actually is wearing a far nicer suit than usual. Which means he knew Betkin and Vasiliev were coming, and dressed up for it.
He coughs. “Team, if I could have your attention?”

Begrudgingly, they all turn to him, but he doesn’t continue. Eve sighs. “You have our attention, Frank. What can we do for you?”

“I’ve been asked to inform you all that Betkin and Vasiliev’s taskforce has arrived. We’ll all be introduced at a working lunch starting at one o’clock. It’s my understanding that there will be a presentation to get us up to speed.”

Kenny’s hand creeps up.

Frank huffs. “Yes, it’s mandatory; no, you won’t be getting extra break time.”

“That’s, uh, that’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Go on, then.”

“Is it catered?”

Frank stares at him. “What?”

“Well, sometimes when we have lunch meetings, they provide the lunch. Like when we had the briefing about the Brussels conference last year.”

“Oh, yeah,” Elena chimes in. “They had really great sandwiches. Are we getting sandwiches for this one?”

Frank’s lips press thin. “There will be some light refreshments.”

If she asked for an exact menu, Eve wonders, could she get that vein in his forehead to pop? Frank hasn’t had a proper tantrum in a while, not since the photocopier started printing pages back to front.

Frank turns to leave, then halts, hovering in the doorway. “You should also know that the official memo I received specified that we are to exemplify the company values of leadership, engagement, and innovation through our behaviour and contributions to discussion.”

Yeah, he definitely recited that verbatim from memory.

As soon as the door closes behind him, Elena says, “I hope belching all those corporate buzzwords gives him reflux one day.”

Eve grins.

“But we are going to be suck-ups, right? I mean, Paul told me that we’ll come under a fair bit of scrutiny,” Hugo says. “And my father always says that in the business world, it’s best to lick someone’s boots if they’re going to be climbing up your arsehole.”

Everyone stops, even Jess, who must’ve heard most of Hugo’s off-brand wisdom soundbites by now.

Elena coughs. “I’m -- is --”

Eve can’t quite tell if she’s struggling through a surplus of possible jokes, or is genuinely too overwhelmed to come up with any.

“Thank you, Hugo,” Eve replies calmly, in an attempt to cut this conversation off at the knees before
it gets derailed into something wildly inappropriate. “That’s not how I would have put it, but yes. We make it easy for them, they wrap up with us nice and fast, and we get back to everything as usual.”

Eve hasn’t made as much headway with the Palace-Friedman proposal as she’d like by the time one o’clock rolls around. If this lunch drags on, she’s going to have to pull some overtime to get everything to Carolyn by Friday closing, which is --

Well. Deadlines are important. Eve doesn’t mind staying late.

Niko will have something to say about it, though.

She sighs, tracking down a legal pad and pen for taking notes before she gets up to join the others.

“You okay?” Elena asks, looping her arm through Eve’s as they make their way out of the office and down the hall to the larger conference room.


And that’s not quite the whole of it, but Eve still hasn’t figured out how to explain that she can be both exhausted and filled with excess, wasted energy at the same time, so she lets it lie.

They’re one of the first departments to arrive for the meeting, and they line up behind the HR people to snag their share of the promised “light refreshments”, which turn out to be some pastries and boilers of tea.

Eve grabs a croissant and locates their table -- seeing as they have the fewest personnel, they’re almost always shunted down the back of the room, and today is no exception. She takes her seat, and the others claim the free chairs beside her.

“These aren’t as tasty as the Brussels briefing sandwiches,” Kenny announces, after one bite of his danish.

Up the front by the smartboard, there’s a small cluster of suits. Hugo had been right to nickname them Prada-Power -- any one of them might as well have Eve’s last six pay cheques sewn into the lining of their jacket. There’s three older men -- two burly, the other lean -- a handful of younger guys, and two women. The brunette is standing quietly, but the blonde facing away from Eve is chatting with one of the older men. He seems caught between exasperation and amusement, and Eve wonders what she could be talking about to merit such an expression.

Then the blonde woman laughs, just barely audible through the gentle texture of a dozen murmured conversations.

And there’s this wild, fraught beat of deja-vu that pounds through Eve’s arteries like a clot on its way to her brain.

Then just as quickly, the feeling dies, and Eve isn’t even sure what caused it, that sense of recognition clouding up her chest.

She watches the woman a little longer: her pantsuit, tailored closely to hug her form; her honey hair styled in that artfully effortless way, all loose subtle curls that make her seem softer than the figure she cuts, straight-backed and steady.

But no, Eve can’t place her as reminiscent of anyone she knows. Maybe it’s something off with the acoustics; maybe Eve sat next to someone similar on the train yesterday. Maybe she’s sleep-deprived.
She shakes it off, because the presentation is starting. The broad, greying man makes one last comment to the blonde, and then clears his throat. “Hello, and thank you all for joining us.” Eve would guess he’s Russian, but she’s not the best judge of accents. “My name is Konstantin Vasiliev, and this is Vladimir Betkin.” He indicates the thinner man beside him, whose presence is one of deliberate, artificial idleness -- as if he’s smoothed the grout of every thought from the surface of his face. Indecipherable, like Carolyn. “And these are our junior partners, Raymond and --”

Right before he says her name, she turns and Eve knows.

“-- Villanelle.”

Shit.

She’s here, actually here, made inarguably real again. Whatever distant dreamscape orbit Eve had managed to exile her to falters, and every satellite memory comes hurtling back to Earth.

Champagne. Alleyways. You can do things just because you want to. Being touched against the wall of an elevator, barely pulling apart to make it down a hotel hall, fumbling with a room key. A blurred montage of a hundred kinds of too much, of tongues and teeth and hands.


This is so not happening.

But it is happening. Villanelle’s thirty feet away, regarding Konstantin absently as he speaks, listening-but-not-really-listening with this languorous confidence: every inch a personal fuck you, Eve from the universe.

Shit.

Elena nudges Eve, hisses, “They’re not seriously going to be checking our professional development logs, are they? Because you and me are, like, at least twelve hours behind.”

Eve realises abruptly that Konstantin has been talking for nearly five minutes, and she hasn’t written a single thing down.

She clicks her biro, inks a dot point on the first line, and focuses.

“...so we want you to think of us as here to help, and --” Konstantin is saying, the slide changing over on the presentation beside him.

Here to help, Eve scribbles out, as if that actually means something.

Here to help.

Here to help.

There’s the chance that their paths won’t cross at all. Perhaps Konstantin has assigned each of the consultants their own department, and Eve will end up with literally anyone else. Anyone.

Or she’ll get Villanelle, and they’ll pass the next few months hardly able to look at each other, every conversation about ethical guidelines and budgeting and project management undercut by the fact that this woman was the best sex of Eve’s life, and probably knows it. Best case scenario, they both resolutely ignore it, but worst case, Villanelle feels obligated to remind Eve that it was a one-time thing, no repeats, et cetera. As if Eve isn’t aware of that. As if Eve’s not actually fully recommitted to
Eve spins her pen between her fingers and forces herself again to pay attention, mindlessly copying down the contents of the slides.

At least Villanelle hasn’t noticed Eve yet. The discomfort of that mutual eye contact can be delayed a little longer, preferably a lot longer, and --

What if she *has* noticed Eve? What if she just doesn’t remember her at all? Is Eve supposed to tell her, or keep her mouth shut and let Villanelle believe they have a perfectly normal business relationship?

God, Eve is going to have been one unremarkable experience in a daze of alcohol-tinted weekends gone -- Villanelle is young, single, rich and gorgeous; she probably has one-night stands all the time. Eve has certainly been entirely forgotten by now, if she wasn’t immediately.

It’s been a year. Villanelle didn’t spend the weeks after their encounter waking up turned on and frustrated from sleep-waned memories she didn’t ask to have replayed, or imagining them together to push through a bland, token five minutes of missionary. Villanelle doesn’t know her name, or that she very nearly talked Eve into damming it all and flying to Nice.

Which Eve is glad about, obviously. It’s better for everyone this way.

And hey, this might even be good for Eve. Yes, it’s unconventional, but it’ll be a chance for closure, right? Harrison’s mentioned that occasionally. *Closure*. Meeting Villanelle outside of the heightened atmosphere of the club will prove that Eve overstated everything in her mind. That she was just so desperate for something different that she put a fleeting hookup on a pedestal, and it’ll be much healthier for her and Niko to have it torn down, once and for all. And being colleagues with Villanelle might be a bit weird at first, but eventually, she’ll come to associate Villanelle with liability checks rather than multiple consecutive --

It’ll be good for Eve, is the point.

That vague, fatuous bitterness going porous in her chest will dissipate soon, too.

Frank asks a question, and Villanelle bites her lip, pushes her hands deep into her pockets, like she’s very determinedly *not* saying whatever it was she just thought. It’s not an unattractive image.

Not that *Eve* finds it attractive, per se, because she doesn’t. Just, like, objectively --

She stares resolutely at Konstantin, shoving her thoughts into cleaner, more manageable boxes. She writes down his latest point in block letters and underlines it twice. There. She can do this. She can totally do this. She’s an adult, for fuck’s sake. She’s capable and competent and not going to be derailed by --

By the fact that Villanelle is looking *right at her*, the corner of her mouth teasing up just slightly, and it’s not quite a smirk, but maybe it is.

Or maybe it’s all in Eve’s head.

Villanelle’s gaze drags over her slowly, leisurely, and she takes her time to meet Eve’s eyes.

As soon as she does, Eve immediately refocuses on her legal pad, on the capitalised, double-underlined words, *minimising risk*. Her own slanted scrawl seems suddenly alien.
She needs to get a grip. Villanelle isn’t *gazing at her*, she’s just scanning the crowd, picking out likely problems, likely assets. That’s her job. She’s doing her job.

Recklessly, resistantly, Eve’s heart thuds.

She doesn’t glance up again. Instead, she keeps Villanelle out of even her periphery, and practically transcribes the rest of Konstantin’s lecture, glued to her paper.

The meeting lasts approximately four hundred hours, and when it ends, Eve is the first one out the door.

She’s back at her desk before she remembers that she was probably supposed to hang back and introduce herself to the consulting team, along with the other department leaders.

Not happening. Not yet.

Eve digs her palms into her eyes until she sees black static, and allows herself a full minute to try and will this into being some kind of stress-induced nightmare.

But then she can hear footsteps, so she breathes deep, holds it, and turns her computer on, opening up a random spreadsheet to fill the screen.

Then breathes out.

The others filter in, all clutching extra pastries that they must have liberated on their way out.

“You took off in a hurry,” Elena observes, dropping down into her chair opposite Eve and regarding her curiously over the tops of their monitors.

“Oh. Yeah. I -- I have a killer headache, and I really wanted some aspirin,” she mutters. Which isn’t entirely untrue. There’s already a pain building just above her eye.

Elena scrunches her nose in concern, then disappears off to the breakroom and returns with a large glass of water, which she offers Eve before sitting back down. “You’ve had quite a few of those lately. Maybe you need a holiday,” Elena suggests. “A getaway, to relax a bit.”

A holiday until the merger is over would probably do it. “I wish.”

“But that’d leave Jess dealing with the consultants, so I’m sure she appreciates you toughing it out,” Elena adds. Then -- “Do you and that lawyer know each other, by the way?”

Eve takes a long drink of lukewarm tap water to give herself a second. “Which new lawyer?”

“The blonde woman. She kept looking at you.” Elena pauses. “Which I definitely didn’t notice because I was absolutely riveted to the presentation and learning loads the whole time.”

“Oh huh.”

“So what’s the story there?”

For a moment, Eve imagines telling her everything. Saying, remember that night Niko left last year, and I fucked someone else? Remember how you asked me for details and I never gave them? Well, here it is: I met her at a club, we went back to her hotel room and --

Eve can’t even make her pretend-self confess it all to Elena, not under the stark fluorescent lighting of their office. “Uh, I’m pretty sure we ran into each other at a conference, once?” She’s oddly
certain that Elena won’t buy it, as if there is some visible thread running between Eve and Villanelle that Elena must have seen.

A tattered, sun-bleached thread, constantly fading further, but not quite gone.

But --

“Oh, okay,” Elena says. She hums. “I wish I had her jacket. Her outfit is amazing.”

“Yeah.” And maybe if she concentrates hard enough, Eve will make it through this entire merger without remembering tearing a very similar jacket off Villanelle, working the buttons on her shirt, her fingers caught between their bodies as Villanelle pressed closer to kiss along her jaw.

Closure, Eve repeats firmly. Closure, closure, closure. This will be closure.

She spends the next age staring at a blur of Excel data sets, her brain a ruptured mess of she kept looking at you and the endless mantra that there’s absolutely no way Villanelle remembers. There’s no way.

Eve clocks out at exactly five, deadlines be damned.

Chapter End Notes

i have a long-ass shift tomorrow so probably no updates until thursday or friday, depending on how i go. these take quite a few hours to write and edit and my schedule can be unpredictable, so i can't really give you a clear updating forecast :(

every comment makes me squeak with joy so if you have left one pls know i really, really appreciated it and have probably already re-read it at least once

and thanks to everyone who clarified. the rating is staying as Mature for now.
Chapter Summary

Are some things better forgotten?

Chapter Notes

four! fucking! drafts! later! and i still hate this stupid chapter!!! i promise i tried really hard guys but i could NOT get it to hang together.

i have decided to let it go tho so we can all move on. apparently this malfunction is the price of admission for me to be able to rig this shit for some quality pining.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eve sits at the kitchen counter, staring vacantly at the sunlight that lathers the windowsills.

She needs to go. It’s after seven-thirty, and if she leaves it much longer, she’ll be late for work.

Beside her, the radio is playing Niko’s stupid alt-folk station while he makes tea, pulling one mug from the cupboard out of habit, then pausing and grabbing another.

She’s not normally still here. Monday to Friday, Eve is out the door as early as possible, sometimes even before Niko wakes up, if she’s fast, and she’s back just in time for dinner.

Except --

Except.

Eve knows exactly why she isn’t on the train right now.

“You were talking in your sleep last night,” Niko tells her, casual as he pours their tea.

“Oh?” Eve murmurs, as if she’s just barely interested, as if her lungs aren’t twisted up in her throat because there is the smallest, smallest chance she dreamed of Villanelle. “What about?”

“The merger,” he replies, and Eve breathes out. “Honey, you’re not under too much pressure, are you?”

“No, of course not.” She stares at their mugs instead of him, and imagines knocking them off the counter. She imagines ceramic shattering into sharp and powder, imagines the sound then the silence. Imagines alt-folk playing in the background. “It’s just going to be a lot of extra work, I think.”

He frowns sympathetically, and Eve wonders whether this will be enough to get her out of their ongoing argument about whether she has to go with him to visit his parents. They’ve moved back to Warsaw, and Eve really doesn’t want to go on a trip with him, spend days in his parents’ house with just them and him.
“It is a bit stressful,” she tacks on. It’s not a lie, not at all, but it’s only half true and only for some of the right reasons. “We’ll all be under a microscope for the next few months.”

“Maybe they’ll see how hard you work for once,” he replies. “You love your job so much; it’d be great if they recognised that a bit more.”

Eve feels a sudden, soft sense of loss grope her ribs, compress her heart. Because he is so kind to her, and in a lot of ways, he doesn’t see her at all. “Yeah. That would be great.” Eve’s never loved her job. She likes it, she’s good at it, she gets along well with her coworkers, but --

But she doesn’t get the satisfaction from it that Niko seems to get from teaching, or that rich, vibrant thrill that had been in Villanelle’s eyes as she drank champagne and talked about travel and scandals and her life, way back forever ago.

“Really great,” she says absently, her head still full of things she’s forgotten.

Is forgetting. Will forget.

Niko nods. “I --”

His phone starts ringing, and Eve pulls away, grabs her bag, takes a few steps back. “I’ve really got to go,” she says, because avoidance or not, she can’t actually be late. “Thanks for the tea.”

He smiles at her, and doesn’t mention that she didn’t drink it.

Eve makes it to the office with five minutes to spare. Everyone else is already seated, chatting; Kenny and Hugo are tossing a rubber-band ball back and forth across the room.

“Oversleep?” Elena asks cheerfully, waving at Eve. She’s wheeled just a little ways away from her desk, not far enough for the boys to notice, but the exact right amount. Her gaze is fixed on the arc of the ball, biding her time, as it passes from Hugo to Kenny, Kenny to Hugo, Hugo to --

Elena. She grins, triumphant, then chucks the ball to Kenny and turns her attention to Eve.

Eve tugs off her coat, drapes it over the back of her chair. “Yeah. I blew off my alarm too many times.”

“The snooze button is a cruel mistress,” Elena commiserates. “So, have you got the scoop on this Raymond chap? If he’s who I think he is, then he’s not Swiss-chateau material, but maybe he knows one of the other --”

“Raymond?”

“From the email?” The rubber-band ball sails over their heads. “Eve, did you not read the email?”

“Just -- one sec.” Eve logs on to her computer and pulls up her inbox. There’s a dozen new emails, but Elena’s probably referring to the one from kvasiliev@betkinvasilievassoc titled Coordination of Primary Liaisons. When she opens it, there’s a couple of greetings and rehashed mission statements, and then it goes on to explain that each department has been assigned a consultant who will work with the leaders and employees to ensure that their practice is watertight.

Eve scrolls down until she finds Eve Polastri → Jr Partner. Raymond Hache.

Oh. Well, that’s awesome. Awesome. She’s a hundred percent certain that she’s never slept with Raymond Hache, whoever he is.
She’s free and clear. There probably won’t be much reason for her to overlap with any of the other consultants. So she can focus on the merger, and Villanelle will be just as out of her life as she has been since Eve gathered her clothes and left.

“Eve?” Elena prompts.

Eve coughs. “Uh, no. I think I got pretty much the same information you did.” She scans through the rest of her Unread column -- she’s been CC’d by Carolyn on a briefing about M-SIX’s departments (it’s fifty pages; Eve barely skims it), and then there’s another message from Konstantin, indicating that she’s expected to meet Raymond at three o’clock for their first review session. “But I’ll be seeing him later, so I guess I can fill you in when I get back.”

“Are you nervous?” Elena asks. “We can prep if you want.”

“I’m fine,” Eve assures her. She’d compiled an introductory portfolio nearly a week ago -- cherry-picking some old spreadsheets, a few example reports; enough to give their consultant an idea of their function. “I’m ready.”

Eve minimises her inbox and opens the Palace-Friedman closing summary instead. There are Elena’s comments in the margin; there is the accidental square bracket Kenny’s highlighted in TrackChanges; there are the paragraphs Eve has drafted and redrafted.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four --

Eve opens Konstantin’s original email back up and scans for Villanelle’s name. Just because.

_Frank Haleton → Jr Partner. Villanelle Astankova._

Eve’s stomach tugs strangely, a feeling Eve could probably identify if she tried, but she isn’t trying. She’s going to be working with Raymond, and this will all be some uncomfortable coincidence she can block out, _so there_.

This time, she closes the tab for real. She switches out the square bracket for a regular one, and takes Elena’s advice, replacing ‘strong’ with ‘significant’.

The next six hours are almost aggressively normal. Kenny eats a cheese and Marmite sandwich like he always does. Elena sends Eve links to two vines, only one of which she understands. Hugo keeps trying to get someone to ask him about his latest conquest, until finally Jess caves. It’s not long before she starts to look like she regrets it.

And then it’s two forty-five, and Eve’s collecting together her folders and printouts, being wished luck by the others, and heading out.

She calls the elevator, adjusting the stack of files in her arms. The numbered lights in front of her flash neatly: the elevator is on the first floor, second floor, third floor, fourth floor.

The doors open.

And there, leaning against the back wall, is Villanelle, an iced coffee in one hand and her phone in
the other.

Eve freezes.

The fluorescents in the elevator are horrible, are the most unflattering light Eve can think of, and still Villanelle looks unreasonably fucking gorgeous.

Before Eve can get a thought to form in her head that isn’t that, the doors start to close again.

But then Villanelle glances up, and immediately presses the button to keep them open. “Are you getting in?” she asks, her eyebrow arching, when Eve still doesn’t move. Her voice is calm, measured, enquiring; so different from the gasp-hitched tones Eve last heard her use.

That’s an image she definitely doesn’t need right now.

Villanelle waits another beat, then says, “What floor do you want, because --”

If Eve gets in that elevator, then she’s going to know. Villanelle will say or do something, and Eve will know for sure that Villanelle has forgotten.

Right now, though, she has Elena’s voice in her head saying she kept looking at you, and this twisting, fleeting hope that Eve is somehow the exception not the rule, is memorable in some faded way.

Right now, it’s a question (Do you ever think of me?) and Eve might die if she gets the answer.

(No.)

“I’m actually taking the stairs.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Everything gets just the slightest bit slower, as if a few extra frames per second have been added to this moment, stretching each breath and blink.

“This is the elevator.”

“Right. So. Uh. Nevermind.”

Villanelle hums. She’s still holding the doors open. “That looks like a lot of paperwork. Are you sure you want to --”

“Yes,” Eve says, and turns on her heel and books it in the direction of the stairs, because she’s committed now.

At least lugging a couple of pounds of reports up five flights of stairs in under two minutes gives her a good reason for her pulse to be a little fast.

Villanelle would’ve beaten her here, if she was even getting off at the ninth floor, but Eve still keeps her back to the elevator as she approaches the front desk. It’s manned by a young guy -- maybe still in college -- who’s not dressed expensively enough to be a consultant, but isn’t Peel’s or M-SIX’s. One of Betkin and Vasiliev’s secretaries, Eve supposes.

“Hi,” he says. “How can I help?”
“I’m Eve Polastri. I’m here for Raymond Hache?”

“Of course. If you’ll come with me?”

He leads her down one of the wide, well-lit hallways, occasionally checking back to make sure she’s following. Eve focuses on the floor, on her shoes, on her papers; anything that isn’t the people nudging past and milling about, chatting while they set up their workspaces. If she looks, then she’ll end up looking for .

He directs her into the corner office, which is spacious, and made to seem even more so by being almost entirely empty, except for a large desk and a few chairs arranged opposite. The view out the windows isn’t on par with Carolyn’s, but it’s still quite impressive. She wonders how Raymond landed this room, rather than Betkin or Vasiliev. Perhaps Carolyn has based them on the executive floor with her and the other partners.

“Sorry it’s a bit sparse,” the secretary says. “We’re still sorting everything out.”

“For sure.”

“Take a seat. I’ll go inform Mr Hache that you’ve arrived.”

Eve steps into the room; she sets her stack of files onto one of the seats, but stays standing herself.

She takes a deep breath. She needs to get Villanelle out of her head and focus on the merger, on winning Raymond over and making sure that Eve and her team cause no bumps in the road.

It’s fine. It’ll be fine. She just has to make their work seem indispensable, and paint each one of them as an irreplaceable asset.

Shit.

Eve stares at the concrete pulp of London through the glass, and thinks of seeing these same buildings from Carolyn’s office. Carolyn, who made Eve the boss, who kept her the boss even with Peel’s additional staff. Carolyn, who isn’t kind, but is smart as fuck, and wouldn’t have left Eve in charge if she didn’t really believe Eve was cut out for it.

No, Eve doesn’t love this job, but it’s the job she has, and she’s going to do it.

She’s counted up to one hundred and back down before Raymond shows up.

He’s a plump, sallow-skinned man, made sallower by the beige of his suit. He’s older than she would’ve expected, too, for a junior partner -- older than she is, maybe in his mid-forties.

Eve smiles at him, but it’s hard to keep it up. There’s something discomfiting about him, a baldness in his eyes -- glassy-blank, like in an attempt to conserve energy, Raymond has switched all the lights off inside himself.

He moves into the room, closing the thick cedar door behind him. It blocks the sound from the hall with a clean abruptness and absoluteness; they are sealed off.

Eve swallows. “Hi, you must be Raymond.”

“You can call me Mr Hache,” he tells her.

He shakes her hand with both of his, and it’s too heavy, too slack, too clammy; Eve pulls away as soon as it’s polite to do so.
“Sit down.” It’s an invitation, if she’s generous; a command, if she’s not.

He limps around to the other side of his desk, easing back into his own seat, and staring at her pointedly until she takes the chair not occupied by her notes, tangling her fingers together in her lap. “So.”

“Mrs Polastri --”

“Eve, please,” she says, emphatically.

“Very well, Eve. As I’m sure you’re aware --” He’s cut off by the door swinging open, and the interruption of a new voice.

“Raymond, I already bagsied this office.” It’s sing-song, petulant. “So what are you doing in here like it’s yours?”

And oh, Eve shouldn’t turn but she does, twisting in place to see Villanelle silhouetted in the doorway. She’s taken off the coat she was wearing in the elevator, leaving her in a tightly-fitted grey dress that makes Eve --

Makes Eve really glad that Konstantin slopes up to stand next to her, giving Eve something else to focus on.

“Raymond,” he says.

He and Villanelle have their arms folded in eerily identical stances -- there’s something particular about the set of their shoulders -- but while it makes Villanelle seem haughty, on Konstantin it is a display of deliberate, angular patience. Like he’s found some sort of sandbar on which to wait out the tide, even as he assesses it carefully.

“Can I help you?” Raymond demands.

Konstantin sighs, long-suffering, although Eve can’t tell which of them exhausts him. Maybe both. “She did bagsy the office, Raymond.”

“I did,” Villanelle echoes, smug. It’s a starkly different impression from the refined arrogance she’d exuded at the club, this spiteful amusement, and it’s a lot less appealing.

Okay, not a lot less, but it’s definitely --

It’s --

Whatever.

Raymond clenches his jaw. “I don’t think so.”

“There are plenty of other lovely offices,” Konstantin assures him. “I have a very good one picked out for you. 907. Near to the balcony. And your assigned department head is already waiting there for you.”

“My assigned department head is sitting right here,” he grinds out, gesturing viciously to Eve.

Konstantin scratches at his stubble, weary. “There was… an issue,” he admits. “We have had to make some adjustments.”

“Adjustments?”
“The Frank man annoyed me,” Villanelle shrugs. “And you know how I get when people annoy me. We are swapping.”

Raymond opens his mouth like he’s about to protest further, but his eyes dance to Eve and he folds -- out of professionalism, perhaps, or maybe he’s already deciding he’d rather work with the ambiguous Frank than Eve.

“Of course,” he agrees.

Raymond stands, and Konstantin moves to allow him room to leave, but Villanelle stays where she is, forcing him to push past her, lit up with a petty vindication as he scowls at her.

“Allright,” Konstantin says, after a moment. “Sorry about that. Eve Polastri, this is Villanelle Astankova, one of our other junior partners.”

Eve rises from her chair mechanically, extends her hand for Villanelle to shake.

Villanelle holds her gaze, and it’s relentless, this feeling of being observed; it burrows pathways through Eve’s every nerve, tracing out her body.

(Do you ever think of me?)

Eve wants for this to un-happen; she wants ignorance-as-bliss.

(No.)

This closure is going to cost too much.

Villanelle takes Eve’s hand. Her skin is soft, and her grip has the same gentle strength burned into Eve’s sense memory -- burned from the way Villanelle held her hips, from --

It doesn’t matter.

“She and I have actually already met,” Villanelle drawls.

There’s the rush of something even higher-octane than relief. Villanelle remembers Villanelle remembers Villanelle remembers --

Shit, Villanelle remembers.

Eve’s breath tapers in her lungs, gets narrow and thin, because Eve’s ordinary, stable life is balanced on the precarious cliff of a secret, and that was fine when only Eve knew it, only Eve could tell or not tell it.

But if Villanelle spills, then it gets around the office, gets back to Carolyn, and Eve might lose her job for being more trouble than she’s worth during the merger, or at the very least get demoted -- and then Niko will find out, and their delicate home life will crumble too.

And just like that, Eve’s whole life would be gone.

How could she have got so caught up in the idea of Villanelle as to miss that?

(She knows how.)

Minutely, Eve shakes her head, and prays Villanelle understands.
“In the elevator earlier,” Villanelle continues, so seamless that it might’ve been what she was planning to say all along.

Konstantin shifts his weight. “Great. Now, Villanelle, I know you were assigned Frank’s team originally, but did you get as far as reading about Eve’s acquisition research group in the briefing?”

“The briefing was fifty pages,” Villanelle complains. “I didn’t even read Frank’s.”

Konstantin glares at her, but Villanelle is all studied innocence. “You are a terror,” he chides, but exasperation is tempered by affection. “I will go get you a copy.”

“It’s alright. I’m sure Eve can walk me through it, can’t you?” Villanelle insists. “Besides, Konstantin, you know I am an auditory and visual learner. Once I’ve seen and heard something, it’s really in my head.” How is Villanelle’s stare more intense and vivid than most touches? “For example, if Eve were to tell me about her department today, I would definitely still recall in, say, a year’s time —”

Eve isn’t sure why Villanelle is trying to wind her up, but she’s hardly subtle, and Konstantin is going to notice any second that Villanelle isn’t really talking to him.

“It’s no trouble,” Eve assures him quickly, maybe too quickly.

Konstantin glances between them.

Does he know, somehow?

Is it apparent to him, in a way it hadn’t been to Elena?

The seconds drag by, serrated.

Shit, if he —

He shrugs. “Don’t pour coffee on this one,” he instructs, jabbing Villanelle once in the arm with his finger in warning. And then he departs, closing the door behind him again.

Villanelle rolls her eyes. “Ugh, he’s so dramatic. It was cold coffee, and Frank’s shirt was ugly anyway —”

Eve is still half dizzy with panic, because Konstantin didn’t figure it out, probably didn’t even come close, but Jesus, what if he had?

“I thought you lived in New York,” Eve hisses. New York, which Eve had visited once in college; New York, just as multifaceted and bright and inaccessible as Villanelle, the perfect place for her: brilliant, thought of often, and safely in Eve’s memory.

But Villanelle has made herself the present again.


“Oh, I’m not saying you should call up your every one-night stand to notify them that you’re back in their area —”

“How could I have called you when you didn’t —”

“But why are you here?”
“I came to work for my uncle,” Villanelle explains. “And I don’t pick what cases Vasiliev & Betkin take on.”

Eve notes how she switches the names, thinks of crossed arms, and -- “Konstantin is your uncle?”
She nods. “We don’t mention it much, though. People might assume it’s nepotism.”

“Oh.”

“They’re right, of course. Konstantin doesn’t pay me quite as well as my old firm, but what can I say? He’s family, and I have a soft spot for him.”

That’s quite possibly the douchiest thing Eve’s ever heard anyone say, including Hugo, and Eve gapes at her. “Wow.”

“That was a joke, Eve. I’m joking.” A beat. “Family or not, I wouldn’t work for Konstantin unless he paid me at least as much --”

“Oh my god.”

“Okay, I am being very amusing, and it’s clearly wasted.” She moves past Eve to perch on the edge of her newly-claimed desk, resting back on her palms. “What’s wrong?”

“You --”

Villanelle arches her back just slightly, like she’s stretching, and Eve thinks it’s pretty fucking unnecessarily, and also doesn’t look away.

Also can’t manage to finish her sentence. “-- uh.”

“Yes?”

Eve makes herself move, makes herself sit back down, and no, that’s a mistake -- that leaves her field of vision as Villanelle; Villanelle: tall and beautifully backlit by one of the only sunny days London has seen in forever.

She stands back up, paces. “You can’t tell anyone about -- that we --”

“That we had sex?”

Eve winces, because she really doesn’t need Villanelle saying sex playing on repeat in her brain. “Yes. I need that to stay a secret. Very, very secret. Please.”

“But it is, because I’m married.” As soon as she says it, Eve wants to take it back. The words seem to take something from her as they go, to carve a puckered wound low in her throat.

Villanelle blinks, and her expression changes and changes back far too fast for Eve to have a chance of interpreting it. “You got married again already?”

Eve can’t get a read on her tone: it’s not judgemental, and it’s too pitchy to be sarcastic, but after that, she’s stuck. Villanelle was opaque like this at the club, too, but it had been mysterious and attractive then. And now -- well, it’s still --
“It’s needlessly difficult, is what it is.”

“No,” Eve forces out. “I was never divorced. My husband and I got back together.”

A pause. “I thought you felt he was boring.”

Eve wonders if she even ever told Villanelle that, or if Villanelle inferred it from context, and stored it away.

More likely, a lot of the women Villanelle sleeps with are bored with their husbands, and it was a lucky guess.

“He is,” Eve replies, and then realises abruptly that this is not the point she’s trying to make. “I mean, no, he’s --”

“And you told me he hardly ever goes down on you --” Okay, yeah, Eve does recall that conversation happening, or fragments of it; there were other things to focus on at the time, “-- which I think is very --”

“We’re not here to talk about that.”

Villanelle sighs. “Did you at least go to Nice?” she asks.

Something just behind Eve’s sternum hurts warm, just for a second.

Because Nice had seemed dazzlingly possible once. Because Villanelle had remembered, somehow.

There’s almost an embarrassment, a shame, when she admits, “No. I didn’t.” Which is ridiculous. Niko is far more important than some fantasy holiday that was never going to happen.

Villanelle regards her, flatly. “So you went straight home to your shouty, bland, sexless husband?”

What does it say about her that Eve wants to defend her decision more than she does Niko? But -- “Look, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

She doesn’t. Eve made a smart choice. A year later, Eve has her marriage, has someone who cares about her, about most of her, instead of just a sunburn and some hickeys that faded eleven and a half months ago.

“I never said you did.” There’s that taunting lilt again. “I was just getting my facts straight. Is that what happened, Eve?”

And suddenly, Eve is furious, Eve is so fucking furious, because she is exactly who Villanelle thinks she is -- the one who gives up, who runs home, who plays it safe -- but Villanelle was never supposed to think it.

Eve is another one of those bored wives who go back to their boring husbands and everyone in her life knows that about her, but -- but for one night, she wasn’t. For one night, Eve was reckless and wild and who she quietly wishes she could be, and in some small way, even after it was over, she got to hang on to the Eve she was with Villanelle.

And now she has to give that Eve up, because like Elena and Niko and Harrison and Carolyn, Villanelle has seen her for what she is, too.

Would it have been better somehow, if Villanelle had forgotten her? Would being nobody hurt less than being so bitterly unextraordinary?
“Going to Nice was never really an option for me,” Eve grits out instead of staggering through everything she really means, and it’s as angry as it is listless.

Villanelle watches her for the longest time, and doesn’t say anything.

God, it’s the worst, how Villanelle makes her feel weak for not being a person she never even really was.

(Or maybe almost, kind-of was, just for a minute.)

Eve *hates* this feeling. Hates that it’s the most she’s felt in ages.

Villanelle leans forward, and Eve is confronted again with her, with the reality of her: young and stunning and effortlessly claiming the kind of office Eve will only see on visits; careless, overloaded with more money than she’ll ever spend.

*Fuck* her. She doesn’t get to criticise Eve. And besides, it can’t be settling if Eve *wants* what she settled for. “Hey. I *like* London. It doesn’t matter that I didn’t go to Nice. Why would I? It’s just a beach. I’ve been to beaches.” Not everyone gets to live their life down a red carpet like Villanelle does. “And I like my husband.”

“I like my pet fish,” Villanelle tells her. “His name is Hammerhead.”

It’s such a register change that Eve almost gets whiplash. “What?”

Villanelle misunderstands. On purpose, Eve thinks. “It’s funny because he’s actually very tiny and has no teeth, but I think he longs to be big and fierce.”

“Don’t compare my husband to a *pet fish*.”

“The way you said ‘like’ confused me, because --”

“I *love* my husband,” Eve bites back, and it registers vaguely that this is the first time she’s said that in long time. “Is that less confusing?”

“Nope,” Villanelle says, popping the p.

There’s that *smirk* again, and Eve realises that Villanelle’s pressing her for a reaction.

She takes a breath, drags a hand through her hair, ignores how Villanelle’s eyes track the movement. “Look, is this going to be a problem? That we -- that we’ve --”

“You really can say *sex* here, Eve. I promise I won’t tell on you.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” she repeats. And it is, it already is, but maybe if Villanelle can not care harder than Eve, then Eve will manage to catch up sometime soon.

“I don’t think we’ll have any problems, Eve,” Villanelle replies, standing again and brushing past Eve -- and it’s a touch, for the shallowest moment -- to sit behind her desk, resting her elbows on the varnished wood. “We’re professionals, aren’t we?”

Eve’s brain stutters over the scent of perfume. “Right. Yes.” She sits down, too.

“But not so professional that we can share elevators?”

“Oh, shut up. I thought it would be awkward, okay?” It’s not the whole truth, but it’s enough of it.
It’s not as if Eve will ever tell Villanelle the whole truth about any of this.

“But you running away was not awkward at all?”

“Walking quickly. I walked quickly away.” Eve smiles, just the tiniest bit, despite herself.

Villanelle doesn’t have to do this, doesn’t have to try and make her feel better about it. But it’s nice that she is, and maybe they can do this, leave the past in the past, and --

“It was cute.”

Eve’s heart shifts gears before it occurs that Villanelle is just teasing.

Villanelle drops her chin into her palm and asks, “So, what’s acquisition research? I mean, beyond the obvious.”

And just like that, it’s a review meeting again.

“Uh.” Past in the past. Okay. “Well, mostly we’re an auxiliary resource for the managers and networkers…”

Past in the past.

Chapter End Notes

 thanks everyone for reading! i have to go to a wedding on the weekend so i’ll be pretty busy. new chapter monday or tuesday depending

 y'all have made my LIFE with your sweet comments they make me so excited to write!!

this was difficult af to balance bc it's eve's narration but she is WILDLY MISINTERPRETING so many things, and i wanted yall to kind of have an idea of what villanelle ACTUALLY means vs. what eve (incorrectly) thinks she means.
Two hours alone together and Eve already thinks that Villanelle is a strong contender for the most immature and exasperating person alive.

ive really committed to absolutely not caring about what they do for their jobs. just making shit up. we're here for the tender homosexuality. no use pretending otherwise.

The weekend passes with agonising slowness, minutes mutating into slanted hours until each day becomes a loose, wide weave of a hundred more, of weeks and months and years.

Usually, weekends are a chance for Eve to dig further into her research. There are a few times a year, around the end of each school term, when Niko is swamped grading exam papers, and Eve has learned to savour them. It’s not that she wants him to be stressed, or snowed under, but -- well, it does leave her free and clear to do her own thing, sans interruptions. This is the way they work best, she thinks: parallel lines, close without crossing.

Eve has collected together a whole Chrome folder of journal articles bookmarked for reading, but it’s been over an hour, and she’s still stuck on this first one about the problematic endurance of the Macdonald triad in popular culture.

She’s reread the same sentence at least five times.

And it’s not that she’s thinking of Villanelle. It’s just that she’s putting so much effort into not thinking of her that there isn’t really much room left in Eve’s head for anything else.

What concerns Hasset and Barker is the perpetuation of the assumption that…

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What concerns Hasset and Barker is the perpetuation of the assumption that…

Okay, so maybe she’s not going to get anything done right now. Whatever. It’s Sunday, and she’s worn out. She’s allowed to be worn out.

Only she’s the kind of worn out that leads to being totally wired, every muscle too warm, her heart slightly too fast -- full of unused energy that has to be productive or destructive.

One or the other.

“I’m going for a run,” she tells Niko, because otherwise she’s probably going initiate sex that won’t be exactly what she wants, and even if she can’t admit that to herself while he’s touching her, kissing
her, somewhere deep down she’ll know.

And she’d rather not know.

He glances over at her. “You went for a run this morning.” It’s not quite curiosity or concern in his voice, it’s more relaxed than that. Observational, with a tilt.

“Well, I’m going for another run.” When her feet ache and her lungs are raw, she’ll have kicked this frenetic feeling, this aimless, writhing urgency.

A handful of minutes later, she’s switched into her jogging gear, and she presses a cursory kiss to the stubble of Niko’s cheek (scratchy, not delicate and soft, not --) before she’s out the door.

She ends up staying at the park until it’s almost dark, winding her way through the trees, passing other joggers, parents and their toddlers, yoga groups out on the green.

She doesn’t see them, not really.

*Professionals*, Villanelle had said.

And they are.

Professionals.

Not that Eve’s still replaying it in her mind, but the rest of that meeting had gone smoothly. Too smoothly, maybe.

Eve is due back in her office come Monday afternoon, and there is no way it’s this easy, that they just blow past that night and become ordinary colleagues, formal and efficient, utterly unremarkable parts of the M-SIX machine.

She’d love it if they could, of course. That would be ideal. That there are no issues, no reminders, no problems.

But there’s no way.

Eve finally makes it home in time for a shower before dinner, bone-tired and wide awake.

When Eve arrives at her ninth-floor office on Monday afternoon, it’s as if Villanelle has always worked there; the space has twisted around her in some violent hurricane of mirrors, reflecting her in a wild, sporadic, mismatched way. In the corner, there’s a coat-stand with three or four outfits slung haphazardly over it, and there’s art spattered across the walls: all abstract, all stark and bold. The desk has been equipped with two large monitor screens and a thin, sleek laptop. The shelves are lined with books -- from what Eve can tell, it’s an eclectic mix of poetry, memoir, legal textbooks, novels and some illustrated children’s books, the titles in a variety of languages.

The place seems *alive*, and Eve wonders if Villanelle just does this to everything she gets close to -- if her proximity relentlessly, inevitably transforms.

Villanelle herself is strewn lazily in her high-backed chair, her feet kicked up onto her desk, her earbuds in and her phone resting on her stomach. She might be asleep, for all her stillness.
Eve knocks tentatively on the door jamb, and Villanelle cracks one eye open.

“Come in, Eve,” she says. “I am just getting to the end of my podcast.”

“I’ll wait.”

She nods.

Eve’s not sure if Villanelle is wrapping up a late lunch break, if she’s finished early, or if she’s just decided she’s not really in the mood to do her work.

The standard-issue chair Eve sat in last time is gone, replaced with a far nicer one that’s much more similar to Villanelle’s. Eve’s grateful -- the regular ones are kind of uncomfortable, which is no doubt a tactical move on Carolyn’s part -- but she wonders what poor soul had to lug all this from Villanelle’s regular office uptown to the M-SIX building. She really doubts Villanelle did much of the redecorating herself.

The blinds are half down, cutting off the view, but Eve stares out the windows at the grey sluggishness of London regardless. The alternative is watching the small smile on Villanelle’s face as she takes in whatever the commentators are saying, or the long stretch of her legs, made longer still by her black pumps.

It’s a minute or two before Villanelle finally loops her earbuds up and drops them in a drawer, swivelling in her seat to give Eve her attention. “Do you like podcasts, Eve?”

“Oh, I guess?” Eve shrugs. “I mostly listen to music. You know, like, if I’m on the Tube, or jogging.”

“You should try podcasts,” Villanelle advises. “They can be interesting like people sometimes are, but it is much better, because you get to pick what they talk about, and you do not have to do nodding to show you are listening,” she lists. “Plus, when they get tiring, you can turn them off. You can’t do that with people in real life.”

“You can, but they send you to prison for it,” Eve jokes.

Villanelle grins. “Yes, and it’s probably a lot messier.” She taps her fingers on her desk, a rolling pattern that’s oddly mesmerising. “Konstantin sends me many links to seminars about conflict management.”

“So that you stop pouring coffee on people?”

“I imagine so.”

“Is that what you were listening to just now?”

Villanelle blinks. “Eve, why would I do that? I don’t know if you’ve ever tried to get through one, but they are not entertaining at all.”

“That stuff does work, though, often,” Eve tells her. No, she doesn’t personally find Niko’s fits of silence or attempts at guilt-tripping preferable to screaming matches, but she can definitely see how it might appeal to others.

“Who did you pour coffee over to be forced to learn about conflict resolution?” Villanelle asks, delighted.
“No one,” Eve defends. “I’ve never done that to anyone.”

“You should. It’s very liberating.”

“It’s childish.” Frank would’ve been at the top of Eve’s hit list, and Villanelle got to him first. Eve had her opportunities for it, though. Sometimes even seriously considered it. But she never went through with it. Obviously. “Adults are supposed to have impulse control.”

Villanelle drops her legs down, sits up a little straighter, and gives Eve that look that she still isn’t used to, might not ever be used to: like Villanelle is looking just to look, not to see something in particular. She opens her mouth, and Eve can just tell that whatever it is Villanelle plans to say about impulse control, Eve doesn’t want to hear it.

Shouldn’t want to hear it, at least.

So Eve breaks eye contact. “I brought the July 2013 files. I figured we’d be starting at the beginning.” She holds out a USB. She’s got her own laptop and some printouts, too, but Villanelle will need her own copies of everything.

Villanelle’s mouth twists down at the abrupt redirect, but she grabs the USB and plugs it into the side of her computer. “Is there going to be anything exciting on here for me, Eve?”

Exciting in Villanelle’s line of work means headache and possibly dismissal in Eve’s. “I hope not.”

“That is what Carolyn and Konstantin have told me to hope as well.” She seems fairly put-out by the prospect.

For a while, they make good progress. Villanelle notices even the tiniest of details, asks intelligent questions, and immediately understands the idiosyncrasies in Eve’s organisational systems that she’d had to explain to Hugo three or four times.

And then around the fifty-minute mark, once Eve’s papers have scattered themselves around in a flurry of checks and re-checks, Villanelle trades her expensive ballpoint for a ninety-nine-cent biro, which Eve doesn’t question until she starts clicking it.

At first, it’s just with the pad of her thumb, once every ten breaths or so. And then it’s little patterns, like she’s trying to communicate in morse code, and then it’s randomly, rapidly against the notepad or her arm or her cheek or the hardwood of the desk itself.

Villanelle has got to be doing this on purpose, to drive her crazy. She’s got to. She’s watching Eve’s expression far too closely for it to be anything else.

Still, Eve ignores it.

Ignores it.

Ignores it.

Ignores --

“Can you stop that, please?” she asks nicely, because professionals, because adults are supposed to have impulse control.

“Stop what?”

“Stop clicking.”
“This clicking?” Villanelle asks, depressing the button at the end of her pen over and over.

Eve grits her teeth. “Yes, that clicking.”

“Is it annoying you?”

If that’s the admission Villanelle’s holding out for, then Eve’s not going to give it. “It’s just distracting.”

“I’m distracting?” Villanelle leans forward in just the right way for Eve to get a view down the front of her shirt, and jeez, that has to be intentional. Would it kill her to do up another button?

Or, like, undo all the buttons so that Eve can actually --

“No,” Eve says, so quickly it comes out more as a clipped sound than an actual syllable. “The pen is distracting me.” It’s hard enough to plough through the tedium of her work history with M-SIX without having her every train of thought disrupted.

“The pen is an inanimate object, Eve.”

“Yeah, but you’re --”

“Oh, so it is me you find distracting?”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

Villanelle’s eyes light up. “An asshole? Is that any way to talk to your colleagues?”

“It is if they’re being assholes.” But no, it isn’t, so Eve stops, takes a breath, holds it, lets it out. “Okay, fine. I don’t care about the pen. It doesn’t bother me. It’s cool. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

Villanelle is prying for a reaction from Eve, so basic schoolyard logic says don’t react.

Click, click, click, click. Don’t react.

It’s stupid. It shouldn’t get to her. Occasionally, Elena does stuff like this too -- she just needs something to do with her hands so that her brain doesn’t wander off-task. That’s never bugged Eve.

Click, click, click.

But it’s not Elena, it’s Villanelle, and Villanelle isn’t even trying to stay on-task. She’s just hovering impatiently for the moment Eve cracks.

Which is the kind of person she is, apparently, when champagne and the possibility of sex doesn’t factor into their interactions.

Click, click, click. “Are you sure I’m not distracting you?” Click, click, click.

Asshole.

“I’m sure.” Eve gestures to Villanelle’s monitor. “If you pull up the September 2013 folder, there’s a file called ‘Westford Interest Group’. My department recommended that we bid on that account, but it ended up being a nightmare of a contract -- a lot of issues with financing. I was hoping to go through it in more detail, to make sure our practice couldn’t still potentially come under fire for that. This is pretty much the only one I’m worried about from that financial year.”
And Eve is the bigger person, so Eve can let it go.

Villanelle opens the profile, and skims the initial summary. “You weren’t head of your department at this time?”

“No. I was only promoted in the middle of last year, when Dave left. I was still a new hire when we did Westford.”

“There’s a note that this was not a unanimous recommendation. You were the holdout?”

“Yes.”

“Mm. That’s good. For you now, I mean.”

Dave had told Carolyn he was the one who voted against, when the Westford Group fell through in billing. Eve’s still not sure if Carolyn believed him, but he didn’t lose his job over it, so they must’ve sorted something out.

It takes them another hour to finish with Westford alone, and move onto proofing the next profile. They’re barely past the first page before Villanelle’s groaning, slouching back down in her chair, kicking herself around in a circle like a little kid. “I’m bored,” she complains.

“Well, it’s work. It’s not supposed to be fun,” Eve reminds her, evenly. With Westford resolved, she’s feeling a little more patient, but not a lot.

“*Everything* should be fun, Eve. You should never do anything that doesn’t bring you joy. Marie Kondo told me that. I saw her do a speech once.”

Eve blinks. She’s yet to get around to the Netflix special, but that doesn’t seem right. At all. “Uh, I’m pretty sure her philosophy is for helping you get rid of stuff around your house that’s outlived its use. Not shirking your responsibilities.”

“No, it was definitely about never having to do anything you don’t like,” Villanelle insists. “Work should *always* be fun.”

“I mean --”

But Villanelle’s already swiftly changing direction again, mostly sitting back up -- a blend of proper and relaxed, incongruously regal and soft at once. “What would you be doing, if you could be doing anything, Eve?”

Eve looks down at her hands so she won’t be looking at how Villanelle is crossing one leg over the other with far more artful slowness than strictly necessary. Than even remotely necessary. “I don’t know.” That answer’s less true than it used to be.

In reality, Eve has spent a lot of her life not knowing -- whether she should move to England, give up postgrad, get married. Niko says she’s adaptable, says that’s a great thing about her, but Eve would rather have passion and conviction than be amiable, flexible.

Sometimes, now, she thinks she might be made of more than *I don’t know* ; that there are things she maybe does know, even if she wishes she didn’t.
Villanelle regards her critically. “Really.” It’s not a question.

“Really,” Eve confirms.

“You have no ideas.”

“No.” Eve gestures vaguely. “I like this job.”

Villanelle huffs, dramatic and genuine at the same time. “You like so many things, Eve. Your papery job, your knick-knack husband. Always liking. How accommodating of you.” She wrinkles her nose in displeasure. “You should love things instead, Eve. You should be obsessed with them. It’s the only way to live.”

“You don’t love your job either,” Eve argues, even though that’s probably not entirely the case: Villanelle says obsessed with too much familiarity and gravity to not be entrenched in it herself. “We’ve been here two hours, and nearly a quarter of that was you procrastinating.”

“I do love my job. But I love a lot of other things, too, so it’s hard to stick with just one at a time. For example, I also love spinning in this chair, as I am doing right now. And food.” She pauses. “Yes, I’m hungry. Have you had lunch, Eve?”

“It’s four o’clock.”

“Is that a yes, or a no?”

“It’s a yes. I had lunch at lunchtime, like a normal person.”

Villanelle’s expression shifts to one of gentle bemusement, as if Eve has said something endearingly naive, not rational and sensible. “You know that nobody is making you do life this way, right? You are a grownup, Eve. You can have lunch at two a.m. if you are so inclined.”

“Because that’s something a grownup would do.”

Villanelle sighs. “You can be lame about it if you want.”

“Whatever.” Eve isn’t lame. She just -- appreciates order. Well, maybe not really, but she’s accustomed to order. She’s been pushed into it and into it, and it seems too late to move now. “We still have at least another hour of work to do, so toughen up.”

Villanelle pouts, then brightens fast, another capricious handbrake turn: too quick to be real, to frivolous to be premeditated. “No. I’m going to get some ice cream.”

Eve is certain she’s kidding, until Villanelle stands up and snags her jacket from the coat-stand, tugging it on. “Villanelle! Come on.”

“What? I’ll do the work later. Konstantin pays me by the hour, not by which hours I use. As long as I get it done, and do it magnificently, he doesn’t care.”

“Well, not all of us --”

“Do you want ice cream?”

"I want to finish this account so I can go home --”

“Do you?” Villanelle slips her hands into her pockets, cocking her hip as she gazes Eve with the sort of intense focus she can’t seem to spare for the paperwork. “Do you really want to finish up and go
Eve licks her lips. Does she? Home to what? To lie next to Niko while he scrawls red pen across another exam, half-assed by another kid? To think about not thinking about Villanelle? “Yes,” she forces out.

“Suit yourself, then. I’ll be back soon.”

Eve gapes at her. “But -- I can’t do this without you.”

Villanelle preens. “Sweet.”

“Oh my god, you know I mean that literally. I can’t review myself. You’re the reviewer. You need to be here for this.”

“And I will be. After I’ve had some ice cream. I think rocky road, but usually I decide when I get there. Sometimes, they have specials, or even brand new flavours. I had green sherbet the other day.” She pulls a face. “It was disgusting. But at least I know that, now.”

“Villanelle --”

“Aren’t you bored, too?”

God, always.

Well, not right now. But --

Eve clears her throat. “That’s beside the point --”

“So you are bored. And you would like ice cream, too.”

“It doesn’t matter whether I want ice cream, what matters is that we’re supposed to be --”

“Of course what you want matters, Eve. Wanting is the only thing that matters.”

“That seems like a dangerous way to think of the world.”

“It is. Why would that stop me?” Villanelle crosses the office, her fingers rising to rest on the door handle. Eve doesn’t picture a different door in a different building, of counting (one, two, three, just wake up). Doesn’t picture giving in -- giving up -- and leaving. “Are you coming?”

Eve shakes her head. “No. I’m going to try and get as much done as I can without you.”

“Okay.” Another shrug, careless. Villanelle is so careless about everything. “Up to you.” Eve hates that carelessness and envies it, too.

Remembers that actually, Villanelle isn’t careless about everything. She is precise with her tongue and deliberate with her hands and --

And she’s gone.

The door shuts behind Villanelle, and the office is silent, Eve left to stare at the flaring patterns of her laptop’s screensaver.

The tiny spirals spin from left to right, and --
Damn it. She’s not going to get anything done, is she? She’ll just be sat here, contemplating what a
dickhead Villanelle is until she gets back. And in the meantime, Villanelle will have got ice cream,
and Eve will have just tired herself out by being furious.

So she may as well have ice cream too. As a reward for putting up with the callous karmic
suckerpunch that is ending up with Villanelle back in her life.

Two hours alone together and Eve already thinks that Villanelle is a strong contender for the most
immature and exasperating person alive. Two more hours and she’ll probably be ready to tear
Villanelle’s head off. Another two, and she might actually hate her.

And that can only be good for everybody. For her career and her marriage and every crumbling part
of her tiny, shrinking universe.

Eve digs her fists into her eyes, sighs, then stands and hauls her coat on, too.

Villanelle can’t have got far; she’s likely still hanging out for the elevator, and Eve can catch up with
her --

She opens the door to find Villanelle lounging back against the opposite wall, waiting. As soon as
she sees Eve, her face splits into a smug grin. “I knew you would come.”

There’s the instant impulse to pretend that she’s just going to grab a coffee from the breakroom, but
Villanelle would know anyway, and trying to get out of it now just to be contrary would somehow
be even more pathetic than being predictable.

Besides, Eve does actually want ice cream. So.

“Don’t be insufferable about this,” she mutters to Villanelle, not even slowing down as she passes
her, heading for the elevator. She’s not going to tag along. If she’s going, she’s going; she refuses to
trail behind Villanelle.

“According to Konstantin, I don’t know any other way to be,” Villanelle chirps happily. She’s
turned to walk backwards so she can keep facing Eve.

Eve is not lingering on how Villanelle can manage that so effortlessly in four-inch heels. She’s not.

In fact, she’s irked by how much taller the heels make Villanelle than Eve, and how much more
obvious it is now that they’re standing.

Whatever. Eve’s not about to break out the stilettos just to even up the difference. “For the record,
I’m not condoning playing hooky.”

“Just enabling.”

“I’m relenting. Not enabling.”

“I don’t know. I’m feeling very enabled.” Villanelle tuts, all exaggerated disappointment. There’s too
much amusement there for her to really sell it, though.
this chapter ends really abruptly and the next one starts really abruptly bc they were originally one chapter but i thought youd appreciate an earlier update more than a longer chapter.

your comments are literally the best and yall give me life thank you xx

PS. yes i have a plan for this story but it is loose and flexible so feel free to come make requests here or on tumblr. i may make this a series so i can add little one-shots or alternate POVs without disrupting the flow. if that's something yall would be interested in?

PPS. @ the couple of people who mentioned it (lmao thanks for reading my longass A/Ns, yall are the best) my cousin's wedding was actually cool plus i got to get drunk on WAY better champagne than i wouldve otherwise been able to afford for my 20th bday so all in all a win.
Chapter Summary

Eve forces another bite in. “I’m enjoying it.”

Villanelle tilts her head. “You forget, Eve -- I know exactly what you look like when you are really enjoying something.”

Eve tries, really tries, not to flush.

Fails.

Chapter Notes

this follows DIRECTLY on from last chapter. there are several important references to the conversations they had last time, so I'm sorry it's been three days since you read it lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Maybe if the universe liked Eve just a little bit more, Villanelle walking backwards down the hallway would pay off in some dramatic eight-person collision, a mess of dropped coffee and ruined papers that might, might, take her down a notch. Might make her awkward and out of her depth for a whole second.

As it is, when at last Villanelle’s back hits the wall by the elevator doors, there’s not even the jolt of impact. Instead, it’s a seamless transition to artfully languishing, so smooth as to be intentional. Eve doubts it was, though, and it doesn’t need to be; Villanelle just has a way of twisting the world to perfectly fit her.

Eve stops a few feet away, because she and Villanelle and walls have a complex and textured history that Villanelle is probably dying to throw in her face.

“Are you going to push the call button?” Eve asks, exasperated.

Villanelle shakes her head. “My hands are in my pockets, Eve. How could I possibly manage that?”

Eve rolls her eyes, but there are people around and she’s not going to make a scene out of Villanelle being antagonistic -- which surely all these Betkin & Vasiliev employees must be accustomed to -- so she leans forward to press the button.

Villanelle’s lounging barely an inch away from it, and Eve could swear she can feel her body heat.

She can’t, of course.

It’s just her mind.
She still takes a second longer than she should to pull back again.

“This is going to be fun,” Villanelle drawls, all lingering smugness, and oh, this is definitely the last time that Eve lets Villanelle predict her so accurately. Vindication is not a good look for her.

Well, like, aesthetically it’s a good look, but in every other sense, it’s annoying as shit.

“Just don’t,” Eve warns.

“I haven’t done anything."

Which is technically true. But still. “Don’t start."

“Are you always this quick to frustration, Eve?” Villanelle enquires, and there’s an extra layer of plastic innocence to her tone that sets Eve on edge. She shifts closer, off the wall, imbuing swagger into the single step it takes her to get in Eve’s space. “Because I know quite a few ways to --”

Whatever she has to say, Eve can’t stand to hear it, so she asks the first question she can think of that won’t somehow lead them back to frustration, won’t lead them back to sex. “Do you seriously have a fish named Hammerhead?”

Villanelle blinks. “Yes. Why would I lie about that?”

The elevator doors open, and somehow, they end up shuffled into the same back corner. Eve should be glaring, demanding more room, because Villanelle is right there, but truthfully Eve isn’t certain that she wasn’t the one to move nearer.

The doors close.

“I didn’t mean you were lying,” Eve clarifies. “You just -- you don’t seem like a pet person.” Eve isn’t. Niko has his chicken, but Eve and the chicken are really more reluctant acquaintances than friends.

Villanelle chews her lip for a second: a fractal of a moment that Eve just knows she won’t shrug out of for days to come. Villanelle’s lips -- she can’t quite recall the specific taste of them, the exact softness of them, and wishes she did; wishes she didn’t wish. “I’m not. But Hammerhead is the perfect pet. He is very beautiful, like me, and he is always ready to fight, but he takes care of himself. I only have to give him food, not pats or anything. This is for the best because I am not home very often.”

Eve wonders if she means she works and travels a lot, or if that’s some oblique allusion to all the nights she spends in other people’s beds.

She puts it out of her mind.

They slow at the seventh floor, and the doors open again. One of Frank’s guys, a former banker named Liam, gets in with them. He glances at Eve, confused -- it’s more than unusual to see her out of her office before closing -- and she gives him a tight smile.

Villanelle ignores him completely, occupied instead by pulling out her phone and fiddling with it.

A second later, she’s nudging Eve’s arm.

“See?” Villanelle says, and holds out her phone. The screen is filled with a picture of a bright blue fish, all delicate fins lined with flashy, colourful streaks. It’s a really great photo, actually --
everything is in sharp focus, and the aquarium lighting gives a hazy, surreal effect -- but of course Villanelle is just one of those people who is effortlessly talented at everything. If Eve looks closer, she can just barely catch the ghost of Villanelle reflected in the fishtank, like a half-imagined version of her, watered down and washed out.

The way she’d got in Eve’s dreams, the details of her almost excised by time, before they’d met again.

Eve wonders how long it’ll take to forget her after all this.

Tries instead to not wonder.

“He’s very pretty,” she tells Villanelle, and means it. Hammerhead is an electric little creature, and well-suited to Villanelle, Eve thinks -- beautiful and utterly inaccessible, preserved in situ, untouchable behind glass; flitting here then away.

Villanelle turns to Liam. “Would you like to see?” she asks him, and Eve notices that she’s adjusted herself slightly -- her accent, the breathiness of her voice, her posture.

They’re minute changes, but effective.

Liam’s gaze runs over Villanelle and he nods eagerly, even though Eve’s sure he got in too late to have any idea what they’re talking about. “Wow. Cool fish.” He examines Villanelle’s expression carefully, seeking some sort of approval, a confirmation that he’s had the right reaction.

Villanelle takes her phone back, satisfied. She taps away for a second, thumbs moving quickly, and then she passes it to Eve again.

It’s open on a blank Contact.

“Why do you need my number?” Eve stalls.

Everyone else Eve works regularly with has her personal number; she doesn’t have any qualms about abandoning dinners, nights in, or conversations in the living room to deal with whatever after-hours problems might’ve arisen. If she had a different consultant, they probably would’ve exchanged information in that first meeting.

But she doesn’t have a different consultant, she has Villanelle.

If she gives Villanelle her number, then Villanelle might text her. And Eve might text back.

Will text back.

“For work, Eve. Some of us take this merger seriously, you know,” Villanelle says, a light, subtle mocking, ebbing over the word seriously. “What if I have an emergency question that can’t wait for our afternoons?”

“You have my email, and my office extension,” Eve deflects.

“You think it’s important to always be accessible when it comes to things like this?” she asks, leadingly.

He clears his throat, glancing between them, scrabbling to get a measure of the situation. “I was actually reading an article this morning about how it’s best to be able to leave your work at work and
just be at home, sometimes, you know? They shouldn’t be making you consult after hours, and when you consider --”

But he’s misjudged his answer, and Villanelle frowns at him, dropping her newly-assumed affectations. “Liam, you are not helping me,” she scolds.

The elevator doors open on the lobby.

Eve hands Villanelle back her phone as they exit. Some part of Eve is screaming at her to just give Villanelle her number, that it will be a good idea, so she knows it’s a bad one.

Villanelle is an asshole, but Eve’s arm is brushing against hers as they walk, and there’s something about her.

And Eve hopes it’ll wear away, but there’s the chance -- the spiralling, suffocating, exhilarating chance -- that there will always be that something.

So this is for the best. It would be idiotic. It’d be asking for trouble where trouble already is.

Villanelle pouts at her, and it’s a performance, it is, but it tugs Eve all the same.

She ignores it.

Liam kind of dawdles alongside them until they’re out onto the sidewalk, but one distinctly unimpressed raised eyebrow from Villanelle has him splitting off on his own. He twists around once, twice, to get a glimpse of her again.

“Why did you do that?” Eve asks, as they push through the crowd, making their way up the street.

“Do what?”

“That whole -- thing, with him. You were different.”

“So he would like me,” Villanelle explains casually, as though that should be apparent. “And that way, if I want something, he will give it to me.” She frowns. “He was not useful, though.” She waves her phone vaguely: the phone that doesn’t have Eve’s number in it.

That won’t. Because --

Because.

“Isn’t that a bit manipulative?” Eve presses, tugging her coat tighter around herself against the wind chill. “To change yourself depending on who you’re with, to get what you want out of them?”

“Everyone does it,” Villanelle responds, unperturbed. In the cold light of the city, in the grey smog of its inhabitants, Villanelle is the flicker of another season: she is bold colours and a fierce presence, the automatic centre of every scene, everything else unconsciously falling to orbit around her. “Is it worse if I do it on purpose?”

Eve gapes at her. “Not everyone does it.”

“Yes, they do. I have seen them. Like you. You called me an asshole. I do not think you have ever called Carolyn Martens an asshole. And I do not think you flirt with your husband the way you flirt with me.”

“Hey, I am not flirting with --” Eve stops. “Did you do that to me? When we first talked, I mean. Did
you make yourself into somebody you thought I’d like?”

Villanelle now really isn’t all that different from then. She has the same decisive, arrogant, irresistible charm that Eve remembers, only with more edges, more quips and complaints that there hadn’t been space for in the rush of that night. She’s more real, out of the club, out of Eve’s fantasies, out in the starkness of the office and the city. And so is Eve.

But if Villanelle does this to everybody --

The notion of it having been pretend coils strangely around and through Eve, further and more deeply than she’d ever admit to.

She speeds up enough that they’re not shoulder to shoulder anymore, that she gets a scrap of distance.

When they arrive at a four-lane crossing, Eve checks left, checks right for cars, is about to step out --

Villanelle throws out an arm, blocking her.

She hardly touches Eve, just the fleeting contact of a forearm against collarbones, separated by layers of clothing. But hardly is always too much, with them.

“We have to wait for the crossing man, Eve,” Villanelle chastises, letting her arm drop back to her side.

“Are you kidding? Nobody waits here. You just go when you won’t die.”

But Villanelle doesn’t budge.

Eve is a hundred percent sure that she’s only being stubborn to get on Eve’s nerves; her lips are twisted up in that almost-smirk again.

Eve sighs, and reaches out, tapping the crossing button again. Pick your battles, right?

She’s about five minutes from saying fuck it and picking all of them, and Villanelle is watching her like she knows it.

A man clutching a skateboard slopes up beside them, clocks the traffic, and darts neatly over to the other side of the street.

Eve opens her mouth -- planning on something along the lines of see? -- but Villanelle’s speaking before she can.

“I didn’t.”

“What?”

“At the club. With you. I didn’t make myself somebody else.” She sucks her lower lip into her mouth, then concedes, “At least, I didn’t try to, anyway.”

“Oh.” And that’s fair enough, because Eve might’ve a bit to, even if she didn’t try to, either. That daze of adventure and wildness, that fugue of attraction and the thrill of consuming curiosity -- it had left Eve as not quite herself, in the best of ways. More herself, maybe?

Not that how it is with Niko, all practiced familiarity and security, isn’t totally great too, of course.
Of course.

The crossing light goes, and they move off with the few others who bothered to wait too.

Villanelle leads her up a few more blocks, and then she’s holding the door open for Eve to a small parlour, half-hidden by a residual tourist-trap phonebox. The shopfront is a bit shabby, but inside is nice and clean and warmly lit, comforting. Dotted at various tables, there are a few couples and lone diners, chatting and reading.

It’s exactly the kind of place Eve would come, and not where she would ever picture Villanelle setting foot.

Villanelle bounces up to the counter, invigorated by the prospect of ice cream. She inspects the tubs behind the display glass for the longest time, but eventually settles on rocky road, like she said she would.

The clerk nods, taking her order with a pleasant smile, and then turns to Eve. “And for you?”

Eve casts a cursory glance at the options, and honestly most of them are pretty appealing, but one in particular catches Eve’s eye. “Green sherbet,” she requests politely. Because she can. Because it’s an opportunity to annoy Villanelle back, to make her huff and roll her eyes.

The clerk nods, and digs out a serving of rocky road and a serving of green sherbet.

Villanelle produces enough cash to more than cover them both, but this isn’t like the club, it isn’t a prelude to anything, she isn’t being seduced, so Eve refuses to be paid for. She slaps down five pounds of her own before Villanelle can beat her to the punch. Villanelle purses her lips, then shrugs, and drops her excess bills into the barren tip jar rather than bother to get her wallet out again.

“Thank you,” the clerk says, suddenly more enthusiastic.

Villanelle just stares at him blankly. “Okay,” she replies.

Villanelle grabs her ice cream and strides off across the room, settling into a booth near the window, turning back to Eve expectantly. Eve takes her own cardboard cup, thanks the clerk again, and follows after her.

This feels oddly exposed: sitting opposite Villanelle in plain view of the street, where anyone could see them.

But she’s not doing anything wrong.

She’s just getting a random, mid-afternoon snack with a coworker, who as far as anyone save the two of them knows, Eve has never had earth-shattering sex with.

Villanelle twirls her plastic spoon through her ice cream, and delicately licks it off with a pleased little noise.

It occurs to Eve that coming here with her for this may have been a huge miscalculation.

Villanelle definitely doesn’t have to be making direct eye contact while she does that with her tongue --

Eve shovels a too-large bite of her own ice cream into her mouth, and is immediately assaulted by both brain freeze and the truly horrible flavour. She schools her expression, though, because
admitting Villanelle was correct about the abject grossness of green sherbet would probably compound her general insufferability.

Villanelle regards Eve silently for a second, and then -- “You hate it,” she observes, all conviction.

“I do not. I --” Eve shuts herself up before she can say I like it, Villanelle’s assertions ringing in her mind.

*You like so many things. Always liking.*

*You should love things instead, Eve. You should be obsessed with them. It’s the only way to live.*

Asshole.

Eve forces another bite in. “I’m enjoying it.”

Villanelle tilts her head. “You forget, Eve -- I know exactly what you look like when you are *really* enjoying something.”

Eve tries, really tries, not to flush.

Fails.

Because --

Eve recalls how Villanelle looks in those moments, too: the arch of her back and the way her teeth sink into her bottom lip, kiss-bruised; how her fingers twist in the sheets.

Fuck.

“Maybe you’ve forgotten,” she fires back, “and this *is* me enjoying something.”

Villanelle eats more rocky road far too slowly, dragging her spoon out of her mouth with a soft pop. “Maybe this is what your husband thinks you look like when you are,” she replies, scathing. And then, semitones lower, accented by the rich darkness in her eyes: “But I definitely haven’t forgotten how it really is, Eve.”

God, Eve could just *die*. She doesn’t need any more visuals like this in her brain, invading the time she spends with Niko, underscoring and overwriting the structured intimacy between them.

So she changes the topic — quickly, clumsily, pointlessly. “Are you liking living in London?”

“Very much.”

“What’s your favourite thing about it?”

Eve almost thinks she’s managed to actually redirect them, but no, of course Villanelle isn’t interested in playing along with small, opaque niceties. “The rocky road ice cream,” she answers, deadpan, deliberate. “I would give you some, but you are *so fond* of your green sherbet.”

Eve glares at her. “Right. I am.”

Villanelle hums, contemplative, propping her cheek on her hand. “You know, there’s nothing wrong with admitting you chose something you thought you’d like and then it turned out you didn’t.”

Eve never actually wanted green sherbet, she was just being difficult, and Villanelle is fully aware of
that.

Villanelle leans in just an inch further. “Much more sensible to share this rocky road with me than to eat a whole bowl of green sherbet just because you said you would.”

As far as metaphors go, it’s about as subtle as a gunshot in a crowded room.

Eve holds her gaze while she eats another spoonful. Jeez, who is this even supposed to appeal to? It’s like bicarb and lime zest polluting vanilla.

Villanelle’s rocky road has raspberry sauce swirled through, and chunks of nuts and chocolate and mini marshmallows.

It probably tastes fucking fantastic.

Maybe if Villanelle hadn’t complicated it by adding extra meaning, then Eve would’ve pushed aside her sherbet and be cleansing the tang of it with expensive chocolate.

But that would be admitting something, now.

Not admitting, because Eve doesn’t have anything to admit --

Villanelle gives her another beat, and then lets it go. “Tell me about the rest of your department,” she prods. “Do you like them?”

“Uh, yeah. Elena and Kenny are really fantastic, and I don’t really know Jess or Hugo that well yet, but they seem great too.”

Villanelle pauses. “Hugo? Is this the boy with floppy hair who talks about Oxford?”

“Yeah, that’d be him.”

“Ah, yes. He wants to have sex with you.”

Eve sputters. “What?”

“Don’t worry, I think he will be discreet about wanting it.” She considers. “Maybe.”

“Hugo does not want to have sex with me.”

“If you say so.”

“He’s just flirty like that with everyone.”

“Not with me.”

Eve blinks. “Are you sure?”

“You sound very incredulous, Eve.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, who wouldn’t want to -- to --”

She stops, but the damage is done.

Damn it.

Whatever expression Villanelle is wearing right now, Eve doesn’t want to see it; she stares at the
lurid green of her ice cream, unwavering.

It’s a long minute before Villanelle says, “I am sure. I scare him.”

Eve frowns. “How come I don’t scare him? I’m his boss. I should scare him a little.” Yeah, she’s not the micromanaging, tirade-prone kind of supervisor, but still. Hugo is a new grad and a new transfer. A bit of caution would only be sensible.

Carolyn terrifies Eve, still. No as much as she used to, but certainly enough that Eve’s never even considered hitting on her.

“I am not scared of my boss.”

“Your boss is your uncle.”

“I was not scared of any of my other bosses, either.”

“Because you’re --” Eve trails off. “You know. You don’t seem very scare-able.”

“Scare-able,” Villanelle echoes, rolling the butchered description over. “No. I am not scare-able. You are correct.”

“Well, you’re wrong. Hugo is just -- always like that.”

“If you say so.”

“Stop that.”

“Agreeing with you?”

“You’re not agreeing. You’re deciding you came out on top and pretending to be gracious about it.”

Villanelle’s expression brightens with amusement. “If you say so.”

“You’re the worst.”

“If you say --”

“Do you like the people you work with?” Eve asks, loudly, drowning her out. She’s just parroting Villanelle’s question back at her, so it’s safe territory. “Apart from Konstantin.”

Villanelle groans. “No. Many of them are terrible. Like Raymond. He is so tedious. And he dresses badly.”

“You don’t like people just because they dress badly?” Eve hates, hate that she instantly pictures what she’s wearing and how it must look, how deeply average the ensemble is -- a pale blue button-down, a cable-knit sweater, black slacks and her old coat. It’s okay, it’s fine. Practical, appropriate. But it’s nowhere near in the same league as Villanelle’s constant runway show of designer outfits.

The dress she’d worn the night they met, that had been a leap from her usual style, and that had been a part of the image that drew Villanelle in, held her however temporarily.

“Don’t worry, Eve,” Villanelle lilts, and Eve hasn’t a hope of determining whether she means what she’s saying. “I still like you, even though you dress like you are just making sure you are not cold.”

Eve scowls at her, at how easily she read her. “Well, I’m not cold. So it works.”
Niko likes how she dresses. At least, he’s never complained. She’s not sure he notices either way, really.

But that works for her. She doesn’t need to be leered at.

“Yes, but when you put yourself into how you look, it is so much better. More enjoyable. A few tiny choices and you change how people see you.”

Eve isn’t sure how to explain that Villanelle’s clothes are beautiful, yes, but they’re not what draws people to her. They’re a symptom, but not the cause -- they hint at that absolute confidence within her, the comfort in herself, in her ability to take up space and make herself known.

“I’m not trying to impress anyone,” Eve says flatly.

“But you already do. You may as well commit to it.”

“Who?”

“What?”

“What do you mean, I already impress people? Who?” Eve frowns. “And don’t say I impressed you, because that doesn’t count.”

“I don’t count? Why not?”

“Because --” Because she’d just be saying it to push Eve’s buttons, to mess Eve around, to confuse her. Villanelle is the quintessential here-then-gone type, and she’s already got everything she could possibly want from Eve, except to remind her, vividly, of what she’s missing out on, and then dance laughing out of reach again.

Not that Eve is missing out on anything. She has Niko.

Not that Eve would ever reach. She has Niko.

What she says is, “Because I don’t care what you think of me.”

“Is that so?”

Eve’s own ice cream has started to melt, making it even less appealing. A sick-sweet lime lake, milky and placid.

Eve swallows. “I --” She gives up. Sighs. “Just tell me if you meant anyone else.”

It doesn’t even matter, really. She’s not after another promotion. Her work at M-SIX doesn’t inspire a drive in her, a desire to step on toes and shoulders to claw her way to the top of the chain.

“Carolyn,” Villanelle informs her. “She likes you. She thinks you are very excellent at what you do. I agree, although you are wasted at that little company.”

“That little company is an international --”

“Yes, but if you don’t get to have any of the fun of that, then what’s the point? I work at an international firm, and I have been all over the world. You work at an international firm, and you have been stuck in the exact same office for five years.”

“Hey,” Eve bristles. She wonders if Villanelle can do this with everybody, zero in so accurately on
what it is they hate about their lives and themselves. “You might get to zoom around living your charmed life, but that’s not possible for everyone. And you don’t get to judge me for doing the best I can with what I have. You don’t know me.”

“I’m not judging you.”

“Right.”

“And I could.”

“Could what?”

“I could know you. We could be friends.”

Eve’s managed, quite successfully, to remain friends with exes before. But Villanelle isn’t an ex, not even close. She’s just --

She’s just --

“Friends?” Eve repeats, as if she didn’t hear right.

For a heartbeat, she imagines it.

Tries to, anyway. She doesn’t get far before --

But.

Eve already bought the green sherbet ice cream. Eve already bought the sherbet ice cream, and she might even be able to find a way to enjoy it if she didn’t have to stare across the table at the rocky road.

“Friends,” Villanelle confirms, the word poured like a shot -- the headiness of warped and careful meanings -- and burning like a shot.

“I --”

Eve likes green sherbet, okay? And the rocky road isn’t there, not really, not for her.

Not that she would want it, even if it was.

“I don’t think we’d be very good at that,” Eve deflects.

She anticipates another pout, then something along the lines of but I’m good at everything.

Instead, Villanelle grins -- wide, wicked, pleased. Everything smells like chocolate. “Oh, Eve. I think we’d be terrible friends.”

Chapter End Notes

i swear we're getting closer to the sexual tension that i promised in the tags lmfao this is transpiring to be a slower burn than i anticipated
Elena perches on the edge of the counter while Eve busies herself with the coffee machine, occasionally supplying an *mm* and a *huh* when Elena’s recount of her date calls for it.

“So I don’t think I’ll being seeing him again,” Elena concludes, passing Eve their mugs. “Just not enough -- *wow*, you know?”

“*Wow* isn’t everything,” Eve reminds her, diplomatically, taking a sip of her coffee and wrinkling her nose a bit.

*Wow* can just be complicated, troubling, intoxicating.

“Of course you’d say that.” Elena catches her expression and tosses her a sugar sachet from the box.

Eve normally prefers her coffee unsweetened, but the cheap brew they keep in the breakroom often edges from bitter to acrid, and it’s not really a taste to be savoured. Then -- “Hey, what do you mean ‘of course I’d say that’?”

“Oh, just. You know.”

“No?”

“You and Niko -- he -- well -- it’s a bit -- hey, how’s it going with Raymond?” Elena asks, inhaling a too-large mouthful of coffee, pouching it in her cheeks so that she doesn’t have to respond to Eve’s raised eyebrow.

And Eve would probably try and circle them back around to whatever Elena’s not saying, but she suspects she knows, and if she knows, then it’s not a conversation she wants to have at one o’clock
on a Wednesday. “Raymond?”

“Yeah. The consultant. Are we golden so far?”

Shit. Right. “Uh, well, we got switched, actually. There was a mishap with some of the department heads, and things got rearranged. So I’m not working with Raymond anymore.”

Elena narrows her eyes. “Who are you working with, then?”

“Villanelle.” Eve is too aware, abruptly, of her pulse, the soft thud of blood, but it’s ridiculous. Stupid. Elena didn’t press her on this last time, and she won’t press this time.

“Huh.” Elena tears open another sugar packet and dumps it into her cup. “Is that the hot blonde one?”

“Sorry?”

“The one you met at the conference last year?”

“Yes, such a great conference,” a new voice drawls, and Eve whips around so fast she almost spills her coffee.

Villanelle’s standing in the breakroom’s doorway, artificially casual with her hands in her pockets, and Eve isn’t sure why-here, why-now, but she’ll deal with all that once she moves past how Villanelle’s latest suit has this neckline that really --

Elena just smiles at her, unperturbed by the unexpected arrival. “Pretty rude of Eve not to invite me, actually. We’re both behind on our PD hours.”

“It was very last minute,” Eve interjects quickly, because Villanelle looks too pleased with herself not to have some sort of double entendre in the works. “Elena, this is Villanelle. Villanelle, Elena. What can we do for you?”

“I thought I would come and get a coffee and meet the rest of the acquisitions team,” Villanelle shrugs. Then, to Elena -- “Eve speaks very highly of you all.”

“She ought to, we’re a riot,” Elena confirms, bumping Eve’s shoulder playfully. “And there’s a fresh pot, so you’re just in time for coffee.”

Elena twists around to grab a third mug, and Villanelle mouths conference?, preening a little. Eve glares, twisting it into a neutral expression when Elena turns back again.

She pours Villanelle coffee, adds a splash of milk, and hands it over, careful not to let their fingers brush.

They make small talk about their department for a while, mostly just rehashing with Elena the various directives they’ve been sent by Carolyn and Peel’s people, and then --

“So what sort of conference brings in lawyers and marketing advisors, anyway?” Elena asks, and Eve kind of freezes.

“Um.” Fuck, she really didn’t think this one through. Save for what they’re doing right now, Eve and Villanelle’s careers don’t really intersect at all. “You know, just one of those annual, uh, ones.”

And Villanelle, who was more than happy to wind her up with indirect allusions to their hookup when Konstantin was around, is of course going to -- “Did you say you were behind in PD, Elena?”
-- going to change the subject, apparently?

“Oh, yeah. It’s kind of a drag. You know how it is. Is that going to be a problem, merger-wise?”


“I guess we could go to that workshop next month, right, Eve? I know we said it would be lame, but hours are hours,” Elena says.

Eve grimaces. “Yeah, I suppose --”

She’s distracted by Villanelle at last taking a sip of her coffee, and immediately pulling a face. And okay, sure, Eve would be the very first to admit that their coffee is hardly artisanal -- even indisputably a little on the sludgy side -- but it doesn’t merit quite such a disgusted expression.

“Eve, you drink this?” Villanelle demands.

“Yeah?”

“You know if your department has done something very bad, then you must tell me, so that I can make it go away, yes?”

“Why would you --”

“This is clearly a punishment.” Villanelle doesn’t even sound like she’s joking. She picks up one of their coffee pods and inspects it with great caution, as if it might somehow infect her with its mediocrity.

“No, we just save our office budget for booze for our Christmas party, right, Eve?”

“Right. And we’re all awake, so it gets the job done.”

Villanelle sets her mug down on the counter, and Eve’s pretty sure its contents are destined for the drain. “If this is your coffee,” she says, “I hate to think of your booze.”

“Well, we won’t share it with you, then,” Eve replies.

Villanelle grins. “But I shared mine with you.”

Eve thinks of champagne bubbles on asphalt. That stuff is very expensive. Villanelle’s smile, pressed to her lips. I’m going to kiss you again, okay?

Elena smacks Eve’s arm. “Seriously? This was one of those fun conferences where everyone gets trashed, and you didn’t invite me?”

“It was very last minute,” Eve repeats, weakly. Then, before Elena can pry any further, “Did you want to meet Jess and Kenny, now, Villanelle? I can --”

“I’ll go grab them,” Elena offers, slipping past Villanelle and back into the bullpen.

Once she’s gone, Villanelle says, “You know, Eve, if it’s an annual conference, and it’s been twelve months, then it’s --”

“It’s not happening annually, okay?”
There’s a long pause, and for a whole second, Eve thinks Villanelle won’t argue, that -- even though it’s meaningless banter, it’s entirely hypothetical -- she won’t protest they could possibly be a two-time thing, possibly merit a repeat performance.

And then Villanelle nods. “You’re right, Eve.”

Eve’s stomach drops and she’s married, she’s married, and Villanelle is kind of a dick, and who cares, and --

“I think only once yearly would be a terrible waste of us,” Villanelle concludes.

A dizzy rush burns through the oxygen in her lungs, and the inside of her chest burns with famine.

But whatever Eve might’ve replied, whatever Villanelle might’ve added -- it’s lost when Elena returns, Kenny and Jess in tow.

“... convenient for me,” Niko says. “Don’t you think?”

Eve glances up from her pasta. “Yes,” she says carefully. She’d tuned out after something about the installation of new water coolers in the science building. “Very convenient.”

He bobs his head. “And how was your day?”

“Oh. It was --” Eve stops herself before she can say fine, because she knows Niko hates that, hates having to pull details out of her almost as much as she hates having to dredge them up and arrange them neatly. Her day was like yesterday was like the day before that. Although that’s not really the case anymore, with Villanelle back in her life, writ large across her time and her mind. “We’re working on the Hitchin & Sons profile, so that’s alright.”

“That’s great.”

“Yes.”

The silence slips back up beside them, a third person at the dinner table. Eve wonders when she began to think of their stiltedness as company, rather than pestilence.

Buffering moments like this are good for them. It’s for the best that they have these microcosms of disconnection and miscommunication -- it gives Niko room to reimagine her edges, construct her as he needs her, and it gives Eve space to breathe.

“You never did tell me about how it turned out with those consultants,” Niko continues, clearing his throat. “You mentioned Carolyn was bringing some people in?”

Eve shoves a forkful of penne in, mumbles out, “They’re good. Yeah. Helpful.”

“You get to work with a whole team?”

“No.” Having to keep both Niko and Villanelle in her mind at once is uncomfortable, arduous; Eve tries to hold them separate, separate always, and there’s no need to compare or contrast. “I got paired with one consultant. That way it’s more focused.” There’s a flush to her neck, now. Too much wine. Speaking of -- Eve grabs her glass and takes a long drink.
“Makes sense.”

“Yeah.”

He cracks the lid off a new beer. “Do you get on?”

“What?”

“With your consultant. They’re alright? Not too pushy?”

If you don’t count being pushed up against an alley wall, the side of an elevator, onto a bed, then -- “No, not pushy.” She pauses. “A bit annoying, though.” Arguably the most annoying thing about Villanelle, though, is how often she isn’t -- getting ice cream with her had been almost fun before it had got difficult; and she’s irritatingly fascinating, if a little petulant, and --

Niko chuckles. “Annoying by your measure, or other people’s?”

“Sorry?”

“I just meant -- you can be a bit harsh, Eve, that’s all. You have fairly high standards.”

“This is eight-dollar wine. I don’t think that counts as having high standards. I don’t think --”

He holds up his hands: surrender. “Okay, okay. Forget it. It was a compliment, anyway. You’re discerning, is what I meant. That’s it.”

It makes her want to laugh, the kind of loud, hysterical laughing that’s sobbing by proxy; makes her so tired that she could sleep for days. Because fuck it, maybe she does. Maybe that’s her problem. Eve just needs too much too fast too badly, and that’s why it’s never enough, any of this.

But it’s like Harrison says: our lives are defined by the narratives we write for ourselves. Anything Eve tells herself often enough, she can make real. She can.

So she practices her gratefulness, her satisfaction.

“Thanks,” she says, smiling at him: a muscle movement.

“Of course.”

Eve stares down at the green flecks of pesto in her pasta, at the shine of the overheads caught in the tines of her fork. “How were your kids today?”

“Well, Jacob A -- you remember? I was telling you about him last week -- he didn’t do his homework again. Fourth time in a row. I’ve tried sitting down with him, giving the whole, focus-up-young-man speech, but I had to send him to detention, in the end.” Niko sighs. “A bad example for the other kids, if I let it slide again.”

Eve thinks of Villanelle and the boredom she flirts with, always sidestepping, finding something new and bright to occupy the front of her mind. “Maybe you could give him a different assignment? Something that might interest him more?”

“It’s a nice thought, Eve, but this is the curriculum. I can’t change it just because I feel like it,” he says.

“Right. Of course.”
“If there were other options, I’d be taking them.”
“I know. I know you would.”

They pass another few minutes in a steadier, mutual quiet.

“Are you coming to bridge on Thursday night?”

A few months after Eve started dating Niko, she met up with one of her old college friends, Alice, while Alice was in France for a holiday. Alice had teased and wheedled about Eve’s latest boyfriend until Eve had finally caved, and given her the dot points over cocktails. Alice had been a little too amused by Eve’s recount of struggling to learn the rules of bridge. She’d said, can you really imagine spending the rest of your life playing card games, Eve?

Eve had just shaken her head. Had replied, shut up, it won’t be the rest of my life.

She’d been so certain about it then, but things happen as things are wont to do, and now --

And now she has this house and this job and this life. She is eating dinner off plates from Ikea, bought a decade ago as placeholders until they could get nicer ones. She is wearing a shirt she found on sale and purchased rather than do her laundry once. She is ignoring the stovetop light in her periphery, the one that flickers but they won’t fix until it’s really unusable.

Eve’s world is a permanent home for temporary things.

“One?”

“Hm?”

Villanelle seems to surround herself with temporality, too. Except hers is the best thing until the next best thing -- the prettiest view until she tracks down one prettier; the most gorgeous dress until the fashion changes. Villanelle has weaved herself from a delicious ephemerality, excised herself from the crush of routine and stability to live forever in the fleeting.


“Definitely. I’ll be there.”

The next morning, Eve gets in to work a little later than normal. She’d stayed up long after Niko turned in, determined to finish the article she was reading -- and then it had been impossible to fall asleep, with his snores beside her and ideas twisting diaphanous through her head.

Kenny, Hugo and Jess aren’t in yet anyway, but Elena’s jacket is draped over the back of her chair, so she must be about.

“Eve, is that you?” Elena calls softly from the breakroom.

“Yeah.” Eve shucks out of her own coat and dumps her handbag, kicking it under her desk and out of the way.

“Get in here, babe!” There’s a gleeful note to Elena’s voice, so Eve can only guess that she’s heard a
particularly scandalous rumour, or another one of her blog posts has really taken off.

“Coming, coming.”

Eve finds Elena standing by the fridge. “Check it out,” she says, gesturing to the coffee machine.

All their bulk-bought low-grade coffee capsules have been replaced with an expensive name-brand kind -- or at least, Eve assumes that they’re expensive, seeing as she doesn’t actually recognise the logo, and they’re certainly not stocked in the supermarket she buys their regular pods from.

“And there’s this,” Elena adds with a shit-eating grin as she passes Eve a small card -- Betkin & Vasiliev stationery.

Eve flips it over.

*Enjoy it.*

- V. x.

There’s something soft, delicate and sprawling, looping under and over Eve’s ribs.

Eve thinks: *I know exactly what you look like you are really enjoying something.*

Eve exhales and pushes the feeling away.


“Why would you check that?”

“To make I could really rub it in if I was right,” Elena says, as if it should be obvious. “The lawyer definitely fancies you.”

“She doesn’t fancy me.”
“X, Eve. She signed it x. And enjoy it? Please. She does.”

“She doesn’t. That’s beyond thin.”

“She does.”

“She doesn’t.”

“She does.”

“Oh my god, what are we, twelve? I’m not doing this with you.” Eve breathes out. “You can do nice things for someone without fancying them, Elena.”

“Of course you can,” Elena agrees. “But this is not an example of --”

“I’m going to go get started,” Eve says, louder, blocking her out. “Bye.”

She’s sifting through her emails when Elena appears about five minutes later, setting Eve’s mug down on her desk, within easy reach.

“Thanks.”

“It’s really fucking good. Would it be immoral of us to hoard these pods for ourselves? The others wouldn’t have to know. Plus, finders keepers and all that,” Elena muses, dropping down into the chair opposite. “Or maybe you can just flirt with her some more and we’ll get infinite refills.”

“I am not flirting with her,” Eve insists. She takes a sip of her coffee and yeah, Elena’s right, it’s really fucking good.

Not that Villanelle would settle for anything less.

Elena shrugs. “So was that a yes or a no on the hoarding?”

At two, ignoring Elena’s waggling eyebrows, Eve heads up to Villanelle’s office. Villanelle, for once, is actually working when Eve gets there --

Nevermind, she’s online shopping. Eve can see the reflection of her screen in the window.

“How do you have time to get all your work done?”

“I’m very fast, because I’m exceptionally good at it,” Villanelle assures her, without the slightest hint of sarcasm or modesty, not that Eve was expecting either.

Eve sits down in her usual seat and opens her laptop, ready to pick up where they left off. “Thank you for the coffee, by the way,” she says.

“You’re welcome.” It’s more smug than gracious, which is endearing in its own way.

That is to say, not to Eve. But perhaps to someone. In general.

“Although Elena thinks you’re flirting with me now.”
Villanelle feigns confusion. “I am flirting with you.”

Eve waits for her expression to crack, for that teasing smile to fall swift across her lips, but Villanelle lets her punchline hang there. “Okay,” Eve says, eventually. “Well, it’s really great. The coffee, I mean. Like, the best --” Eve’s not going to say the best I’ve ever had straight to Villanelle’s face. She’s just not.

“Coffee should be a luxury,” Villanelle tells her seriously. “Not just a tool for keeping yourself awake.”

“Not everything can be a luxury.”

“Can’t it?”

“Well, if everything is special, isn’t nothing special?” For some things, it’s okay to have them rarely - - only once, even -- and move along.

She gets caught in how the early afternoon light carves angles in Villanelle’s cheeks and sets a glow in her eyes, and god, Eve is so great at the move-along part.

“Are you paraphrasing The Incredibles ?”

Eve blinks. “The what?”

“The Incredibles. ”

“Isn’t that a kids’ movie?”

“Yes. It’s a very good movie, Eve.”

“Uh. I’m sure it is? I haven’t seen it.”

“We could watch it together,” Villanelle suggests, smoothly. “It is very funny. You are missing out.”

“I don’t think I could convince Carolyn that that’s a valid use of my time.”

“We could watch it when Carolyn isn’t paying you. After work, sometime.”

The temptation to say yes pushes at Eve, insistent. But. But what would she even be doing, staying late to watch Netflix with Villanelle after everyone else has gone home, after Eve herself should’ve gone home. “If you spend all your work hours shopping and eating ice cream, your outside-of-work hours are going to have to be work hours. You can’t have much free time.”

Villanelle rolls her eyes. “Fine. Let’s get some of this done now, then.”

There’s this tiny, grumpy crease between her eyebrows, and Eve thinks she’s probably two seconds from stomping her foot.

It’s cute.

They comb through old files for hours, and it’s -- nice , in a weird way. They can work well together, if they really focus, really try. Villanelle has a playlist going softly in the background, and most of the songs are in unfamiliar languages, but Eve’s almost certain they’re all national anthems. Villanelle mouths the words occasionally, unconsciously, and translates this or that line for Eve when she’s so inclined. There’s a silky, timeless film over it all, fractured only by the setting sun.
And then it’s pushing five, and Eve has to go.

“We can start on 2014 with the Kellington account,” Eve says, starting to pack up her things.

“Konstantin says Carolyn wants that by Monday.”

“We’ll knock it over tomorrow,” Eve checks her watch. “I have somewhere to be.” It’s only bridge, but still. Niko will be insufferable if she bails or is late after she promised she’d show.

Villanelle nods. “Kellington is a big one.”

“Yeah. One of our largest ongoing accounts. I’ll come early tomorrow, okay? We’ll have plenty of time, then.”

“Okay.”

Eve watches Villanelle pull the Kellington profile up on her screen regardless, skimming the details to get a brief measure of it.

“Who is Felix Guard?” she asks, tapping her monitor over where his name is printed. The pixels flare and ripple. “I have not seen his name listed anywhere else. Was he a temp?”

Something in Eve’s stomach gets harder, heavier, and she frowns at the memory. “No, not a temp. He – just didn’t work here long.”

Villanelle appraises her carefully. “And you are… sad about this?”

“No. No.” No. “He’s not really relevant. Kellington was pretty much the only case he worked on. He brought then to M-SIX’s attention in the first place. Then he got booted for, y’know, misconduct.” She waves off Villanelle’s frown. “Don’t worry, it won’t affect the account. I’m sure HR has some paperwork on him bouncing around the system somewhere.”

“Misconduct?”

“General douchebaggery.”

Three clicks of Villanelle’s mouse, a few keystrokes, and – “I have his paperwork.”

“You’re allowed to access that stuff just like that?”

“I don’t know,” Villanelle shrugs. “But it’s not password protected, so --” She stops. “There are six lodged complaints here from you and Elena. And then it says my very good friend Frank Haleton accused this Felix man of sharing inappropriate links via email, and he was terminated.”

“Sure. That sounds about right. Anyway, I’m gonna go --”

Villanelle bites her lip, reading further, then glances back at Eve. “Quite unusual that he managed to accidentally forward his search history to a higher-up.”

“Not everyone’s a tech genius.”

“Not just unusual.” Villanelle pauses, dramatically. “A stroke of luck for you, even. Very fortunate.”

“We thought so.”

“Eve.”
“Hm?”

“Do I need to know of anything that might come back to bite you and your department?” Villanelle looks amused, maybe impressed, as she toys with the ends of her hair. “Come on.” Her voice drops, conspiratorial. “You can tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” Eve tightens her grip on the strap of her bag.


“You can’t guarantee that. It’s not as if we have attorney-client privilege. I’m not your client.” Carolyn is, and for all Eve knows, Villanelle might be contractually obligated to report this sort of thing.

“True,” Villanelle concedes. “But this is my job. Like I said, I’m very good at it. It’ll be okay.”

Eve hesitates.

Everything with Felix happened years ago now -- during those four months when Carolyn had been briefly overseeing their nascent American branch, and every single one of Eve’s superiors had been a boys-will-be-boys white man. Dave had blown off their discomfort after Felix had almost single-handedly delivered the Kellington recommendation. Eve and Elena had been left with a few slack promises from HR that they’d follow up, request his attendance at a seminar for appropriate workplace behaviour.

But Felix had ditched the seminar, had kept leering, had kept commenting, had kept brushing past them too closely until once when he was out with Dave for lunch, she’d booted up his computer and just --

Done it.

Everyone had put it down to an unfortunate right click, maybe a glitch, and it had become a cautionary horror story, recounted at office parties and pubs.

“You already know I can keep a secret,” Villanelle points out, miming zipping her lips. She knits her fingers over her knee, and regards Eve evenly, and it’s not judgement, not patience either. Maybe anticipation.

Well, it’s not like anyone can prove Eve was actually involved.

She sighs. “I didn’t do it for fun, okay? He used to say the skeeviest shit to Elena. And we all knew what he was watching on his computer. He wasn’t exactly the fastest Alt-Tab out there.”

“Ah.”

“Technically, IT can look at our search histories anytime they’d like. Anything we do on our M-SIX computers is fair game. So really, it was just a nudge,” Eve defends. “If they actually did anything when we complained then I wouldn’t have had to.”

It had been -- easy.

Satisfying, almost.

Not that she’s going to tell Villanelle that.

“You thought they’d listen if it came from Frank instead,” Villanelle surmises.
“I mean, I guess. It was spur of the moment.”

“Was it?”

“Of course it was.”

“You know, there’s nothing wrong with a little revenge, every now and then. It’s healthy, even.” Villanelle nods, approving. “Very crafty, Eve.”

“Ethically a bit dubious, though.”

“But you don’t regret it.”

“No.”

Villanelle hums. “Nobody else knows you did this?”

“No.”

Elena probably has her suspicions, but Eve’s never told her outright. Plausible deniability, et cetera.

“I am including your boring husband, Eve. You did not tell him?” There’s the glint of something in Villanelle’s eyes: shiny like curiosity, sharp like challenge.

“No.” It hadn’t so much as occurred at the time, when this was twisting her up, to consult Niko about it. He would’ve told her to stick with HR, to trust the system, to make sure everything was done peacefully and properly.

She hadn’t wanted peace or properness, she’d wanted resolution, and she’d gone for it with her teeth. He wouldn’t have understood that.

“Then I do not think this is a coming-back-and-biting thing,” Villanelle declares, decisively. “I will make sure of it.”

Eve watches her another second. “Thanks.”

And then she’s out the door.

---

Eve, after all this time, remains terrible at bridge. What she lacks in skill, she also lacks in commitment and enthusiasm, which as it transpires, is not a recipe for success.

While Niko sits with the serious players -- the ones here from open to close at every opportunity, the ones who probably hustled back in the day, if there even is such a thing as bridge hustling -- Eve is relegated to the phone-it-in table, which suits her just fine. It’s Eve, two reluctant teenagers dragged here by their parents, and Eve’s partner Ethel, whose foggy memory means she has the loosest possible grasp of the rules.

The hall is loud and busy, as always. Niko’s bridge club is a community event, and that’s something Eve has always admired about it, even if means she’s perpetually shoehorned in somewhere she still, even now, doesn’t really fit.
But that’s okay.

They’re up to the auction of their second game when Eve’s phone buzzes with a notification. Subtly, she slips it out of her pocket, and checks the banner on the lockscreen.

An email from vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc, marked urgent.

It’s not that Eve’s hoping something has come up. But it is marked urgent. It would be irresponsible to ignore it.

She unlocks her phone, and opens Outlook.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Important (!)

Hi Eve,

How’s it going?

V x.

It’s chased by a generic company email signature, the consulting firm’s logo.

Eve frowns.

From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastr@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

What’s urgent?

Eve decides to leave her own automatic sign-off -- it’s too much hassle to delete it, even if this isn’t really a kind regards sort of message.

“Eve?”

“Huh? Oh. Double?”

The dealer raises an eyebrow, and Eve knows immediately that she’s made a bad call. Not a surprise, really.

Her phone vibrates again.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]
Subject: Re: Important (!)

You didn’t answer my question. That’s impolite, Eve.

Impolite. Right.

Eve rolls her eyes as she taps out her response.

From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

It’s more impolite to mark non-urgent emails as urgent.

“Pass,” says Ethel, across from her, and Eve shakes herself out of it, trying to focus on the game again.

Another buzz.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

It is urgent. If you do not answer now, then it will be tomorrow, and I already know what you do at work.

Eve scoffs.

From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

What is it that I do, then?

It’s not like their days are even remotely comparable.

She misses something probably quite important about the trump, but cares less than she should, waiting instead for Villanelle’s reply.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)
You wait around until it is time to see me.

Asshole.

From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

Asshole.

Succinct and to the point. Carolyn would appreciate that. Probably would not appreciate Eve calling her very expensive hired expertise names, though.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

I am joking.

You make sure M-SIX and Peel continue to grow and expand as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

AND you wait around to see me.

:D

It’s the emoticon that gets Eve. “Idiot.”

“Are you okay, Eve?” Aleksy asks, nudging her arm gently.

“Oh. Yeah.” She smiles at him. “I’m fine. Just some emails from work.”

From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

I think this counts as an abuse of company resources.

Across the table, Ethel gazes at her indulgently. “I know how important your work is, dear. Do you need to step out?”

“No, it’s fine. You know how these things are.” Although she likely doesn’t. Ethel probably retired when Eve was in college.
From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

I’m not the one who just used company resources to call someone an asshole.

True, but still.

And you did say that I could use your email if I wanted to contact you after hours.

Eve had said that, hadn’t she, when she’d refused to give Villanelle her number.
Well, she hadn’t meant Villanelle could hit her up whenever with nothings and nonsense.
Eve could just -- not write back. Villanelle would probably give up within a matter of minutes.
But --

From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

Fine. I’m at my husband’s bridge club meeting. Does that answer your “urgent” question?

She slips her phone back into her pocket, deliberately, firmly, and even manages to ignore the buzz of another email notification for a whole nine seconds.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

That sounds excruciatingly dull.

It is.

MUCH less fun than watching The Incredibles.

Eve could respond with some kind of avoidance, a maybe I like bridge, but that would just prompt a really? , and eventually, after a lap of back and forth, Eve would admit she’d rather be in Phoenix in
July than be playing cards right now.

May as well cut to the chase.

**From:** Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

**Subject:** Re: Important (!)

“Excruciating dull” is about the size of it.

And then, even though it doesn’t matter, and she isn’t thinking of Villanelle at all --

*What are you doing?*

She hits send almost compulsively, before she can walk it back, write a paragraph of fiction defending her evening and cutting the conversation off, rather than prolonging it.

**From:** Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

**Subject:** Re: Important (!)

*I am writing emails instead of texting because you are stubborn.*

Also *I am being very nice to some of Konstantin’s contacts at a very boring party so that they might pay us a lot of money in the future.*

Eve smiles despite herself, and absently makes an entirely random decision when pressed by the dealer.

**From:** Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

**Subject:** Re: Important (!)

*You know how to be nice?*

“Shall we break for some tea?” Ethel asks.

“Sure,” Eve agrees, vague, distracted.

Aleksy glances at her. “Is there still soda in the back, Mrs Polastri?”
“Eve, please. And yeah, I think so. Do you want me to --”

“No, I can get it.”

She nods, turns back to her phone.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

I know how to make people think I’m nice.

Would you like a reason leave your excruciatingly dull bridge club meeting?

Eve bites her lip.

Around her, conversations thread a soft carpet -- Polish and English, accents and dialects.

It’s just an email.

It’s easier to talk when Villanelle isn’t in front of her, isn’t making things difficult just by being.

If Villanelle isn’t here, isn’t looking at her, then it’s all okay. Eve could have this same conversation with Elena or Kenny, and it wouldn’t be weird.

She never has, never would, but she could, theoretically.

From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

Is that a question or an offer?

She glances up to find her whole table has left, is chatting over by the refreshments table as they pour long-life milk and plate crumbling biscuits.

Eve stands, too, to join them, when her phone vibrates again.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@betkinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

I think you want it to be an offer.

There’s a hand on her forearm, a heavy and unexpected touch, and Eve starts, fighting the automatic
urge to lock her phone again.

Niko’s not going to try and read her screen, and even if he did, there’s nothing to see. She’s emailing a work colleague.


He sighs. “It’s just --”

“I know.” They’re supposed to be taking an interest in one another’s hobbies. Eve doesn’t want him to join her on her runs, they’re just for her, and he’d probably baulk at the research she does, so this is their activity that they have in common. His, but theirs. She needs to be present. “Just work.”

“Your annoying consultant?”

“That’s the one.” Annoying had been how she’d described Villanelle to him, yes, but it wrankles, oddly, to hear him parrot it back to her. “But it’s all sorted now.”

There’s the itch to reply. To see if this offer is going to shift from the abstract to a time and a place, but --

That would be asking for things to get complicated.

Eve puts her phone in her handbag, leaves her handbag in the kitchen, and for once, actually wins a game of bridge.

When they get home, when Niko is in the shower, when Eve is alone and unoccupied and still half-distracted all this time later --

She caves to temptation, and checks her phone again.

From: Villanelle Astankova [vastankova@beikinvasilievassoc]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

Eve?

Sent two hours ago. Whatever hypothetical, maybe-offer -- that there probably never even was -- has unquestionably expired.

But Eve can’t quite help herself.

Fuck it, right? She was always going to give in anyway. Whether she does so now or later is almost beside the point.
From: Eve Polastri [eve.polastri@msixinternational]

Subject: Re: Important (!)

I do take this merger seriously, you know. So if you do have an emergency question that can’t wait --

She’s quoting back their conversation in the elevator, knowing full well that Villanelle’s definition of “emergency merger-related question” is unlikely to be the same as Carolyn’s or Frank’s or Konstantin’s. Not caring, either. Or maybe past not-caring, maybe straight to glad for it.

Text me.

She types out her phone number and presses send.

Chapter End Notes

this fic is turning out to be a lot longer and more slippery than i originally anticipated. so thanks for sticking with me through this mess lmao.

comments make my day/night, so everyone who has left one, you're a superstar and also my favourite.
Chapter Summary

iPhone settings, unsolicited birthday cake, and staying after closing.

Chapter Notes

1) I will dig deeper into Eve being more stubborn and ruthless in the future, but atm im mostly working with Eve as she stands in character development ~1.01/1.02, so she doesn't have the extra confidence and recklessness that followed managing to chase down and stab Villanelle. Don't worry, she'll grow, but it felt inauthentic for her to have those qualities without the catalyst for them. But hardcore Eve is The Best so I'm aiming for her to grow at least partially in that way.

2) Yes I am just making straight up corporate buzzword nonsense at this point to have excuses for them to stay late at work together. No I don't know how marketing companies work, or indeed any companies. This is all based on the vague memory of that time I watched half a season of Suits four years ago and that one Criminal Minds episode set on Wall Street that I saw when I was drunk. Sue me.

3) I refuse to believe that Eve "Passcode 1234" Polastri would have any idea how to delete shortcuts on her phone, so don't @ me.

4) I thought the idea Villanelle not knowing about or caring for sports was funny but I guess this is one you can @ me on.

5) This is another one of those chapters that got too long and I had to chop it in half, so if it feels like not much happens (sorry) that's why. I had to establish a lot of things to create fun situations later.

Yes this chapter is kind of a bust but I really wanted to get it out of the way because the next chapter is going to be soo much fun to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Eve stares at her screen, at the white blank page in front of her. Her fingers rest stationary on the keyboard.

The cursor blinks.

Blinks.

Blinks.

She drifts her thumb back and forth over the spacebar, and thinks of the Steinway in her parents’ house, back in Connecticut. Eve never played, never wanted to, but as a small child she liked to
stand in front of that piano and trail her fingers over the ivories: all the way up, all the way down. They were cool and smooth and there was something soothing about that, but what fascinated Eve most back then was their capacity to make music, unrealised: under her mother’s hands, the keys grew notes, splayed into chords, but under Eve’s, nothing. They were these beautiful, powerful things, potential made elegant -- left at rest.

The letters under Eve’s hands now, thirty-something years later, are at rest too. She could write something brilliant, she could write something terrible, but until she actually types something, she hasn’t done either.

So she can’t start. She can’t just start, because all she’s got is an outdated bachelor’s degree, next to no experience in her field, a scattered folder full of journal notes and a few half-baked threads of a nascent theory.

God, she’s being an idiot. Nobody’s going to read this, or take her seriously, and really, there’s no point to Eve trying to write this anyway.

Even if nobody reads it, though, she’ll still have done it. She’ll still have researched and written and made something, and surely that counts, in a slanted, quiet way.

But.

But if she does this, finishes this, what then? What does she do to fill her time at home, to give herself a sense of purpose, of direction?

“Are you alright?” Elena asks, waving to catch her attention. “You’re sighing a lot.”

Eve closes the empty Word document without saving, and digs her knuckles into her eyes. “Yeah. I was just going to try writing something, but -- whatever.”

“Writing what?” Elena encourages, her shoe tapping Eve’s lightly under their desks.

Eve shakes her head. “Nothing. It was just a -- a thought.” She checks her watch. “I’m going to head up for my meeting now. You should get confirmation from Carolyn’s people by four that the Hitchin & Sons rec has gone through. If you don’t hear from them, call me ASAP.”

“Will do,” Elena confirms. “Also, seeing as Villanelle’s getting us the full upgrade around here, I have a list of hand soaps from Lush that I think --”

Eve rolls her eyes. “You get two more of those jokes,” Eve says, and Elena grins at her, ever-innocent. Except she’s absolutely not innocent, because Elena has taken Villanelle’s coffee gift and run with it, making increasingly elaborate and ridiculous requests for Eve to pass on. “Use them wisely.”

“You know I will.”

Eve’s about to reply when her phone buzzes, distant and echoey in the drawer it’s been relegated to. She’s spent the whole day checking her notifications far too quickly -- hence it’s shut away instead of in her pocket -- so she breathes out, forces some restraint, and makes herself wait.

It’s not going to be Villanelle, because it hasn’t been Villanelle the previous eight times, and each promotional message or automated reminder on her screen has been met with -- not disappointment, obviously, but something disappointment-adjacent.

Yes. At lunch, when her phone had gone off, and it was just a text from Niko confirming they were
still on for their Harrison-suggested (mandated) date night -- that soft shrinking feeling high in her throat was disappointment-adjacent.

The thing is, Eve doesn’t necessarily want Villanelle to text. She doesn’t even actually expect her to, but --

But now, somehow, Eve’s waiting.

Which is probably what Villanelle wants -- for Eve to have resisted, resisted, and then in some small way given in, only for Villanelle to turn around and remind her that she doesn’t care after all.

Whatever.

Eve can care even less. Does, in fact.

It was a lapse in judgement to give her phone number to Villanelle, anyway.

So when this is from Facebook or a calendar alert, it’s going to be fine, great, and Eve won’t feel anything.

She opens her desk drawer, snatches up her phone, and --

**Unknown Number [1:57pm]** eve you should hurry up the birthday cake will be here soon

Eve could send a *sorry, who is this?* but she knows, Villanelle knows she knows, and pretending otherwise wouldn’t prove anything.

**Me [1:58pm]** Whose birthday is it?

**Unknown Number [1:59pm]** why would it be someone’s birthday?

**Unknown Number [1:59pm]** i just want birthday cake

**Unknown Number [2:00pm]** so i ordered some

The last text is chased by a string of cake emojis and then, inexplicably, a handful of smiling faces with dollar-signs for eyes.

**Me [2:00pm]** Okay. I’m On my way! Now

The autocorrect changes her abbreviation as she hits send.
Unknown Number [2:00pm] you should turn off automatic keyboard shortcuts

Me [2:01pm] You can do that?

Unknown Number [2:01pm] eve it is very tragic that you do not know this but dw i will show you

“Who are you texting?” Elena asks. “You’re all -- smirky.”

Eve kills her smile, which -- when did she start smiling? “Smirky isn’t a word, Elena.”

There’s the clattering of keys, and then, “Google says it is, so suck it. Who are you texting?”

“Uh -- it was a wrong number,” Eve says vaguely. “They sent a stupid line.”

“Must’ve been a pretty good line,” Elena replies shrewdly, eyeing Eve.

“It was. It was a pun,” Eve defends. She’s not sure why she didn’t just tell Elena the truth -- but it had been automatic, instinctive, to keep this small interaction with Villanelle a secret. And it’s not even that Eve doesn’t want to be teased, it’s that at some point the teasing will become a real conversation, and if Eve lets Villanelle bleed over into the other parts of her life, she doesn’t know where it’ll stop. “I’ve got to go, now.”

She grabs her bag and heads for the door, ignoring Elena calling, “I want to hear the pun!” after her.

In the elevator, Eve stares down at her phone, hesitating, hesitating --

She saves the number: V.

She gets off on the ninth floor, feeling a little bit reckless and a little bit stupid for feeling that way. As she weaves her way through the clusters of people in the hall, Eve passes Frank and Raymond, who are clutching tablets and arguing quietly, both of them greying and balding and almost expressionless.

For a second, Eve imagines how different her afternoons would be if she were still stuck with Raymond: how the walls of his office would compress them slowly, how they’d tread the water of small talk and judgemental stares.

Instead, her life is a mess of close proximity, of ice cream and coffee and comebacks and I think you want it to be an offer, and that’s so much better for all the ways that it’s so much worse.

She knocks twice on Villanelle’s door, and waits for an acquiescent sound from within before she enters.

Villanelle’s perched on her bookcase, a battered novella held loosely in her hand. She’s wearing a silky jumpsuit that doesn’t fall quite all the way to her knees, and Eve spares half a thought for whether it even counts as professional attire before relenting and allowing herself to follow the length of Villanelle’s legs. Her heavy-duty lace-up boots ought to clash horribly with the delicacy of the rest of her outfit, but somehow it works. It’s Villanelle; of course it works.
“You don’t have to knock, you know,” she says, slowly, deliberately crossing one leg over the other so that the hem rides up an inch or so further.

Eve drags her gaze back to Villanelle’s face, but it’s too late now: the image is in her brain, looping back through memories of what it was like to touch her there and there and there and then even higher still, and Villanelle is looking at her like she knows it. “It’s polite,” Eve forces out. “To knock.”

Villanelle shrugs, setting her book down. “I don’t mind.”

Eve’s hand is still on the doorknob, and she could pull the door wide open as a kind of self-control failsafe, but instead, she lets it fully close -- and so seals herself away in Villanelle’s microcosm of a world, where the gravity pulls twice as hard, makes entering inevitable and leaving almost impossible.

Neither of them says anything for a minute.

Silence with Niko is like: a vacuum, an absence, a tiny, home-grown vastness over which they seem incapable of crossing, incapable of mustering the energy to.

Silence with Villanelle is like: a resistance, as if there are a million thoughts and words that Eve is pressing back, holding out for the exact right one. Is like: a prologue to some greater, grander thing that’s so very nearly tangible, that Eve could maybe have if she just reached.

And then Villanelle stands up, and closes the distance between them, and holds out her hand.

“Phone,” she says.

Eve swallows. “Sorry?”

“I will show you how to get rid of that silly shortcut,” Villanelle says, and she’s less than a foot away from Eve and god, is she doing this on purpose to kill Eve or does her voice really sound like this all the time?

Eve unlocks her phone and gives it over.

Villanelle toys with it for a moment, tap-tap-taps, then offers it back.

Eve has literally no idea what she did, and not just because she was distracted by Villanelle’s proximity, but because Villanelle isn’t even holding the phone so Eve can see it.

“You’re a pretty terrible teacher,” Eve points out, slightly shaky.

Villanelle tilts her head. “Oh?”

“Yeah. And don’t give me that I teach by example schtick again.” Admittedly, Eve was a bit mesmerised that first minute at the club, but she’s definitely no better at ordering drinks at a crowded bar than she was before they ever met.

“Well that worked, didn’t it?”

“No. I mean, I don’t think so. I haven’t been back to a club since, so --”

“So it’s not really fair to accuse me of being a bad teacher, is it?” Villanelle responds.

Eve tries to take her phone back from Villanelle, but Villanelle doesn’t let go, and they’re just
standing there, fingers brushing.

“I guess not,” Eve agrees.

“Tell you what. I’ll take you to another club, and you order us drinks. If you can’t, you win, and you can badmouth my teaching all you like. If you can, I get --” She pauses. “What do you think I should get, Eve?”

“I --”

The door opens, and Eve jumps backwards, trying to put a gap between them.

In the doorway, there’s a young man -- an intern, probably -- clutching a large cardboard box. “Ms Astankova?”

Frustration flashes over Villanelle’s face, but then her expression shifts, becoming more severe, her eyebrow arching. “You should really knock, Pieter,” she says. “It’s polite, don’t you know.”

“I have your delivery.”

Eve’s heart is still tripping unevenly, thrown by Villanelle, thrown again by this one-eighty change in pace.

“You can put it there.” Villanelle points at the small bar, which is host to an eclectic mix of hard liquor, international sodas, and cold-brew coffee.

“No, put it there.” Pieter ducks awkwardly across the room, placing the box gingerly.

“Thank you, Pieter,” Villanelle says, unreadable.

He nods and hurriedly retreats, closing the door behind himself with a definitive thud.

As soon as he’s gone, Villanelle drops the facade of restrained dissatisfaction, and approaches the box with an energetic glee, tugging the flaps until the sides fold away, and the three-tier, sprinkle-covered cake is laid bare.

“Oh, this is very tacky,” Villanelle declares approvingly. “So tacky, Eve, look.”

“I’m not sure I’d call it tacky. I mean, it’s for children.” More specifically, for parties -- there’s enough cake there for twenty people.

Villanelle just glances over at her blankly. “Many things meant for children are tacky, Eve.”

“Right.”

“They don’t get an excuse for poor taste because they are children.”

“I think they do?” That’s the general rule, isn’t it? Eve doesn’t really know much about kids, doesn’t have any cause to spend time with them.

“I had exquisite taste as a child.”

A second later, Villanelle’s got a knife in her hand, seemingly out of nowhere, and Eve hopes it was in the box or behind the glasses on the bar, and not just stashed on her person.

Villanelle tears two squares of cardboard from the cake’s packaging and carves up generously-sized
slices, flipping one onto each of her makeshift plates.

“Here you go.”

She holds out the first expectantly, and Eve accepts it, still slightly bemused by this whole situation.

But Villanelle is smiling, swooping a finger through the frosting and licking it away happily. It’s not half-performance, like it was when Villanelle ate that ice cream -- it’s genuine enjoyment, and her small hum of pleasure is so soft Eve doubts she was even meant to hear it.

Maybe there’s no weird reason behind any of this. Maybe Villanelle really did just feel like it, and that’s that.

Eve breaks a piece off her own slice and pops it into her mouth.

It’s fantastic.

Through the eddy of sweetness, Eve wonders if Villanelle’s ever eaten cake made from a packet mix, or microwaved in a mug. If Villanelle’s ever bought an off-brand anything, or gone for second-third-fourth best.

No, Villanelle has probably never settled in the whole of her life, might be allergic to the very idea of it.

At some point though, she’s inevitably going to realise quite how much Eve’s world is a tapestry of half-assed, knock-off, clearance-rack things, a patchwork of making-do and pushing-on. And what then?

Eve sits down in her chair, focusing instead on setting up her laptop and getting ready for today’s review.

Villanelle drapes herself over her own chair -- seriously, is she incapable of sitting up straight like a normal person in a professional environment? -- and waits, watching Eve.


“Is it good?”

“I mean, they pay their bills, so --”

“No. The cake.”

“You know it’s good.”

“I know I like it,” Villanelle replies. “It’s a matter of preference.” She narrows her eyes. “I don’t just get the most expensive of everything, Eve. I get the one I like the most.”

“But you like the expensive ones the most.”

“Usually.”

“Well, it is good. I like it.” Eve’s struck, suddenly, by the oddity of this scene, the goofy image they must make: Eve, her ordinariness and edges; Villanelle, all couture and high cheekbones; the gaudy, vibrant colours of the cake; the sprinkle on Eve’s thumbnail and the fleck of frosting on Villanelle’s bottom lip. “It’s good,” she repeats.
There’s another one of those lulling pauses.

Before it can turn into something, Eve lets it go. “We should get this done and send it to Carolyn,” she says.

Villanelle huffs, but doesn’t protest, waking her computer -- the screen flickers on, and the Kellington files are already ready for them to trawl through.

It takes them nearly three hours to comb through the entire file. Kellington is one of the accounts that opened itself to bidding war, rather than simply a company without representation that Eve’s department found, or a group that contacted M-SIX for their services directly.

They get through the whole file in one three-hour burst, and Eve can almost feel the grit in her brain by the time they’re done with it.

At least they are done with it.

She puts her laptop to sleep and begins to pack up, not eager to leave but certainly eager to not be working anymore. Villanelle, though, is still regarding the computer, contemplative.

It’s enough out of the ordinary that Eve stops what she’s doing, and focuses on her. “What’s up?”

Villanelle taps the desk idly a couple of times, then turns to Eve. “Why did you recommend that the development team incorporate international expansion into their pitch to Kellington?”

“What do you mean? It was a good call. They did go on to establish themselves in America,” Eve says, loathe as she is to defend what would’ve been either Felix or Dave’s idea. “With that as our edge, we beat out Hardison and Leitwich for their business. Made our bosses pretty happy.”

Kellington hadn’t even been that big of a company when they made their bid, but it’s grown exponentially since extending itself overseas; it’s definitely in the five top clients they’ve brought in since Eve started at M-SIX.

Villanelle shakes her head. “No, I mean, how did you know they were expanding to America? M-SIX pitched for Kellington’s marketing in February, but their American expansion press release wasn’t until late March.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Eve doesn’t tend to follow companies’ business once her part of the deal is done. “Oh. Well, sometimes we get tips early. If they released it to shareholders, and it made it to Wall Street, we knew about it, even if they hadn’t done a press conference yet.” She stops, because -- actually, something about that doesn’t sound right.

Her laptop is already off, so she stands and makes her way around to Villanelle’s side of the desk, nudging her and claiming her mouse. She scrolls up through the document, acutely aware that Villanelle really hasn’t made any effort to give Eve space.

“There.” She’s right; two hours ago, they’d passed a note about how M-SIX helped prepare the shareholders’ information packet on the expansion, which means their pitch must’ve predated that.

“We knew before the shareholders.”

Villanelle’s mouth tightens. “It seems so.”
“Maybe the partners told us, Hardison, and Leitwich? They might’ve wanted the most informed
bids,” Eve suggests. “That’d make sense, since they clearly wanted to have us weigh in on how they
presented it to shareholders.”

“But that would’ve risked it leaking early. That’s a lot of trust to put in the employees of a company
not beholden to you.” Villanelle snags the mouse back from Eve. “Do you have a copy of the
briefing that Kellington sent out?”

Eve frowns. “It should’ve been consolidated into this document, actually. That’s weird. Just -- uh,
check through the folder. Maybe it’s separate.”

She wheels her own chair around to Villanelle’s side of the desk and snatches up her laptop, too,
rebooting it. It’s possible she just gave Villanelle an old or incomplete version of the file.

“I haven’t got it,” Villanelle says.

“One sec, I’ll find my copy.” Eve’s department keeps everything, in case they get hauled in for a
workplace practice audit by HR, or worse, Carolyn.

“Do you remember what was in it?” Villanelle presses.

“No -- Dave had us split into two teams, then. Kellington came in kinda last minute, so Elena and I
were still wrapping up the Lowings account at the beginning; we got brought onto Kellington later,
near the end.” The loading circle spins and spins as Eve waits for her login screen. “Besides, I’d
have forgotten it all by now anyway.”

“I just think it’s strange,” Villanelle says. “Hardison has a much bigger presence than M-SIX in the
States -- or at least they did, back in 2014. Your New York branch was new, then.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“So if Hardison knew about the expansion, they would’ve included it in their pitch, and they
would’ve been the obvious choice.”

“I mean, I guess? But a lot of factors go into these decisions. We might’ve appealed more to their
company values --”

“Yes, spare me. Every company has the same value. Money. Hardison was better established with
their target market. If they’d played that card, they would’ve been a -- slam-sink.”

“Slam-dunk.”

“Whatever. I don’t watch soccer.”

“Basketball.”

Eve finally manages to get her Kellington folder open, but a quick scan tells her it’s minus the brief,
too. “I don’t have it. I should have it.”

She checks a few other accounts that were open bids, but they all have their briefs, loaded up exactly
where they ought to be.

“You only became the boss after Dave left, yes? Maybe some of his documents didn’t transfer
properly to you?”

“There wasn’t a transfer, I just got all his permissions -- his account became my account, basically.
That way, nothing got lost. Except this, apparently.” She sighs. “I probably just moved it for some reason while I was reorganising, and then forgot that I did.”

She pulls up the internal search function and plugs in every keyword she can think of that might flag the file, but --

“Nothing?” Villanelle prompts.

“Nothing,” Eve concedes, leaning back. “If it doesn’t come up on a search, that means it’s either encrypted, or someone deleted it.”

“How likely is it to be encrypted?”

“Well, obviously M-SIX has security to prevent from external intrusion, and then internally, we’re only given access to certain company drives or folders that we need. But there’s no reason the brief would be encrypted, especially from me. I mean, it’s not even M-SIX intellectual property. It was sent to us.”

“Would you still have that email with it attached?”

“It would have gone to Dave, not me.”

“So not encrypted; it must have been deleted, then,” Villanelle concludes. Her fingers trace arcs over the trackpad of Eve’s laptop as she flicks through the folder one more time. “Any reason Dave would’ve done that?”

“No,” Eve answers, immediately. “We don’t delete anything. Even the paperwork on clients we don’t work with anymore. And Kellington is one of our biggest contracts. They’re worth millions every year.”

Villanelle pauses. “Is there any reason Carolyn might’ve asked Dave to delete something?”

“No,” Eve says, but she’s not totally sure. Because Carolyn is an enigma. “What are you thinking?”

“That perhaps someone came across an extra piece of information not in the brief and passed it along, unofficially, and it tipped M-SIX’s strategy. Gave an off-the-books advantage.”

Eve scoffs. “What, like insider trading?” The idea that one of them illicitly acquired a tip that significant, and that it didn’t get noticed for four years, is beyond ridiculous. “Villanelle, we were a four-person department then. Felix wasn’t even awake half the time. We were not exactly a hotbed for corporate scandal.”

“Eve, all the best scandals come from where you least expect them. Oh, if we’re the ones who get to have all the fun, Raymond is going to be so jealous,” Villanelle singsongs.

“No, no fun. No one’s covering up anything,” Eve insists. “Carolyn wasn’t even our boss at the time. She was overseeing the other branch while it found its feet.”

“Who were you answering to, then?”

“Kyle Bayer, one of the junior partners.”

“Ahh, yes. The one with the goatee?”

“That’s him.” She sighs. “Look, Dave probably just accidentally deleted it and couldn’t be arsed to get it back.”
“Lighten up, Eve. This whole thing could turn into a total nightmare. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Maybe that’s nice for you. I could lose my --”

“I will make sure you keep this job you hate,” Villanelle promises amiably, patting her hand. There’s the buzz of hyperawareness, static across her skin, that Eve resolutely ignores. “Don’t worry.”

Eve closes her laptop. “Don’t get all giddy over this,” she warns. “We’re going to see IT, they’ll hunt down the file in no time, and we’ll have this all tidied away.”

“It’s after five on a Friday.” Villanelle points to the clock on the wall. “They’ll have gone home.”

“Oh. Right.” And this is kind of time sensitive, not in the least because Carolyn asked to have this review completed before Monday opening. “Well, what about the hard copy?” Eve can’t believe this didn’t occur to her sooner. “M-SIX went entirely paperless at the end of 2014, but we used to have to send hard copies of our profiles from department to department. There are whole boxes of files in the office that we haven’t got around to digitising yet.”

They’re well and truly behind schedule with uploading those, but it’s the one deadline that nobody’s chasing up; it’s easy to forget about them, and Eve mostly has until now.

“Come on.” Eve stands up. “We can grab that now, wrap this up, and send it in.” They’ll find the brief, America will be mentioned, and this will have been a fuss over nothing.

Villanelle stands to, follows her to the door, and --

“Seriously? You’re bringing your cake?”

Villanelle nods. “Yes.”

“Fine. But you can’t get any sprinkles anywhere, okay?”

“I’m going to eat the cake, Eve, not throw it on the walls.”

They take the elevator back down to the fourth floor, which is abandoned now -- on Friday afternoon, their department can’t get out fast enough; it would’ve been fully evacuated by one minute past five.

Eve leads Villanelle through their little bullpen, all the way to where the storage room is tucked away; out of sight and mostly out of mind.

It’s locked, and Eve has to scrabble through her desk for a minute to find they key, but eventually, she gets the door open and flips on the crappy overhead lights. The fluorescents flicker to life one by one, illuminating harshly the stacks and stacks of cardboard boxes piled on the racks of shelves.

“Wow. This is very messy,” Villanelle observes, her nose wrinkling in distaste.

“Yeah, yeah.” It’s actually sort of depressing. Half of Eve’s life is filed away in these boxes; they’re full of folders which are full of hours and hours of her time -- time spent, at least in part, wishing she was doing something else, maybe being someone else. “Look for February, 2014.”

They each pick an end and work towards the middle; the organisational system is pretty lax in here, mostly because each file is individually dated, and it doesn’t really matter what order they digitise them in, so they never bothered to get rigorous about the arrangements.

About twenty minutes in, Villanelle says, “I bet you wish you had brought a snack, now, too.”
“I’m good.” But she does. It’s starting to feel like a long time since she had lunch.

Finally, after trawling through about twenty boxes, thumbing tab after tab for K - Kellington --

“Got it.” Eve rests the manila folder on top of another stack of boxes, and sifts through the pages.

Villanelle abandons her own search, coming around to stand just behind Eve, reading over her shoulder. And Eve is thinking about whether this brief is going to be here, but she is definitely also thinking about the warmth of Villanelle at her back, and how Eve can just barely feel her every breath and the minute movements of her chest: inhale, exhale.

“Okay, -- final submission, draft submission, first findings,” Eve mumbles, narrating for no real reason other than to try and get her thoughts straight. “And -- no brief.”

“Are you certain?” Villanelle’s voice has tilted in pitch.

“Yes, I’m certain,” Eve bites back, but rechecks just in case, then rechecks again. “So someone came and took it?”

“Or it was never filed in the first place. Either way: deliberate.”

Eve turns. Villanelle’s eyes are lit up with excitement, a brightness that shimmers across the whole of her face. It’s familiar -- Eve’s seen that shivering glow to her before -- but it affects Eve the same way as it always has: she envies it, and feels the first embers of it catching in her own muscles, veins.

“We may have hit what Konstantin calls a ‘little snag’,,” Villanelle observes cheerfully.

“Villanelle, we’re the smallest department in all of M-SIX. We don’t get commissions or bonuses if we introduce big accounts or give good recommendations. There’s literally no incentive for anyone to do anything unethical.”

“The right people might’ve made the right promises on the quiet,” Villanelle replies, the corner of her mouth ticking up. “And besides, Eve; even if your department just followed a hunch and got lucky -- which I really doubt -- it doesn’t matter. What matters is whether someone might think M-SIX cheated, and if M-SIX can reasonably prove that they didn’t.”

“So -- do we call Carolyn?” She’ll be out at the fortnightly partners’ dinner and won’t appreciate the interruption. “I’d rather not.”

“Agreed. We leave the fancy bosses out of this until we know more. We figure out what we’re dealing with, and if we can deal with it. Better to go to the person who pays you with solutions than with problems.”

Eve believes that’s part of it, she does, but also believes that Villanelle is eager to hoard this potential disaster for herself, isn’t going to surrender to supervision until the last possible minute, until she absolutely has to.

And --

It’s strangely infectious. Eve should want everything to be perfect, for nothing to have been faked or cooked or covered-up, but Villanelle’s hunger is catching. Because this might be entertaining and demanding and difficult in a way Eve’s job never is, never has been.

“Right.” Eve gathers up the file, shuffling all the papers back in place. “So. I’ll reach out and see if I
can get a copy of the brief from a friend at Kellington, and if there’s nothing about international expansion there, then I’ll run through all our usual resources and see how Felix and Dave might’ve come across that information legitimately.”

“And I will see how they could’ve come across it illegitimately.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Then there’s a beat, and Eve realises again, abruptly, just how close they are. Barely half a step forward, and they would be chest-to-chest. She could twist her hands in Villanelle hair, that today she’s lightly curled in that complicatedly-effortless way, and draw her down, kiss her until she makes that soft, low sound in her throat that Eve still remembers, despite all the ways she’s tried to forget.

Villanelle’s gaze has dropped to Eve’s lips, and that’s really not helping.

“We should go,” Eve says eventually. She doesn’t move, though. “We need to make a start on this.”

Villanelle leans closer, just a fraction.

Eve can smell her perfume; it’s gentle and dizzying.

She takes a breath, and --

And --

And her phone starts ringing.

Eve starts backwards, and she doesn’t unbalance but still, Villanelle reaches for her waist on reflex, and that’s probably the least-steadying thing imaginable.

“I --”

Villanelle’s hand is on Eve’s hip, and Eve can feel the five slight pressure points of her grip, of each of her fingers and her thumb.

She doesn’t let go.

“I should get that,” Eve says. She reluctantly tugs her phone out of her pocket, and --

Niko. It’s Niko.

Right. Niko.

“I’m just -- I’m gonna -- head out and take this,” she says, and gives herself one more second before stepping away, setting the file down on the lid of the box and backing out of the storage room.

It’s the second time in her life she’s walked away from Villanelle to answer a call from her husband, but this time, she’ll get to walk back towards her again.

Which she shouldn’t prefer, but she does; this feeling as she taps the green Accept icon isn’t disappointment-adjacent, it’s annoyance -- which it shouldn’t be, but it is.

And then there is Villanelle, who runs on impulses like gasoline, who has traded in her shoulds for the glittering attraction of every shiny want, who takes and throws away and god, sometimes Eve
really wonders if it could be as easy and thrilling as it looks.

But.

“Hello?”

Chapter End Notes

yes i know this story is riddled with plotholes but this shaky-ass plot is an elaborate ruse for eye sex and then actual sex so please bear with me

our slow burn is going to burn a little faster now guys but don't expect them to be banging next chapter or anything. i have a plan and i promise we'll get there. i honestly thought it would move a lot faster than this but like... ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ idk what im doing lmfao

@ everyone who comments you're a living angel and im defs going to get around to replying to you guys sometime soon because... you warm my heart... you do... ur the greatest
Dinner

Chapter Summary

Math teachers and Sea Vegetables and swearing in yet more elevators.

Chapter Notes

1) yes im updating this prematurely with a short chapter bc it just occurred to me that a measly 2k words would bump this over the 40k line and i couldn't resist. i thought this fic would be 30k max but here we are. im not even sure if we're halfway.

2) im replying to comments now, which i have finally worked out how to do and found the time for, so i hope nobody has been weirded out by a reply to something they wrote weeks ago -- i started at the back and am working my way forward, and i wanted to say thank you. i havent replied to everyone (sorry!) i ran out of time, but maybe chuck an R on the end of your comment now so that i know im good to reply and wont be bothering you? cheers :D

3) sorry to any high school math teachers or indeed any math enthusiasts reading this. eve's opinion on the profession does not necessarily reflect my own (although i will admit that i can't add double digit numbers without a calculator. i am a failure of the system)

4) @ steph you called it

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hey,” Niko says, and Eve’s not sure if it’s her or him or the slightly gritty phone line that makes him feel so far away. “It’s nearly six. I thought you’d definitely be home by now?”

“Oh. Sorry.” She’s not actually sorry -- she doesn’t have to apologise for staying late at work -- but that’s probably the response Niko is after.

“Was there a holdup on the Tube?”

“No, I just haven’t left yet. There’s a problem with one of our accounts, and I’ve got to have it sorted before opening on Monday.”

“Can’t you just go in tomorrow morning and finish it then?”

She hadn’t even considered that. But they’re in it now, and the idea of leaving is beyond unappealing; she wants answers, and she wants -- well. She wants answers. “It’s time sensitive. The earlier the better.”

He sighs. “Fine. But be quick, okay?”

There’s no Niko to glare at, so she glares at the bare wall she’s facing. She doesn’t have to be quick.
This is her fucking job. “Hey, I don’t think --”

“For our reservations, Eve,” he cuts in, not quite impatient yet, but slanting towards exasperated. “You need to be back in forty minutes if we want any hope of making our reservations.”

“Oh, date night. Right.” And she could pretend that the lack of enthusiasm slugging heavy and low in her stomach is at the prospect of missing their evening out, not at the idea of an evening out at all. She could.

He scoffs. “Wow.”

“Wow, what?”

“Wow, I’m not trying to pull teeth here, Eve. You picked the restaurant. We’re rearranged this three times --”

Technically true, but she’s pretty sure one of those times was because of Niko. “I had a headache last week, okay --”

“I’m just saying, this isn’t even the bare minimum effort, Eve. Marketing research is hardly life or death. You could put it down for a night and make time for us.”

“Jeez, Niko, it’s not like I’m working till midnight five days a week. I’m usually home by six-thirty.”

“But not on the day we have plans. Obviously.” There’s a hard edge to his tone, now, some blend of hurt and vindication. As if he expected this, but he couldn’t have.

Or is Eve predictable and pedestrian now no matter what she does?

“Don’t obviously,” she hisses, tugging absently on the sleeve of her sweater. “I couldn’t have seen this coming. But this is a big account and a big problem, so I’m going to stay and sort it out.”

“You know, I texted you at lunch to make sure. You promised we were on. I turned down drinks with the boys, and --”

“So go have drinks with the boys,” Eve says, relieved. That’ll keep him busy.

“I don’t want to have drinks with the boys, I want to have dinner with my wife.”

And Eve wants to find out if Felix and Dave doctored the Kellington brief. But if she says that, it’s going to take a week of niceties and extra time to make it up to Niko again. So she swallows and reframes everything carefully. “I’m sorry. Look, this is really important, like getting-fired important - -.” Although Villanelle’s already assured her that she won’t lose her job over it, and Eve’s inclined to believe her. “-- and it’ll be a one-time only issue. It’s shitty that it happens to clash with our dinner, but I didn’t have a choice in that.”

She rolls her neck, waiting to see if she’s said the right thing. Honestly, she doesn’t see why it’s a whole ordeal in the first place -- they’ve had dinner together more times than she could possibly count over the last fifteen years, and it’s not like they have anything new or significant to say to each other. Save for maybe the food, it’s not as if tonight would’ve been memorable. He’s not really missing out.

“Fine,” he concedes, and he’s not happy but he’s less cross than he was a minute ago.

“Great.”
“I’ll go out with the others, then.”

“Have fun.” And she means it. She hopes he has a great time. She hopes he gets drunk a bit and forgets a bit and when she gets home, he’s already asleep, and they can put the reprisal of this conversation off for another few hours.

Niko hangs up, and Eve sighs, slipping her phone back into her pocket. She breathes out. This feeling that’s like having extra ribs crowding out her lungs -- it’s not resentment, just an awkwardness; a discomfort that she usually presses down, now set free.

When she turns, Villanelle is leaning back against the closed door of the storage room, watching her serenely. Eve doesn’t bother asking whether she was eavesdropping; she clearly was, and Eve can’t bring herself to mind at all.

Eve counts the seconds.

One.

Two.

Three.

F--

“Your husband sounds lovely,” Villanelle lilts, sarcasm patterning every syllable.

There it is.

Eve hums. “Uh huh.” Villanelle looks far too entertained, far too smug, for Eve to encourage her.

“What? I was complimenting him.”

“You only heard my half of the conversation. You can’t really make any judgements about him,” Eve rebuts, half-heartedly.

“True,” she admits, “but you forget -- I can hear your tone, and see your shoulders go all scrunchy. Plus, even though I never displease women, I do know what displeased women sound like.”

“I’m sure you’ve pissed off more than a few women, Villanelle.” It’s hard to imagine that she hasn’t got a string of numbers not-called-back in her phone, hasn’t left a trail of unrequited infatuations wreaked across the world.

“Never.” She frames her chin with her hands and gazes upwards, as if memorising heaven. “I am an angel.”

Eve laughs, and it’s real. She wants to say it’s some kind of abstract articulation of this fresh burst exhaustion with Niko -- to say that she’s letting Villanelle under her skin as a form of revenge. Wouldn’t that be better, somehow, than admitting that she just hung up and already she’s not thinking of him at all? “Right.”

Villanelle smiles, cat-like. “Your boring husband, who you left and un-left --”

There’s a twist of something in how Villanelle bites out un-left that makes Eve feel like she ought to defend herself. “It was a mutual --”

“-- what does he do?”
“He’s a high school math teacher.”

Villanelle’s fingers tap an irregular pattern on her thigh. “How interesting,” she deadpans.

Eve reaches out and snags the storeroom key that’s dangling from Villanelle’s finger. “It’s dull as shit.” It had seemed grown-up when they first met, years ago -- Eve was struggling under student loans back then, was temping and backpacking right before she started working for Bill, and there had been something attractive about Niko’s stability, about how sure he was of his place and path in life. Eve had hoped, perhaps, that it would be catching, but all this time and it’s never taken to her.

Villanelle cackles. “Say, Eve, you know who does have an interesting job?”

Yeah, Eve knows where this is going. She cuts to the chase, to Villanelle’s own brand of intertwined bragging and flirtation. “You?”

“I was going to say you, Eve, but thank you. That’s very flattering.” Villanelle preens.

“Me?”

“Yes. Don’t you think this is interesting? Potential scandal, shitty former coworkers turning out to be shittier than you thought?”

“I mean -- I guess so.” She likes research, she always has, but her regular work is research watered down to its least-appealing form. It’s glorified data collection, not innovation.

And scandal is a stressful kind of good, but really, really, this intrigue is partly down to Villanelle: her capricious enthusiasm and penchant for theatrics.

They stop at Eve’s desk so she can stash the key away again, and Villanelle drops into Eve’s chair, spinning herself around in circles, only stopping to snatch the rubber band ball from by the keyboard -- Kenny and Hugo’s creation that she’d unofficially confiscated earlier in the day, after another poor shot knocked over her jar of pens one too many times.

Villanelle tosses it from hand to hand. “So you were going to dinner with your lame husband?”

“Yep.” Eve pops the p. She grabs the ball out of the air -- Villanelle makes a small, offended noise -- and takes it back over to Hugo’s desk, setting it by his mouse.

“Eve, what’s this?” Villanelle has kicked herself over to Elena’s desk, and is holding up a small scrap of paper. “Raspberry Milkshake, Lavender Vida Loca, Karma, Sea Vegetable. What?”

For a second, Eve’s surprised she doesn’t recognise any of them, and then it occurs that Villanelle’s idea of nice soap is probably less in the ten to twenty dollar range and more in the one to two hundred dollar range. “Just Elena being funny.” Eve hadn’t noticed that Elena had actually written her suggestions down in aid of her punchline.

“Funny?”

“Because when you -- doesn’t matter.” Eve extends her hand for the paper, but Villanelle stands up, holding it out of reach like a schoolyard bully. “Oh, seriously?”

“We should get dinner,” Villanelle says, out of the left field. “Seeing as you don’t have dinner plans anymore.”

“We’re working.” Well, right now, they’re having a faceoff over a list of Lush hand soaps, but
theoretically, they’re working.

“We can eat and work,” Villanelle points out. “You know there are people who will bring you food all the way from their restaurant if you ask nicely.”

“We should get McDonalds. UberEats will deliver from them now.”

Villanelle freezes, horrified, then -- “Oh, I see. You are teasing me.”

“Yep.”

“You will not be finding it so amusing if I have a heart attack.” Villanelle shudders, possibly at the thought of actually having a heart attack, but most likely at the prospect of ingesting something produced and sold for less than 99p.

“You’re in your twenties,” Eve says. “I think you’re pretty safe from clogged arteries.”

“Plus, I am in excellent shape,” Villanelle adds, standing up and smoothing her hands down her sides, as if to emphasise a point she proves just by existing. “We should have Thai. Do you like Thai?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. Tell me what these words mean,” she adds, tapping Elena’s paper again. Eve wonders if she’s capable of following a single thread in a conversation, ever, or if she just has to jump between them, leaping from one to the next and back again as if every sentence is crumbling under the weight of itself.

Eve considers pushing back, but really, what’s the harm if she knows? If not this, then Villanelle will find something different to wind her up about. “After you got us that coffee, Elena started joking about how you’d glitz-up our whole office if I asked,” Eve explains. “This is a list of suggested hand soaps for the bathroom, apparently. It’s just a --”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Asking.”

It takes Eve a second to realise what she means. “No,” she says. “I’m not.”

Villanelle shrugs. “Okay, then.”

She pulls out her phone and snaps a photo of the list.

“Wait, you’re not going to -- Elena would never let --”

Villanelle presses a finger to her own lips, and Eve, for a beat, images it pressed against hers instead. “This is for me. I want to remember to find out what a sea vegetable smells like. It sounds very strange.”

“Oh. Alright.”

“Don’t be disappointed, Eve --”

“I’m not,” Eve swears, almost blushing, but definitely not blushing.
“-- if you wish it to be for you, you just have to say so.”

“I don’t. Wish that, I mean.”

Villanelle nods, once. “Okey-dokey.” The colloquial turn of phrase is a little awkward, a little clunky grating against the silky richness of her accent, and Eve tries not to find it cute, because cute and Villanelle shouldn’t belong in the same thought, but now, irrevocably, they do. “Let’s go. We have a lot of work to do.”

Eve follows her back out to the hallway, wondering, stupidly, pointlessly, what Villanelle would have done if Eve had said yes, I’m asking. She couldn’t care less about the soaps, and Elena would tease her literally forever, but the part of her that always wants to know everything wants to know this.

The elevator is empty except for them.

Eve stands on the opposite side of the elevator to Villanelle -- some quite kind of insurance against closeness -- but all that does is let her look.

Every moment of this, between them, is so much unrelenting, overwhelming effort.

Effort, with Niko, is doing things.

Effort, with Villanelle, is not doing them.

Which is stupid, ridiculous, immature, reckless, idiotic, adjective-adjective-adjective, because Eve barely knows her and Villanelle is younger and richer and eternally unattached and god, why isn’t any of that enough to quiet the hum in her body?

Eve, maybe, has been staring a little too long, because Villanelle is smirking like she could make a career out of it. She opens her mouth, but Eve cuts her off.

“If you say, see something you like? right now, I swear --”

Villanelle tuts. “Eve, I am not so unoriginal. Besides, it is already established that you like me.”

It’s not gloating, for once; it’s a statement of fact. And that’s so much more irritating, because the only thing worse than Villanelle being right about Eve is Villanelle knowing she’s right about Eve.

“What, because we slept together one time?” Eve’s never brought it up so directly before, no vague allusions or subtext, and it’s asking for trouble.

“Six times,” Villanelle corrects. “And no. Not because of that.”

Eve’s jaw works. Six times. “Oh?”

“It’s established because it’s been a year, and you’re still thinking about it.”

About hotel rooms and hickeys and Veuve Clicquot.

Eve sucks in a breath. “Yeah, well, you’re still thinking about it, too,” she retorts quickly. Too quickly, because she’s a beat late to realising she should’ve just denied it, and run them around in tireless circles again rather than dragged them face to face with this.

The elevator doors open.
Neither of them moves.

Surely, surely, there should be other consultants here overtime, but there aren’t. It’s just them. Of course it is.

“Yes, I’m definitely still thinking about it,” Villanelle replies, easily, unashamedly. Maybe even honestly.

It’s heavy, it’s deadly, it’s a dozen kinds of too much and Eve just wants her to say it again and then --

“Are you glad you left that morning?” Villanelle asks, and it’s not curiosity in her voice, it’s something glassier: smooth for all the ways it could become sharp.

This, the is and was of them: it’s out of the abstract now.

Eve doesn’t reply. She doesn’t have an answer. She doesn’t know. Or --

 Doesn’t want the fallout of knowing.

The elevator doors, automatically, close again.

Villanelle is watching her, unwavering. “Because it is just the same as you told me back then. You still have a husband and a job you don’t love, you still are bored -- I can see it in you -- you still want more than you have --”

It’s not like that anymore, Eve thinks about telling her. Thinks about insisting: well, now I don’t feel those kinds of things. But she’s afraid if she says it aloud then she’ll be certain that it’s not true, and that certainty will pierce into her like nails growing in backwards.

So Eve doesn’t deny it, just glares. “You don’t get to say that to me.”

“Were you ever going to say it to yourself?”

The marbled heat of everything Eve spends her time trying not to think is raking at her ribs, and why is this so hard, why is it so goddamn hard, why can’t Eve just adore Niko and M-SIX and have never met Villanelle at all -- and Jesus, why can’t Eve even manage to properly wish for any of that? “Fuck you.”

“You already did.”

Eve blinks, and everything rushing in her trips and freezes. “That was pathetic,” she says. “That was, like, an eighth-grade comeback.”

“You seemed cross. I thought it would make you laugh.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“I can see that.”

Villanelle scans her face, like maybe if she holds out long enough, Eve will find it funny, after all.

And she kind of does.

Eve exhales softly. “Are you going to apologise for being a dick to me?”
Villanelle bites her lip, but Eve can’t read regret or remorse anywhere in her expression, so she’s not surprised by -- “No.”

“I stand by my fuck you , then.”

Villanelle nods. “Okay.”

"Alright.”

Eve breaks eye contact and jabs the door open button. “Come on. Asshole.”

“So sweary today, Eve,” Villanelle grins, bumping her shoulder lightly to Eve’s as she passes.

Eve could count the nerves there, now; is aware of each of them.

They make their way back to Villanelle’s office. Villanelle holds the door for her and inside there is their computers, looping screensavers; there is nine-tenths of an outrageous birthday cake. Villanelle throws herself dramatically back into her chair.

“Did you want dinner now or later?” she asks.

This dinner won’t be at a restaurant Eve picked herself, booked in advance; it’ll be in scattered cartons at a desk over paperwork, it’ll be after Eve just yelled at Villanelle in an elevator, it’ll be shoved in around commentary over errors in accounts.

And it’s really fucking annoying knowing that if they had planned this ahead of time, then Eve wouldn’t have forgotten, wouldn’t have had to set an push notification, or get a text or call to remind her.

“Now,” Eve says.

Villanelle grabs her phone and a second later, is placing an order in lightly-accented Thai, twirling her hair around her finger, her eyes on Eve the whole time -- and it’s not challenge, not seduction, just focus.

Eve looks away first.

You still want more than you have.

To the little voice that sounds like Villanelle in her head, Eve thinks: fuck you, too.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading <3

yes i really did shoehorn the title of the fic in here by any means necessary ;D
Two A.M.

Chapter Summary

Yam Nua, dickswabs, moonlight, jogging, and a visitor.

Chapter Notes

someone mentioned that a couple of people from killing eve twitter found this? hi killing eve twitter people! i found like three or four tweets about this story so thank you :D idk how to navigate twitter at all so unless it's tagged like #nidftkot or smth i'll never see it but anyway hello and thank you for reading

2) more nonsense re: plot. whatever. we all know why we're here and it's not to watch me trip over legal terms.

3) i promise it'll get sexier again soon but i feel it's unrealistic for eve to jump ship on a fifteen year marriage in like six days (seven or eight days, maybe...)

4) like i said it's very late here so sorry for any mistakes. my proofreading is exponentially worse after ten pm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Villanelle types faster when she’s actually interested in something, and Eve listens to the rapid clack-clack-clack of the mechanical keyboard while she wakes up her own laptop.

She opens her email, scrolling through her address book until she finds Angela’s contact information -- Eve met her at some mixer they’d had when Kellington first signed on as a client, and while they’re not exactly close friends, Angela will probably help her out on the quiet.

Eve drafts and redrafts her message a couple of times, trying to find a way to communicate urgency without letting it bleed over into pushiness and panic. She asks Angela for a copy of the original brief as casually as possible, claiming that it’s been eaten by the system -- routine paperwork error -- and adding that she’d really like to take care of it before her boss finds out about the mistake.

After she’s hit send, Eve can’t help compulsively refreshing her Outlook, as if Angela might magically reply within the minute. She won’t though, of course she won’t -- it’s Friday night, and everyone not managing some kind of crisis has definitely clocked off by now.

They won’t get a reply until tomorrow at the earliest, so they need to assume the worst, and keep moving based on that assumption.

Not that Villanelle minds “the worst” at all. Across from Eve, Villanelle’s eyes are lit by her screen, and she’s barely blinking as she works. Usually, Villanelle’s attention bounces all over the place -- from the task at hand to an anecdote to Eve to weekend plans to a complaint to Eve to gossip to Konstantin’s latest wardrobe blunder and then maybe, if they’re lucky, back to the task again. Right
now, though, Villanelle is almost meditative: her forehead is slightly creased with this tiny frown, and every so often, her lips move minutely as she reads.

Behind her, London is a new kind of awake. Through the windows, Eve can see the sprawling neon lights that go on and on forever, until the mingled glows form a honeyed horizon with the pitch of the sky.

It’s funny; Eve’s lived here for nearly two decades and there’s still so much of London she hasn’t seen. She’s blitzed through about half the tourist traps and found her way into dozens of out-of-the-way places, but this city is a matted garden of civilisation: the roots of cultures and customs, of age and modernity all grow together in concrete soil. It’s a hive of life, going forward and backward, and it must have so much more to offer than the same paths that Eve walks every day.

It occurs to Eve, then, as she catches her own reflection suspended in the glass, that she could just go. She has free weekends and evenings. There’s no reason she can’t change up her jogging route or wake up at dawn and spend her Saturdays and Sundays investigating different districts. There’s no reason she can’t ignore the signs and maps and just hop on the underground and see where she ends up.

No reason.

She’ll do it, she decides. Niko likes to relax at home on the weekends, worn out from the week, so he won’t want to come, and she won’t invite him to. She’ll pack a bag and wander around and see how far away she can get while still staying here. She’ll track down museums of weirdly specific shit, and try odd foods with mixed reviews, and buy a few things she’d ordinarily walk by.

Sure, it won’t be Nice, but Eve doesn’t need it to be Nice. So long as it’s new, and so long as it’s hers.

The breath in Eve’s lungs feels, at once, a little softer.

“You’re smiling a bit,” Villanelle observes. “You are not angry anymore?”

Eve starts. She’d been certain that Villanelle was long gone, buried in her own research. “Hmm? No. I’m not angry.” She never really was. Just frustrated. Just raw. Just flinching away from the sensation of both.

Villanelle overstepped, in the elevator. But Eve’s overstepped, too.

Eve is the sand and the lines she draws in the sand and Eve is the tide that washes them away.

This probably won’t be the last time they go too far to get closer.

“I’m good,” Eve tells her.

Villanelle gazes at her for another moment, and Eve wonders if she’s going to ask what Eve was thinking of. So often, Villanelle is grabbed by wracking fits of curiosity, which Eve recognises from within herself: that need, almost a lust, to know everything, to understand it.

But maybe this once Villanelle is okay with not knowing, or maybe it’s clear somehow that Eve wouldn’t be able to properly explain it. Said aloud, her resolution would seem too achingly simple to Villanelle, and too mundanely impossible to Eve.

“Alright,” Villanelle says, and lets her be.
Eve shakes off thoughts of London, and focuses on her laptop once more.

She slogs her way through all their usual resources, but it’s a nightmare trying to filter out every page and update and edit incorporating extra information about Kellington that wouldn’t have been available in early 2014. She skims economic journals and old stock projections from analysts, and scrubs through Kellington’s online presence, through their archived articles and announcements -- hell, even their Twitter.

Around seven, Villanelle disappears for a few minutes and returns with their dinner, which -- well, it’s Villanelle. Eve should’ve known better than to expect take-out cartons and plastic forks. She waltzes back into the office clutching an insulated tote, and proceeds to unpack real silverware, then at least five different dishes, all sealed neatly in pyrex containers.

“They do not usually do delivering,” Villanelle gloats. “But I am the exception.”

“How come?”

“Because I am a delight,” Villanelle informs her confidently. “And I helped the manager with a nuisance lawsuit a few years ago.”

The food is incredible. It’s also definitely leagues out of her price range, so Eve doesn’t ask the name of the restaurant, because she knows if she does then she won’t be able to resist going back.

They work while they eat, even though this is the kind of meal that’s an event in and of itself.

Eve’s midway through a Wall Street Journal writeup on Kellington when --

“Oh oh,” Villanelle says.

Eve’s first thought is that Villanelle has managed to spill something on her outfit -- which, can you even get stains out of silk?

But Villanelle’s staring at her monitor. At LinkedIn, of all websites.

“What?” Eve prompts. “What’s wrong?”

Villanelle swivels in her chair to face Eve, the container of Yam Nua -- which she’d shared a bit of sparingly and with great reluctance -- still clutched protectively to her chest. “Before Felix came to be douchey here, he worked at Wilcox-Hansen.”

Wilcox-Hansen. It’s familiar. “They’re a law firm, right?”

“A consulting firm, like us,” Villanelle clarifies, swooping her fork in aimless circles through the air. “Although we are much better. So, yes, lawyers, but a mix of other specialists, too.”

“Why’s that a big deal? Makes sense that they’d need a few researchers.” Even if Felix hadn’t been a particularly good one.

“Because Wilcox-Hansen was consulting with Kellington confidentially toward the end of 2013 -- most likely about their international expansion. My firm does this kind of work, too; it’s mostly checking for liabilities in proposals and action plans.” Villanelle huffs and rolls her eyes in a succinct portrayal of boredom. “It’s not so fun as dismantling scandals or arranging deals, but it does pay nicely.”

Eve runs this new fact over in her mind. “So if Felix was involved in Wilcox-Hansen’s work with
Kellington, and then told Dave about the expansion plans when he transferred to M-SIX --”

“Then it’s potentially damaging to M-SIX’s corporate image at best, and a direct violation of an NDA at worst,” Villanelle says. “And it won’t be easy to extricate M-SIX from Felix and paint it as unintentional. It looks bad, to hire him for this one case and then let him go again.”

“Let him go because of harassment,” Eve emphasises. “And misuse of company resources.”

“You know that the severance package he got will make at least one journalist happy to insinuate that the harassment accusations were a front, though,” Villanelle replies.

“Severance package?”

“Yes. It was in his HR file.”

Eve scoffs in disgust. Felix hadn’t been at M-SIX long enough to merit stealing a pocketful of office supplies, let alone to getting any kind of payout. She figures that this must be fairly common in Villanelle’s line of work, though -- shitty former employees getting a cheque in their exit interviews to keep them from taking to social media to soapbox. “Ugh. Dickswab.”

Villanelle’s eyebrow quirks, and there’s the flash of a smile. “I haven’t heard that before. I will have to use it.”

Eve loosens her grip on this moment, just for a second, and thinks of Bill. Bill -- the first person Eve had ever heard call someone a dickswab. It had been on her second or third day working for him, and she’d known right then, as he denounced the higher-ups over their swapped lunches, that they were going to be friends for a long time.

They weren’t, in the end. They had a few good years and then Bill was dead and Eve was set adrift anew.

Bill has been so thoroughly tangled with pain and gasping loss in her head that it’s abrupt -- abrupt but good -- to be able to remember him so fleetingly and brightly in this way. To recycle an insult of his and laugh, rather than feel a crushing weight cracking her ribs, rather than suffocating under the iron press of the memory of his face and voice and drunken glee at karaoke.

Eve clears her throat. “Having a misconduct termination in your job history doesn’t play great with future employers. Surely this hypothetical journalist would have to concede to that. Felix might’ve got severance pay, but it’ll have been a lot harder for him to get a good job when M-SIX won’t give him a reference. Us giving him the boot doesn’t exactly scream that we’re complicit.”

“It wouldn’t,” Villanelle agrees. “But M-SIX did give him a reference. He has them posted right here as a former employer, and see -- Kyle Bayer is listed as a character contact.”

She looks quite hopeful at the prospect.

For a heartbeat, Eve imagines it: dousing Felix in an icy cold-brew, preferably something so loaded with sugar that he’d be sticky for days. She pictures slushy milk running slick through his hair and soaking his shirt as he tries frantically to wipe it out of his eyes.
It’s a satisfying visual. No wonder Villanelle couldn’t resist doing it to Frank.

But Carolyn would be a force to be reckoned with if she were to find out Eve was dipping her toe in vigilante justice. Well, actually, she wouldn’t care, but if it were the kind of vigilante justice -- or revenge -- that in any way endangered M-SIX’s professional reputation, then she’d have Eve’s head for it.

“No,” she declines, regretfully.

“I will write the Sambrook address down, in case you change your mind,” Villanelle says, tugging the cap off a pen with her teeth and scrawling down where Felix’s new office can be found onto a post-it, and sticking it to the bevelling of her monitor.

It sits there innocently, transparently; a back-lit temptation in looping letters.

Eve digs a knuckle into her temple, and re-focuses. “Okay. So M-SIX hires Felix from Wilcox-Hansen, who are consulting for Kellington, and then Felix comes forward with information -- which is probably legally confidential -- that helps us lock down the Kellington account. And then M-SIX fires Felix for harassment, but he gets a parachute and a recommendation from upper management. That doesn’t look great.”

“Not great,” Villanelle echoes. “One might even say it looks bad.”

“This makes it seem like the severance was a chunk of change in exchange for the tipoff, but he really was fired for harassment. I made sure of it.”

“Maybe when Felix first went to Dave, he asked to be moved up the ranks, and the deal was for a promotion? But they had to change tack once you made sure Frank complained?” Villanelle suggests. “Promotions would’ve meant money and power, all tied up in one. The severance could’ve been a fallback.”

“No, surely they’d want to get him out of the company if it’d been illegal in any way. Tidy up, and all that.” Eve nods. “If it were me, and he’d made me that offer, I would’ve kept him around for three or four cases at least, and then quietly shuffled him along. Firing him straight after the case is sloppy. But HR must’ve really pushed after Frank complained, so they didn’t have a choice but to let him go early.”

“If it were me,” Villanelle says slowly, “I would promise him whatever he wanted and then once he has given the information to me, I would threaten to expose that he violated his NDA if he didn’t keep quiet. I would have my tipoff and he would be afraid of a lawsuit. Win-win.”

Eve blinks. “Well, that works too, I guess. I mean, it’s actually blackmail --”

“What’s a little blackmail between friends?”

“You’re a lawyer.”

“So I’d probably be very good at blackmail,” Villanelle concludes, ever-cheerful.

And yeah, Villanelle probably would be. Eve decides to leave that alone, lest this conversation get derailed into a debate over the finer points of corporate espionage. “Can you figure out if Felix actually did sign an NDA with Wilcox-Hansen?”

Villanelle shrugs. “I can reach out to a few contacts who used to work there. They will know what the firm’s standard practice is. But if I ask about this case directly, it’ll raise more questions with them
than it’ll answer for us.”

“Fantastic,” Eve drawls. “And I can’t find anything to prove Felix might’ve come by the American expansion information ethically.”

“I think it’s a safe bet that something shady --”

“Something shady? Nobody actually says that, unless they’re in a gritty old crime movie.”

Villanelle frowns, but it’s petulant. “Hey. I like those movies.”

“What’s your favourite? If it’s The Godfather, I’ll --”

“It’s The Godfather.”

“Oh my god, really?”

“No, Eve. Of course not.”

Eve can’t actually discern whether Villanelle is telling the truth, or if she’s changed her answer in the face of Eve’s incredulity. She regards her critically. “You like the it’s strictly business scene, don’t you?”

“Everybody likes that scene.”

“Have you ever said that to somebody? Like, while you were serving papers, or something? We won’t settle for less than five million. I’m sorry, it’s strictly --”

“I thought we were discussing your bosses maybe being corrupt, Eve,” Villanelle interrupts, all shiny aloofness once again, although it makes Eve feel amused rather than inadequate, now. “At this point, we can assume something shady -- yes, I’m going to say it -- has happened. It’s a matter of who knew, and why they did it.”

“Felix, Dave, and Kyle Bayer knew, at least,” Eve lists off. But the why of it is more opaque. Even before this merger with Peel, M-SIX was a Fortune 500 company, high-rolling an influential. Accepting, acting on and rewarding illicit information like Felix’s heads-up about the American expansion would have been a risk disproportionate to the reward. Yes, Kellington turned out to be an excellent client, but they have lots of excellent clients. “Carolyn didn’t know,” Eve adds.

“Are you sure?”

“Would she have set us digging in this if she thought she’d left herself vulnerable? She’s too smart for that.” Carolyn is cunning, but she’s also peaceful: a forcible, brutal kind of peaceful. Eve sincerely doubts that all of Carolyn’s business practices are up to code, but she’s deliberate and pragmatic, and she wouldn’t endanger M-SIX so carelessly, and then cover it up so sloppily.

Villanelle nods. “Okay. You call Carolyn, I call Konstantin, and we tell them about the stupid enterprises of your former coworkers,” she agrees, begrudging. “And we hope that they don’t take us off this just when it’s starting to get interesting.”

Eve heads out to the hallway to make her call, so that she and Villanelle won’t be background noise to each other.

“Hello, you’ve reached Carolyn Martens. I’d advise that you compose a concise email and I will respond to your concerns at my next opportunity. If this is an emergency, leave a message at the
Right. Second Friday of the month is the partners’ meeting, which according to Kenny, carries over until the early hours in a blending of arguments and entrees and liquor. No wonder she’s hit voicemail.

After the beep, Eve rambles her way through a short summary of their issue. “-- and I suppose this throws a lot of the rest of Dave’s practice into question, not to mention Bayer’s, and I’d --” she pauses. “I know it’s not really my job, or my place, after a certain point, but I’d really like to follow up on this. I’m great at research -- you know I am -- and this is just a different kind. You should have me chase this; I’ll come through.” Eve shoves her voice full of confidence she doesn’t necessarily feel, even though she doesn’t doubt a word she’s saying. This is her wheelhouse, her skillset; this is something beyond the basics that she can do, and Villanelle is right -- this is more exciting, more compelling than the inanity of her usual day-in, day-out.

She hangs up, and stares down at the call history on her phone screen:

Carolyn Martens [8:13pm] outgoing call

Niko [5:49pm] outgoing call

She sighs.

Villanelle is still talking a mile a minute to Konstantin when Eve heads back inside, so she’s careful, shutting the door behind her quietly. English words like “Kellington”, “M-SIX” and “Eve” stand out in the rhythmic roughness of a conversation held in Russian, and her brain fixes on them like islands in an ocean -- a place to rest.

Then at last Villanelle signs off; she drops her phone on her desk and stretches, cat-like. “We should go,” she says, quietly. “Tomorrow will be a very long day, I think.”

“Right.” Eve is crowded with information, with possibility, and the notion of shutting it off and just going to sleep is slack and distant. But she’s been at work for over twelve hours, and she hasn’t had coffee since midday, so this energy will probably wear off sometime on her trip home. “So, back here at nine?”

Villanelle shakes her head. “Not sure, yet. Might be earlier, might be later. Get some rest while you can. This is going to be the good part, Eve.” Villanelle is endlessly enthusiastic over things going wrong in a way she just isn’t over things going right. Eve wonders if that’s typical of people in her profession; if consulting lawyers want their projects to run smoothly, or if they’re all secretly dying, waiting desperately for a disaster to wrangle back into shape.

It’s not the going-wrong part that gives Eve a thrill, though, or the prospect of witnessing scandal, stoking drama, or the incentive of a bonus, like it is for Villanelle -- for Eve, the attraction is in the untangling itself. The pulling of a hundred threads, the gentle and persistent unweaving of them; the disassembling and interpreting. It’s not even the idea of ultimately understanding so much as it is the process of arriving there, and of having been the one to manage it.

Niko would say that’s her ego, and maybe it is. Hell, it definitely is.

But Villanelle wears ego like high heels, makes it an accessory and a weapon.

Maybe it’s a double-edged sword, but isn’t that better than no sword at all?

And Eve likes the weight of it in her hands, the sharpness of it under her fingers. She can’t find an
objection to being cut both ways.


Villanelle stays on the other side of the desk, doesn’t try to invade her space this time.

It’s not a moment that’s trying to be something else, so it has no right to leave any kind of impression.

“Goodnight, Eve,” Villanelle replies.

When at last Eve turns away, she’s surprised the night hasn’t ended, that dawn didn’t set in while they watched one another.

On the train, she turns on her playlist and tries to clear her head. When she gets home, Niko is still out at the bar with his friends; she isn’t really sure whether she expected him to be waiting for her or not, and she runs out of the energy to mind before she puzzles that all the way through.

She showers, absently, her thoughts chasing through an office she’s long-since left, and then curls up in bed.

In a handful of seconds, she’s asleep.

When Eve wakes, it’s still dark. Still the middle of the night, actually: the alarm clock tells her it’s just after two. Next to her, Niko is snoring heavily, which means he probably drank a bit too much; he doesn’t usually snore if he’s gone to sleep sober. She wonders if the noise of it is what woke her. More likely, she was shunted into consciousness by a dream she’s already mostly lost.

There’s a veil of moonlight over Niko’s face, drifting through the curtains that neither of them thought to fully close. The daylight-bright glow of it doesn’t seem to bother him. She can make out, in it, all the details of his face: the shading of his stubble; the strong lines of his eyebrows and moustache; the straightness of his nose; the curve of his cheeks; the floppy strands of his hair.

She watches him breathe.

She watches him breathe, and thinks, if Niko wakes up right now, I’ll tell him everything.

Everything, as in: stagnation and Villanelle and boredom and stress and Villanelle and adrenaline and Villanelle and so on and so on and so on.

But that’s not fair -- not just not fair, but completely impossible: she knows he’s knocked out, and if she’d really believed there was even the slightest chance that he’d stir, she’d never have promised herself that if.

“Are you happy?” she asks him, in the softest of voices.

He doesn’t reply, of course. Doesn’t even shift in his sleep.

“I don’t really think you are. I know we both thought that this is how we could be happy, but what if we were wrong?” she whispers.
Although that’s not what she means. Not really.

She means, “I think we were wrong, Niko.”

She means, “I think we keep being wrong every day and we don’t know how to stop.” A beat. “Maybe we do.”

If Niko rolls over, I’ll wake him up and say all that louder.

Niko doesn’t roll over.

Eve waits and waits and waits, counting breaths -- her own, not his.

Perhaps tiny coin-flip gambles with the universe won’t help her making decisions such as this. Perhaps it’s time she started making them by herself.

She settles back more comfortably against her pillows and reaches out, placing her palm in the center of Niko’s back, and feeling his heartbeat.

Would she miss this? she wonders. Would it hurt to crack the shell of it, and leave it in the past?

Obviously, it would. It would have to. Because if fifteen years isn’t enough to make something hurt, then Eve can’t fathom what possibly could be.

She remembers the moonlight on Villanelle’s face in the alley outside the club, and how the sight of her like that had been the very last thing to make up Eve’s mind. That light is over Niko now.

It is strange to think of it as the same moon.

She can’t compare Villanelle and Niko.

Villanelle, and what Eve feels with her, is a riotous, bursting immediacy: if Eve feels it all at once, she’ll burn up, but if she doesn’t, she’ll burn up with the needing to. It’s too much and too fast and too unrealistic to actually be something (isn’t it?), but in the snap of instant, in the deep bone-cut of an instant, something isn’t better just because it lasts.

And Niko. Kind, gorgeous, wonderful Niko. He doesn’t push or pull at her, he doesn’t make her heart thud, he doesn’t drive her crazy or up the wall or any of the ways a person can be driven. But that’s to be expected, because what she feels for him hasn’t been compressed into a few seconds or days or weeks -- it’s had to be spread thinly across fifteen years. Spread to be: sensible and measured and intimate; with all the sustainability of passion flatlined.

But --

How thin can you spread love before it’s not love, anymore?

This would all be easier if they could just hate one another. But they don’t. Eve isn’t sure whether she stopped being honest with him until he stopped seeing her, or if he reimagined her until honesty seemed ruinous, but it’s irrelevant. They’re so separate now, chronically apart, but that’s not hate. It’s unavoidable, maybe, but certainly not simple. This life they have together, it’s so much more than most people ever get --

-- and it’s still not enough, because deep down, underneath everything, Eve is greedy.

Eve is so fucking greedy that she’s going crazy. Eve is greedy for adventure and danger and a dazzling rush; for hunger and lust and fury; for newness and fear and discovery; for dizziness and
hazes and obsession.

Eve is greedy for greed, Eve wants to want, has to have something so badly it aches, and she does, she does, but it’s always the wrong thing.

And maybe if it was just the greed for greed’s sake, the wanting for wanting’s sake, the ache for the sake of aching, it would be manageable. But it’s not.

It’s not the verbs that surround Villanelle that capture Eve, threaten delicately to consume her. It’s Villanelle.

“I’m sorry,” Eve tells him, at normal volume, so maybe it’ll creep into Niko’s dreams and he’ll feel that she is. She is.

But not sorry enough to change anything.

So Eve closes her eyes and goes back to sleep.

The sun is just barely up when Eve wakes again, and even as she blinks, her two a.m. apology begins to feel less like a memory and more like a lucid dream.

She checks her phone, but there’s nothing yet from Carolyn or Villanelle. Still, Villanelle had seemed fairly sure they’d be working all day, and if Eve’s going to be sitting down and reading for ten hours, then she may as well get out for a bit while she can.

She scribbles a note for Niko, changes into her jogging gear, and leaves for a run.

The cold air is nice on her skin. Above her, the sky is grey. The sky is always grey, and whether that’s oppressive or comforting changes by the minute.

She varies her route a bit, avoiding the park and instead taking some of the smaller lanes and alleys. Rather than sloping laps only ten minutes from her house, she runs further and faster; slingshots away and at a good halfway point, turns back. It’s not exactly a grand journey, but it’s a gesture, an effort at expanding her world.

She’s been out about thirty minutes when her phone buzzes with a text, and then a second later, with a phone call. But it’s tucked securely away in the band strapped to her arm, the one that always takes her forever to get comfortable, so she ignores it. Niko will find his note in a minute -- she left it right by the toaster, front and centre -- and even if he doesn’t, she goes jogging every Saturday, albeit usually a bit later. He’ll figure it out.

Her phone rings once more, and then stops, and doesn’t ring again.

Twenty-five minutes later, she’s back on her block, five houses down from her own. There’s an unfamiliar black car parked on the sidewalk, which does give her pause; none of their neighbours really drive.

Eve walks by it a little slower than she needs to, curious. There’s a man behind the wheel, looking at his phone -- that resolves it, then. An out-of-towner who’s trying to navigate. He must be really lost if he’s wound up in their area, unless he’s visiting family.
He glances up and she waves as she passes. She’d stop and offer to help him, but honestly, Google Maps is far less likely to accidentally point him in the wrong direction than she is, and --

And she wants coffee more than she wants to talk to someone. So.

She pushes open their front door, and follows --

Voices.

Voices, plural?

Niko often puts on those irritatingly chipper breakfast radio shows, but that’s not what this is. The sound is wrong -- too present, not tinny and mastered -- and these aren’t the voices of random podcaster, but of Niko and --

What the fuck?

She steps out of the entryway, and there, in the kitchen, stands Niko. He’s by the sink, close to the coffee pot, looking more put-together than she’d expect for this early post-night-out, but also far more frazzled.

Assumedly because leaning against the counter, opposite him, is Villanelle, who is eyeing him appraisingly.

Eve gives herself a second for this to turn out to be weird, stress-induced hallucination. Then gives herself another second, just to be sure, because come on, please.

It’s barely seven, but Villanelle might’ve been awake for hours. She’s in a pressed white shirt, a tie, cream slacks, and a matching sweater she’s tied over her shoulders in the style of mid-nineties frat douchebags, although she more than pull it off.

Eve, in her workout clothes, feels underdressed. And distinctly on the back foot, despite technically having the home-field advantage.

Niko sees her first. “Hey, Eve,” he says, flatly. “This is Villanelle. Apparently, she’s a friend from work.”

“Yep,” Villanelle confirms, inclining her head. “Friend from work.”

“What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here. You can’t just come to people’s houses, Villanelle,” Eve rambles, unquestionably too fast, and objectively, rather rudely. “Especially so early. You have to at least call. You can’t just roll up whenever; you’ve got to text first. That’s how it works.”

There’s a pause. Niko is still blinking sleep out of his eyes, and Villanelle appears entertained. “I did both of those things.”

“What things?”

“Call. And text.” She points to Eve’s phone, where it’s strapped to her arm. “You did not pick up.”

Eve wrangles herself free of the stupid freaking sports equipment band, and it takes an embarrassingly long minute to extricate her phone from the mess of velcro and sheer plastic. That’s what she gets for buying the cheapest one she could find, she supposes.

She turns the screen on, and sure enough:
V [6:51am] your boss says meeting at her place ASAP 🌔. i have been sent to get you

V [6:51am] missed call

V [6:52am] missed call

“Why can’t you capitalise in your text messages?” Eve demands, because okay, yes, she’s wrong. But she can hardly say, _oh, I thought you were Niko, so I ignored your call_. Villanelle would probably appreciate that, but Niko’s standing right there, and it’s doubtful that he would.

It’s worth noting that Eve had her reasons, though. She’s not just a terrible wife.

Although -- she is.

Villanelle hums. “It shows I am relaxed. I am very friendly and approachable, Eve.”

“You aren’t.”

“No.” Then -- “My cousin Irina told me I texted like an old person, but I refuse to use abbreviations. So. Compromise.”

“You use emojis, though.”

“Everyone uses emojis, Eve.”

Eve shakes her head. This conversation is getting away from her. “Still. I could’ve been asleep. You can’t just -- _come over_ .”

Villanelle holds up her hands, surrender-style. “Carolyn asked me to. Gave me your address and everything. We are going to her house for a meeting, not M-SIX, and she says you do not know how to get there.”

“We’re going to her house?”

“Yes. We have to be there in half an hour. You should really get ready. Unless you want to go like that.” Villanelle’s gaze drags over her, and then over her again. “It works for you.”

Eve doesn’t flush. “I’ll go get changed,” she says. But she can’t move, because if she goes upstairs to shower, then that leaves Niko and Villanelle in the same room together.

It’s not that she really thinks Villanelle would bring up what happened a year ago, or what kind-of-almost-but-definitely-didn’t-happen last night. Villanelle won’t tell him. Will she? Would she?

She wouldn’t.

Surely.

So that’s not why. And it’s not that she’s embarrassed for Villanelle to meet Niko. Niko’s a great person -- selfless, compassionate; very normal, super great.

It’s just --

Villanelle might not need too long to realise how right she is, how everything she’d thrown at Eve has stuck because it’s true: that Niko is not boring, but he’s boring to Eve; that they aren’t suited, aren’t connected, aren’t any of the things they’re really supposed to be.
Then again, what can she say that Eve doesn’t already know? That Eve might maybe be ready to admit to knowing?

“Don’t worry, Eve. I play well with others,” Villanelle says. “I will be nice to the moustache.”

“He’s not just a moustache,” Eve protests, and Niko’s general bemusement gives way to slight offence in the face of her lacklustre response.

Whoops.

Well.

He’ll get over it.

Villanelle smiles. “Moustache stuck to a piece of fudge, then.”

“She has a strange sense of humour. She’s kidding,” Eve assures Niko.

“I’m not kidding,” Villanelle replies, just shy of nastily.

Eve fixes her with a glare.

Villanelle sighs, clears her throat, and does her chameleon trick, the one that worked so well on Liam -- she dials up the charm, and becomes this amorphous, personable creature. Seeing it the first time had been discomfiting, but this time, it’s impressive. But Eve also has this abstract, muted sense of loss at witnessing Villanelle fold her real self up and stow that self away.

“So, Niko,” Villanelle lilts pleasantly. “I hear you’re a maths teacher. That must be a really rewarding career.”

Niko is thrown by the sudden change of tone and body language, but he recovers within a beat or two. “Oh, yeah. The kids are really great. And --”

Villanelle shoots Eve a discreet wink -- which really isn’t that discreet -- as if politeness is some secret mission she’s suffering through.

Eve rolls her eyes internally, but she also trusts that Villanelle can keep up this veneer for fifteen minutes.

She darts up to the bathroom, has the world’s fastest shower, and then spends too long frantically ransacking her closet while she dries her hair. A meeting at Carolyn’s home means this Kellington thing is as big of a deal as Villanelle had hoped, which in turn means that there will probably be other important people there.

Eve settles on a nice blouse that she kind of hates -- she bought it to wear to her M-SIX job interview, and she hasn’t dragged it out since -- and pinstriped black pants that have a paper-sharp crease, on account of them spending most of their life in the wardrobe.

She throws a jacket over the top, a scarf, grabs her bag, and clatters back down the stairs.

“... so he was arrested,” Villanelle is saying, gesturing grandly.

Niko is staring at her, horrified, over the top of the coffee he’s clutching in both hands. “In the middle of the party?”

“Uh huh.”
“They didn’t wait for the kids to, I don’t know, go inside, or something?”

Villanelle shrugs. “It was educational.”

“Educational?” Niko sputters.

But, satisfied at the reaction to her story, Villanelle’s lost interest in him again, turned instead to Eve. “All set?”

“All set.”

Villanelle flashes her a grin, and heads back towards the front door. Eve follows after her.

“All set?”

“Eve! Wait. I made you a coffee.”

Niko’s holding out a keep-cup.

“We’ll get coffee on the way,” Villanelle tells her, certainly loud enough for Niko to hear.

But Niko’s made his way over to them now, and Eve’s stuck suspended in the hallway between the two of them, and this choice is starting to feel bigger than it really is.

“Uh, thanks. Have a good day,” Eve tells him, snagging the cup and giving a small wave -- the idea of kissing him, even on the cheek, seems alien with Villanelle here -- before heading out.

“My coffee would have been better,” Villanelle sniffs, regarding the keep-cup with biting judgement. “He poured it too soon for it to taste like anything.”

“You didn’t tell him to wait?”

“It would have been rude to criticise how a man makes coffee in his own home,” Villanelle points out, as they slip through the gate. “Besides, I don’t care how bad the coffee he drinks is.”

“I’m not going to drink it. We can get coffee. I just didn’t want to not take it,” Eve admits.

“Eve,” Villanelle says, clutching her chest, exaggerated. “You lied?”

Villanelle holds the car door open for her, but Eve walks around to the other side of the car and climbs in herself, partly because she hates sliding across seats, but mostly to be contrary. Villanelle just sighs, and gets in herself.

“I didn’t lie,” Eve replies, once the driver -- because Villanelle goes places with a driver, of course she does -- has pulled away from the curb. “I avoided confrontation.”

“By lying.”

“By avoiding.”

Villanelle holds her gaze. “Why avoid when head-on collisions are so much fun?”

“With Niko?”

Villanelle pauses -- then, for the first time, Eve thinks, she concedes. “True. I would like very much if you saved your head-on collisions for me.”

Chapter End Notes
thanks for reading everybody. i know this update was slow but it is at least long, so i hope that balances out :D
Eve’s not sure whether it’s standard practice or if the driver has just decided that he doesn’t want to hear where this conversation is going, but either way, he raises the partition, and Eve’s left staring at their reflections in the dark-tinted glass.

And it’s too early for willpower, for denial or restraint, so -- Eve allows herself a minute to just look at Villanelle; Villanelle, who is looking at her too.

The gentle pattern of new rain starts up against the windows, against the roof. The soft, distant sound of it mutes the rest of the world: London, outside, is just falling water, and the two of them stay dry.

In their reflection and in her periphery, Eve watches Villanelle turn her head so she’s facing Eve properly.

“This is a nice blouse,” Villanelle says, reaching out and trailing her finger over Eve’s collar.

“Thanks.”

Villanelle must’ve touched her perfume to her wrist, because in every breath Eve catches a trace of it -- something light and subtle and purposeful. She inhales through her nose and the scent coats her brain.
“Why do you wear it --” Her finger halts on the button at Eve’s collarbone. “-- if you don’t like it?”

Eve turns, then, too. “I never said I didn’t like it.”

Villanelle sighs. “As if the only way to know something is to hear someone say it,” she dismisses. “I can tell. You are not comfortable.”

“It’s just not my -- my style, I guess,” Eve says.

Villanelle widens her eyes. “You have a style?”

“Shut up.”

Villanelle doesn’t, but Eve hadn’t expected her to. “You know, if it makes you uncomfortable, you - -”

“Don’t make a joke about me taking it off,” Eve warns.

Villanelle scoffs in mock offense. “Do you think so little of me, Eve? That I would try and get you out of your clothes when we are on the way to see your boss? Who is currently also my boss?”

“Yes.”

There’s the flicker of a wicked grin. “Okay, I would, but only if you asked.”

Eve’s pulse picks up.

She imagines:

Grabbing Villanelle’s tie, twisting it around her hand and dragging her in, kissing her hard. Leaning closer, pressing Villanelle into the corner -- Villanelle smirking against her lips, saying, “If that’s how this is going to be,” and slipping her hands under Eve’s stupid uncomfortable blouse. No fumbling with Villanelle’s belt this time, just fast, deliberate movements while Villanelle’s mouth fixes at the hollow of her throat, sucks a mark that won’t fade.

And because it’s all in Eve’s head, there’s no driver to overhear them, no corners to take too fast, and no destination to ever arrive at.

“I’m not asking, to be clear,” Eve’s voice only wavers the slightest bit.

“I know.” Villanelle shrugs. “I don’t want to, anyway.”

“You don’t?” Eve asks, too quickly, before she can stop herself, can turn the thought around and shove it back into her bones instead of letting it out.

“Nope.” It’s casual, cheery, and Eve’s breath curls small in her lungs.

“Right.”

“We are only twenty minutes out from Carolyn’s place,” Villanelle explains. “I need a lot more than twenty minutes.”

There is a shiny darkness in Villanelle’s eyes, a sense of promise that suffocates in the best way, choking everything other than this into nothingness, leaving only Eve, and how much Eve wants her.

Which is --
Eve does want her.

She catches the hand that is still at her collar, and Villanelle’s palm is warm and smooth against hers, feels how Eve remembers it feeling -- this hand that has been at her hip, her neck, between her legs.

Moonlight and Niko and whispered apologies rush back to her, banish the overload of sense memory --

But it feels like a pause, not a stop.

Maybe there isn’t any stopping this. Only small, laboured delays, each more effort than the last.

Eve coughs. “Do you know what’s happening?” She tugs her seatbelt instead of Villanelle’s tie; a slack, lacklustre substitute. “I don’t think I’ve heard of meetings ever taking place at Carolyn’s house before.”

Villanelle’s jaw works for a second, and then she shrugs, leaning just slightly away again, giving Eve space she needs and doesn’t want. “The floors at M-SIX have ears.”

“What?”

“That is the expression, no? If this meeting happens at M-SIX, then word will reach the wrong person.”

“I think it’s the walls have ears, not the floors.”

“Whatever. It makes no sense. English proverbs are stupid,” Villanelle declares, scornful.

“All proverbs are stupid.” People should just say what they mean. “So Konstantin hasn’t given you anything?”

“No,” Villanelle admits. “But he has told me he is there. We are meeting him also.”

Eve doesn’t actually realise they’ve pulled over until Villanelle pops her door open. “Come on. Some of the best coffee in London is just up here,” Villanelle says, then -- “Unless you are staying here with your keep-cup.”

Eve doesn’t think she’s ever heard keep-cup said like a curse before. “I’m coming.”

She climbs out of the car, and follows Villanelle down the glorified alley to a tiny hole-in-the-wall shop -- there’s one small sign that says Coffee, but if Villanelle hadn’t stopped, then Eve would’ve walked right past it.

Inside, the counter is manned by an elderly woman, who jabs a finger at Villanelle, and spits out something in rapid French.

Villanelle rolls her eyes, and her own French when she replies is perfect, inflected with the hint of a Parisian accent.

The back and forth goes on, and Eve can’t tell whether the barista is pissed at Villanelle, or just a naturally aggressive speaker, and Villanelle’s widening grin doesn’t preclude either. But then Eve hears Konstantin’s name thrown between them, and she realises they must know each other -- really know each other -- in some shape or form.
After another minute or so, the conversation shifts, and there are enough familiar words for Eve to work out that Villanelle is placing her coffee order. “... et un --” She turns to Eve. “What would you like? And no picking something bad just to be clever.”

Eve can still taste the faint echo of green sherbet on the back of her tongue. “Mocha latte, please.” She glares at Villanelle, waiting for some comment on her unadventurous choice.

But Villanelle seems satisfied. “Et un café au moka.”

“Merci ?” Madame Tattevin prompts, as she scoops out some coffee grounds.

“De rien,” Villanelle says, smartly.

Eve elbows her. “Oh. Sorry. I have not introduced you.” Eve was actually elbowing her for being rude, but she’s curious, so she lets it slide. “This is Madame Tattevin,” Villanelle informs her in a stage whisper. “She is a million years old, and feeds off spite.”

Madame Tattevin bites back some jagged response that has Villanelle cackling. “I will tell my uncle you taught me those words,” she scolds. “He will be most upset that you have ruined my innocence.”

“Innocent?” Madame Tattevin echoes, incredulously. “Non, tu es despicable.”

“Oui,” Villanelle agrees. “Tu m'apprends tous les jours.”

“Je te deteste, Villanelle.”

“Je sais. Ça m'est égal.”

“Bien sûr. Et qui-est ta amie?”


Madame Tattevin waves away some steam that’s collected from the pot in front of her. “Seulement une collègue?” she pries, glancing between them.

“No talking about me in French,” Eve tells her flatly, knocking her arm again.

“You are no fun,” Villanelle complains, but lets it drop anyway.

Madame Tattevin sets three takeaway coffees down on the counter -- a tiny one that must be an espresso shot, and two larger ones. She hands one of them to Eve. “Pour vous.”

“Merci,” Eve says. It comes out sounding brutal and America, hard-edged, and Villanelle smiles at her brilliantly. “What do we owe?”

“Nothing. I have an account here. I’m paid up.”

“You pay in advance for coffee?”

Villanelle blinks. “It’s very good coffee.”

“Okay?”
Villanelle picks up the two remaining coffees, and snarks one last comment at Madame Tattevin, who this time only barks out a rusty laugh -- deep and chesty, from smoker’s lungs -- and shoos her away.

On the way back to the car, Villanelle knocks back some of her drink and hums, pleased, then offers it to Eve. “Try this. You might like it.”

“It’s not spiked with anything, is it?”

“Madame Tattevin will add whatever you want, but I would not ruin good coffee or good whiskey by mixing them,” Villanelle assures her. “Try it.”

So Eve does -- because her mocha latte is excellent; because nothing Villanelle has ever given her, from ice-cream to Gaeng Daeng, has been less than excellent.

Eve should probably put more effort into not enjoying all of it. On principle.

Or she should find something Villanelle will like that she hasn’t yet found herself, just to prove to her that she doesn’t know everything, can’t have everything; that Eve has her own mysteries, too.

Eve accepts the drink, takes a sip, hands it back. “Thanks.” Villanelle knows it’s good, so she doesn’t visibly react.

Villanelle’s lips quirk up anyway.

Once they’re settled in the car again and are back on the road, Villanelle says, “You know, not all proverbs are stupid, Eve.”

“You don’t really strike me as someone who listens to popular wisdom. Or any wisdom.”

“I am wise enough on my own, true. But in Russia, we have some very good ones.”

“Are any of them about letting your coworker finish their coffee before having a conversation with them?”

“Nope.”

“Maybe they should be.”

“Probably.” Villanelle takes another drink. Outside, the grey sky beyond the window silhouettes her, outlines her in a bright glow that’s only a trick of the eye. “Would you like to hear my favourite?”

Eve watches her for a moment, trying to determine where this is going. It seems harmless enough, but even if Eve hadn’t already known it, spending the last week in Villanelle’s company has more than confirmed that Villanelle’s incapable of harmless.

That, in the right circumstances -- the wrong circumstances -- Eve is equally incapable.

But it’s also confirmed that she doesn’t care much about changing that. “What’s your favourite?” she obliges.

“Appetit prikhodit vo vremya yedy,” Villanelle recites.

Sometimes, when Villanelle switches languages, there’s a spark in her, like she’s savouring the texture of fresh words. There’s none of that when she speaks Russian; it’s fluid and rhythmic, but it’s communication, and that’s all. It’s not relished, enjoyed; just used.
“And what does that mean?” Because Villanelle’s clearly waiting on her to ask.

“The appetite comes with eating.” Villanelle licks a stray fleck of coffee foam from the corner of her mouth. “Once you’ve had a taste of something, you realise you’ll never have enough of it.”

The takeaway cup is warm in Eve’s hands. “Or, the more you have, the more you want. No matter what you get, you go after more. You’re never happy.”

Like Eve, who has a job and a husband and a home, and who is still irresistibly drawn to the more. Eve, whose hunger erodes with an endless maw, unsated by stability.

Like Villanelle, who flirts with Eve because Eve can’t flirt back -- shouldn’t -- and who chases the wreckages of other peoples’ mistakes, resolving them and in doing so, growing bored of them too. Forever starving for the next shiny thing.

“You can want deeply without wanting widely,” Villanelle argues, frowning. “I love my career. I like to work. I think about it most of the time. But that doesn’t mean I want to do all jobs. I only want my job.” Eve can’t actually tell if she’s earnest or offended.

Her eyes are wide and clear and something in Eve’s chest swoops.

This is why proverbs are stupid. This is why people should just say what they mean.

Because what if she fucks up by reading into it too much; fucks up by not reading into it enough.

She opens her mouth, a reply curved into her soft palate.

And then the partition is whirring down, and they’re not alone again.

“I’ll drop you here,” the driver says. “Ms Martens’ place just up that way, five houses down, but there’s no parking there.”

“Thanks for the lift,” Eve tells him; she’s the first out of the car.

She needs to get it together. This meeting will decide whether she’s booted back to managing acquisitions, or if she follows this through.

Villanelle catches up with her quickly, falling into step beside her.

Carolyn’s house, when they reach it, is comfortable but unassuming, like her office -- the kind of understated luxury that’s almost impossible to afford in London.

It’s a lovely building, but Eve doubts that Carolyn spends much time here.

She reaches forward to press the doorbell, and then shifts back again, her shoulder brushing Villanelle’s.

It’s Konstantin who opens the door. “Ah, you’re here,” he greets. “Good timing. Is this mine?” He points to the small coffee in Villanelle’s hand.

“Yes,” she says. “It is a bribe.”

“I see.” He takes it, pries the lid off, and downs it in one gulp. “Come in.”

He leads them through to the kitchen where Carolyn is standing at the counter, sipping a cup of tea. It’s a precise movement, raising the cup from the saucer to her mouth; everything Carolyn does is

Eve nods. This probably isn’t the kind of thank you to which you’re welcome is an appropriate response.

Carolyn clears her throat. “We’re not a breakfast-eating household, I’m afraid, but I’ve sent Kenny out for some pastries. As you can see, there’s not much here, save for some toast.”

Eve is sure that Villanelle is going to interrupt, to say, actually, I’d like some toast — out of genuine hunger or a desire to be disruptive, or both. But beside her, Villanelle is silent, regarding Carolyn evenly, calculatingly.

She’s actually paying attention.

“It’s very early, so I won’t waste our time commending you on uncovering this error. Consider yourselves commended,” Carolyn instructs. “But I think you’re wrong.” It’s abrupt, direct, and certain.

And you’d have to be an idiot to argue with Carolyn, but --

But maybe the caffeine hasn’t kicked in yet, or Eve’s just willing to be an idiot, for this. “Carolyn, with all due respect, I don’t think we are,” Eve replies, slowly, but not really tentatively. She can feel Villanelle’s eyes on her. She always can. Whenever Villanelle focuses on her, Eve knows, because every single one of Villanelle’s actions is really an interaction; isn’t something that happens in isolation, but rather, between them. Bridging the gap. “I get that not having a copy of the original brief yet might make it seem like we’re jumping to conclusions, but you --”

“Eve.”

Eve goes quiet, but doesn’t look away from Carolyn.

Carolyn tilts her head, maybe amused, maybe exasperated, maybe nothing at all. “I admire your spirit, but it’s really not necessary to be so combative. I am not disputing the possibility of a touch of foul play in our acquisition of Kellington. In your voicemail, however, you suggested that Felix was hired, and came to Dave with information in exchange for a payout when he realised we were attempting to secure Kellington.”

“Uh. Yes?”

“You give too much credit to both your colleagues and to coincidence. It’s far more likely that Felix was deliberately recruited for his insider knowledge than it is that an opportunity was conveniently stumbled onto.”

Konstantin chuckles. “Nothing is ever convenient when it comes down to millions of dollars.”

In the corner of her eye, Eve can make out Villanelle pulling a face at him.

Carolyn sighs, lightly. “Quite. Which leaves us chewing more than I’d prefer to have bitten off. As you pointed out, Eve -- it’s very probable that this was not a one-off event.”

Before she can continue, the front door opens, and Kenny walks in. “Sorry it took so long. The regular bakery was closed.” He sets a large brown paper bag down on the bench, stilted. “Hey, Eve.”

“Hi, Kenny.”
Carolyn doesn’t keep talking, and after another moment, Kenny nods. “Right. Well, I’ll just take my almond croissant and be on my way.”

“That thank you, Kenny,” Carolyn says. “And please don’t share any with Martin, this time. The sugar isn’t good for him.”

Eve isn’t sure who Martin is, but she’s certainly not going to ask. The question is answered a moment later though, when there’s the laboured sound of a few rattling breaths, and the click of nails on the hardwood floor --

A pug.

Carolyn has a pug: a small, rounded creature with wild eyes.

It’s not ugly, but it’s not cute either, and Eve can’t decide whether this is utterly incongruous or weirdly fitting.

Kenny snags his pastry, and leaves a dusting of icing sugar on the hardwood floor as he leaves again, heading up the stairs, Martin labouring his way up each step behind Kenny.

Carolyn takes another sip of her tea. “I’ll be up-front, shall I? I hate to be a spoil-sport, but I must take Kellington off your hands.”

A flash of indignation goes off in Eve’s chest, curbed by something a shade more distrustful.

“Carolyn, it’s our --”

“It’s likely that this goes higher than Bayer, which makes it very much my concern, Eve. This has significant implications for the merger as a whole, and I refuse to act a passenger on this ship when I am the captain.”

Villanelle turns to Konstantin, having apparently concluded he’ll be the easier of the two to wheedle a concession out of. “You know how much I love rat-catching --”

“I’m not removing you from this entirely,” Carolyn interrupts, a measured kind of placating. “There is almost no chance that this is a one-off case of illegal tip trading. It may have been the first incident -- which I doubt -- but it certainly won’t have been the last. Bending rules is rather like drinking cheap liquor; it’s fast and it gets the job done, and if you’re not careful, you develop a taste for it.” Carolyn sets her teacup down. It makes a tiny clink, china against china. “So, what do you suggest?”

It’s not a question so much as it is a test. Carolyn knows the answer, but if Eve doesn’t, she ought to take an almond croissant and leave too -- that understanding is clear in the air between them.

“We check HR logs to see if any other departments have had any extremely short-term hires,” Eve answers. “Anyone who worked here for less than four months. Then we try and connect those with any notable gains for M-SIX.” Felix was a researcher, but it’s possible that there have been others -- accountants and technicians and developers who were made similar promises, who came and went and left information behind. “Not just new clients, but any kind of unprecedented advantage.”

Carolyn nods. “That seems a suitable approach. I’ll scale up your clearance, to make sure you can access whatever you need. This is your priority, until you’re otherwise assigned. I expect progress reports, in person, every three days. No emails. Phone calls only if necessary.”

Eve’s heart thuds. They’re getting this. Eve gets to blow off acquisitions and spend her days digging through M-SIX’s dirty secrets with Villanelle, dredging up the skeletons.
Villanelle slips her hands into her pockets. “And Peel?”

“What about Peel?” Carolyn responds.

“Does Peel get looped in? Technically, we consult for both of you.”

“I feel that this would concern Mr Peel unnecessarily. If this is an issue for you, then Eve, we can partner you with an in-house lawyer. One of our own.”

“Oh, it’s not an issue for me,” Villanelle interjects, casual but quick. “You are the real boss. Who hires us is Konstantin’s problem, not mine. But Peel does want updates from us.”

“I will take care of Peel,” Konstantin grunts. “For now.”

“So we’re all in agreement, then?” Carolyn’s tone is perforated with finality.

“Yes,” Villanelle says.

“Excellent. Pastry?”

Villanelle extracts a danish from the bag -- it’s a light golden brown, with the swell of an apricot half in the centre. “Eve?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” Villanelle reminds her, before taking a bite.

Eve’s pretty sure that Villanelle’s opinion on the most important meal of the day is entirely dependent on what time of day it currently is. “I’m fine.”

“More for me,” Konstantin shrugs, levering himself out of his chair and swiping the bag from the counter, prodding through it.

Carolyn observes them all with a precarious tolerance, as if they’re a museum exhibit she’s patiently making notes on, but she has many exhibits to critique before the end of the day, and she’ll be done with them shortly.

“Should we, uh, go?” Eve asks, after a moment punctuated only by Konstantin’s slightly too-loud chewing.

“We’re finished here,” Carolyn confirms. “I’ll have your clearance up by Monday. Forward me the copy of that brief as soon as your contact gets it to you, and then Kellington is off your radar.” Her mouth tightens. “And remember, Eve. Updates every three days.”

“Every three days,” Eve repeats back. “Thanks -- for the opportunity. And the pastries.” She waves, awkwardly, and they head for the door.

Villanelle drags her feet as they make their way back down the street. Eve knows she’s grumpy about being taken off Kellington, but she’s not sure whether she should try and distract Villanelle or leave her to brood.

“Carolyn has a stupid dog,” Villanelle declares, eventually, her strides uneven as she switches to trying to step on every single pavement crack.

“It’s also kind of stupid that he’s called Martin Martens.” Dogs don’t really get last names, but still.
“That is stupid.”

Eve bites her lip. “Don’t worry about Kellington. You heard her. We’ll find another scandal.”

Villanelle waggles her eyebrows. “We could always create one of our own,” she suggests, bumping her shoulder to Eve’s.

It’s not flirting, not really, not the way Villanelle flirts when she actually wants to mess Eve around. It’s just to get a reaction, of any kind.

Eve smiles. “I don’t think I’m scandal material.”

“That’s not a can-do attitude. Anyone can be scandal material,” Villanelle asserts. “Besides, I’ll teach you.”

“So you’re the expert, huh?”

When they reach the car, Villanelle doesn’t open the door, but leans back against it instead, facing Eve. “Where to now?” she asks.

Home, is the obvious response. Only Eve doesn’t want to go home. But they won’t have the clearance to really go digging until Monday, and their meeting is over. There’s nothing keeping them.

And yet.

Eve did say she wanted to explore London more. There’s no reason why she can’t bring Villanelle with her, for a few hours.

A few hours ends up stretching long into the evening. Eve doesn’t make it home until well after six, exhausted but full of a day unwasted. Awake and alive.

She can’t even remember everywhere they went or everything they saw, not exactly, but she does remember Villanelle’s fascination with a beautifully-wrought knife laid out in a private collection; does remember Villanelle tripping up a guy who cut her in line, almost definitely -- but not provably -- on purpose; does remember having to drag Villanelle out of a clothing store with price tags reminiscent of Eve’s college tuition.

Niko is on the couch, flicking idly through the channels, and he watches her as she shrugs out of her coat, hangs it up.

“How was it?” he asks. “Dinner is in the oven, by the way. Nearly ready.”

“Oh. Thanks,” she says. She drops her handbag on the counter and realises then that the keep-cup is still inside, full and sealed -- long gone cold. “I actually ate at -- work, but thanks.” Work. It’s a lie, not a lie; she doesn’t want to wade through it.

He nods, impassive. “So this is a really big deal, huh? At work.”

“Yeah.”
Eve stares down at the keep-cup. She can’t empty it now, not with him watching her, but she can’t leave it in there overnight. It’ll spoil.

Niko sighs. “I’ve booked a flight to Warsaw,” he tells her, calmly.

Eve rounds on him. “Are you serious? I told you I’m too swamped --”

He holds up a hand. “I know. I know. A flight for me. You’re being hauled out before eight a.m. on a Saturday to go to your boss’s house, Eve. I can see that you’re swamped,” he offers. There’s a twist of badness in her chest, because he thinks she’s been working hard all day, and she hasn’t. But -- the window to speak up passes, and he continues, and she doesn’t say anything. “I want to go see my parents, and I’m not going to wait around indefinitely until you’ve got some spare time.”

“Oh.” Eve pauses. “Well. That’s great. Go have fun. Tell them hi from me.”

Niko chuckles. “I’m not leaving now.”

“No, no, I know. I meant, like, in general. When you are there. Tell them hi.” Eve gestures vaguely.

“Sure.”

Eve’s a little relieved that this argument has been resolved so easily. She’s not sure why he couldn’t have reached this decision when she first objected to going, but whatever. “How long are you going for?”

“A week.”

“A week.” A week of Eve being home alone. No one waiting for her.

She hates that her first thought it to mention that to Villanelle.

_Hates_.

But can’t unthink it.

_Hates_.

But doesn’t hate it enough.

“You’ll have to take pictures for me,” Eve says, forging onwards, pushing the images in her head to the sidelines.

Niko raises an eyebrow. “Eve, it’s fine. I know you’re not the world’s biggest fan of Warsaw.”

“That obvious, huh?” Eve’s not actually sure she doesn’t like the city; it’s possible that she just doesn’t like her in-laws that much, and Niko’s parents and Warsaw have become inextricable in her mind.

He smiles, rueful. “Yeah. Don’t worry. I’ll get them to come visit us next time, rather than vice versa. They’ll like coming back to London for a bit. They haven’t been here much since they retired.”

“Right. Of course.” The bubbling energy Eve built into herself over the course of the day begins to fade in the face of regular life, reinforced.

“We should think about that, you know.”
“Them coming to visit?” Eve, personally, would rather not.

Niko shakes his head. “Whether we want to stay in London when we retire. I know you love this house, but in twenty years, it might be time to give another city a try.”

There is a small shelf of silence. A sliver of a minute that is simply a vacuum, that draws even the echo of breath out of the room and lets this moment play on repeat.

Twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years --

Eve feels slow concrete collecting in her bloodstream, setting her bones and turning every part of her still. She is a museum piece, marble-carved, titled --

Titled what? Woman (Stopped)?

Woman (Aching)?

Jeez, are exhibit names always so pretentious?

“Don’t look so horrified, Eve. I’m not suggesting we move to Warsaw,” Niko assures her. “And nowhere in France,” he adds, as an afterthought. “We don’t need to have any ideas now. But it’s something to keep in the back of your mind.”

In her mind:

Eve and Niko, in twenty years, in Brussels. Will he still have his moustache? Maybe he’s taken up photography as a hobby. Maybe she’s learning a third language. There are no careers to keep them far enough apart.

Eve and Niko, in twenty years, in Madrid. The humidity doesn’t agree with her hair. Niko takes to wearing short-sleeved polo shirts. Eve spends her time driving around but never really drives away, and Niko starts up another bridge club.

Eve and Niko, in twenty years, in Rotterdam. Niko teaches himself to bake. Eve buries herself in libraries and goes for long walks and never eats any of Niko’s biscuits or crumbles or pies.

God, she can feel all twenty of those years and then the twenty next, stacked on top of her, a migraine of time crushing her gently.

Eve takes a step backwards. “I need to go.”

He frowns. “Go? You just got here.”

“For a walk. I just -- sorry. I need -- I have to go.” Eve has never been more conscious in her life of the fact that words are just sounds, sounds that Eve is making with her throat, sounds that are the soft pull of muscle. She can barely string the syllables to meanings. They are barren little noises, limp and void.

She stumbles backwards, back out of the house, over to the sidewalk, and then --

Down the block.

Down the next block.

Up another street.
And another.
And another.

Eve runs until she’s run out of road and air, and she’s staring at a brick wall she doesn’t recognise.

She doesn’t know where she is, actually. She lost track of street signs and landmarks a hundred head-spins ago.

She presses her arms against the scrape of the mortar and doubles over, dragging in oxygen, and blinking too fast.

She’s going to be sick.

She’s not going to be sick.

She’s going to be sick.

She swallows.

She won’t cry. Eve doesn’t really -- *do that*. Niko’s voice wavers with emotion and his eyes glint when he’s upset, always so *in touch* with his feelings.

But Eve’s not wired that way. She doesn’t sob. She goes vacant. She gets stuck on this treadmill in her mind, and it’s not until something starts her out of it again that she realises she’s been washing the same plate for the last hour, or the bathwater has gone cold, or she’s reread the same page a dozen times.

She stares at an ant on the bitumen below, and watches it walk, minute and relentless. It crawls across the ground without hesitation or pause: forwards, forwards, forwards.

Where is it even going, she wonders.

Where the fuck is it going?

All that’s ahead of it is more bitumen, more unending damp. More grey.

What’s the fucking point in moving forwards if it’s not moving towards anything?

“Twenty years,” she says. Aloud, to taste.

Day to day, week to week, she can manage it. She sees Niko only some mornings, then in the evenings, and mostly they only talk while they eat dinner; the rest of the time they’re occupied in their own ways. It is unremarkable and soporific, but fine.

She’s more than capable of that. More than capable of one day.

She’s been living in individual days, like pills popped from a blister packet and swallowed dry, since before she met Villanelle.

Long before that.

But if she zooms out, if she patches the days together, weaves them from months to decades --

Twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years twenty years --
What is she doing?

She’s forty-one. The average life expectancy for a woman in the UK is just shy of eighty-one. Eighty-one. Eve smoked off and on in college, and she drinks a bit too much, but she’s got great genes so fuck it, she’ll make it to eight-one at least.


Forty. Fucking. Years.

In increments of one day, she could do it.

In increments of one day, she could do anything.

But --

No.

She can’t, can she? Inevitably, this dissatisfaction will give way to real resentment, will give way to something toxic.

Christ, Niko deserves so much better than someone slowly hating him for being lovely and loving and not right.

And.

And.

And Eve, Eve fucking deserves better, too.

She does.

She deserves --

She deserves weightlessness; freedom; the slack to explode and implode and build something of her own. To shuck this skin of dread that has had its teeth into her for so long.

It’s losing something. Unquestionably. Niko will never understand this, and she’ll lose him from her life, for good. She’ll lose having someone at home who cares whether she makes it to her bed at the end of the night. She’ll lose home-cooking and a date to events and arms wrapped around her when she needs closeness, warmth, humanness in proximity. She’ll be alone.

But that aloneness is a big wide space, somewhere in which she can be herself vastly, in which Eve can be Eve without caveats or edges or compromises. Eve, able to breathe all the way in. Able to breathe all the way out.

Her life will be entirely her own: for better or worse.

“Can I do this?” she asks the ant. “Really?”

Could it be this easy?

This hard?
The ant keeps walking, forward, forward.

Eve gives herself one long moment, and then she keeps walking too.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter we get rid of niko (big yeet) and the real fun begins

the burn is slower than I intended whoops but at last we have freed from the moustache
and our skates are on

sorry for my rusty french lmao and eve's view of warsaw does not reflect my own
**Angry-Sad-Confused**

Chapter Summary

Effort = Time + Energy, cheesecake, apartments, text-flirting (and eye-rolling emojis), Elena, and endings.

Chapter Notes

hey guys!

this fic has passed 57k, making it officially the longest fic i have ever uploaded to the internet (i used to have a different ao3 account). whoop!

thank you to carolynmartensjuul who made [this awesome art](#) of villaneve's ice-cream adventure in chapter six and to frmboise who made [an amazing aesthetic board](#) for this story on pinterest. you guys are the best!

thank you to [fizzydoctor](#) for beta'ing the first half of this chapter (and teaching me to code hyperlinks). mistakes/issues with the second half are all on me

NOTE if u are on ur computer, the flag emoji i used will not come up. sorry i tried lmao but it just won't work

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It’s not a blur. It doesn’t happen in a blur.

Instead, Eve experiences it all in smooth, distinct pieces.

She stands on the curb. The streetlights are on. The glow from the streetlights is gentle on her hands. She stares down at her hands.

She hails a cab. The cab pulls over. She gets in. She stares out the window, and counts houses as they pass. She loses count after one each time, so it’s just one, one, one, one, but there’s the feeling of counting all the same.

They arrive. Eve fishes her wallet from her jacket. She overpays. The notes feel overly textured and alien in her hands, and for a sliver of time, she misses American money with an unexpected sharpness.

She gets out of the cab, crosses the street, pushes through glass doors, and steps into an elevator. She rides the elevator to the third floor.

Each action is small and pearly, and Eve collects them, presses them together, like teeth in a mouth, ready to bite.

So this is what it feels like to change your life.
She walks up to the front desk, and the receptionist smiles at her. “Hi.” It’s not the usual young guy with the dyed grey streak in his hair. Maybe he’s out sick. Maybe he doesn’t work Saturdays. Their appointments are usually Thursdays.

“Hi.”

“Are you the six o’clock?”

“Sorry?”

“It’s alright that you’re late,” she assures Eve. “Just -- it’s best to call and give some notice next time, if possible. Keeps everything ticking along.”

Eve shakes her head. “I’m not the six o’clock. I don’t have an appointment.”

“Oh. Okay?”

“Does -- does he have a minute?”

The receptionist hesitates.

“I’m a regular here,” Eve adds. “I’ll pay and everything. I just -- I’m --”

“I’ll call through and ask,” the receptionist says. “Name?”

“Eve Polastri.”

She doesn’t hear what the receptionist says. She’s stuck on Polastri.

Polastri Polastri Polastri.

It had taken so long for it to feel like her name, not just something borrowed that she’d tried on for a minute, like one of Niko’s sweaters. But it’s on her driver’s license and her payroll stubs and --

“You can go through,” the receptionist tells her.

Eve reads her name tag. Mandy.

She wonders what Mandy’s last name is, and if she likes it.

“Thank you,” Eve says.

The hallway is long and short, long and short, long and short, and then she’s opening the door to the office and slipping inside.

Harrison is sitting in his chair -- this incredibly ordinary chair that is so essential to Eve’s mental image of him. In her head, he’s always sitting down just like this, one leg crossed over his knee, his slacks pulled by the action an inch or two, enough for her to see the stripes on his socks.

He’s reading over something he’s written on his notepad. Eve thinks of dozens of other sessions, of how often she’s been desperate to snatch that notepad out of his hands and see what he’s written about them: to be a voyeur of the grotesque mundanity of her own life, to be, for once, on the outside looking in.

That urge isn’t there anymore.
It doesn’t really matter what it says.

“Hello, Eve,” he greets. “Is Niko on his way?”

“No. Just me, today.”

“Would you like to sit down?”

Would she? “No. No, thanks.”

“Sure.”

She folds her arms over her chest, but -- Harrison’s going to think she’s feeling combative, or defensive, or something. No. She stretches them out by her side, but that’s worse, that’s performative of a calmness she’s clearly not feeling, and -

She folds them again, because they’re her fucking arms, so who cares. “How do you know it’s over? Really over?” she blurts out.

He watches her for a moment, and stays quiet. She can make out a tiny, warped Eve reflected in the lenses of his glasses. “How do you think you know?”

“Don’t do that. Don’t -- don’t make it a question. I know that’s how this goes, but -- just tell me, please?”

He sighs. “Eve --” He stops. “Please, sit.”

This time, she does.

Harrison flips his notebook closed. “I see a lot of couples, Eve. Some of those couples stay together, and some don’t. I can usually tell which way it’s going to go, after one or two sessions. Do you know how?”

“No.”

“If we don’t include couples dealing with adultery, or significant external pressures like a sick child or a layoff, then mostly, in the end, it comes down to effort. Time and energy. Whether partners are willing to make the effort to listen, to compromise, to debate, to be vulnerable,” he says, slow: each word selected carefully and threaded on.

“Are you saying I’m not trying hard enough?”

He tilts his head. “Eve, I’m not accusing you of being lazy. You’ve been coming here for a year, you’ve participated in sessions, you’ve done your homework. You’ve put in effort.”

“But you think not as much as I could’ve,” Eve infers. She’s phoned it in at bridge, and she wouldn’t let Niko come jogging with her, and she never told him about Villanelle --

“No, I think that all the time and energy in the world can’t make up the ground if you don’t want something.” He leans forward. “Do you want to be married to Niko, Eve?”

In her pocket, her phone buzzes.

She’s been out more than half an hour.

It’ll be Niko, wondering if she’s okay, wondering where she is, and what’s got into her.
He cares.

He loves her.

But --

(He loves him, too, in some ways. She loves his persistence and his warmth and his loyalty.)

But --

(They met through a mutual friend, at a party Eve had never meant to go to. She’d had other plans that had fallen through, and had gone by Teresa’s place last-minute, with a bottle of cheap wine and a grinned apology. Teresa had said, Hey, can you help Niko with the ice? And Eve had said, Which one’s Niko?)

But --

(He’ll never call her up again like this. He’ll never microwave her leftovers. He’ll never throw a too-heavy arm over her while she lies awake.)

And --


“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s it? Okay? Aren’t you supposed to give me a list of actionables and tell me to give it another go?”

“Would you like me to?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t.”

“Oh.” She pauses. “So, that’s it?”

He smiles. It’s not happy or sad. She’s never seen a smile quite like this, one so entirely in the middle, symptomatic of nothing but calm. “You’d made up your mind before you got here, Eve.”

She exhales, and smooths her palms down her slacks. Down the pinstripes that don’t suit her. She’s still wearing the blouse she hated this morning but doesn’t anymore, not with echoes of Villanelle’s fingerprints on the collar. “Yeah. I know.” She glances up. “Did you think we would?”

“Sorry?”

“Did you think Niko and I would be one of the couples who stayed together? When you first met us, I mean.”

“Is that relevant?”

Would it change anything?

Of course it wouldn’t change anything.

“I guess not.”
“Eve, whatever you do, it has to be for you. That’s my only advice,” he says. He adjusts his glasses, pushing them just slightly back up his nose. “You can’t control other people’s actions. Only your own.”

They sit in silence for a minute.

It’s peaceful.

Eve can’t control other people’s actions.

Eve can’t make Niko okay with her walking away. Eve can’t make Villanelle want her once she’s single and free and the chase is gone.

Eve can only make her choice and live with it.

It sounds difficult and daunting and a little bit awful at once, and impossible to regret.

“What -- what do I do now?” Eve asks. “How does this work?”

“Divorce?”

“Divorce,” she repeats.

Did she ever think she’d be here?

No. When she’d got engaged to Niko, got married to Niko, the future had seemed so opaque and nebulous; she’d never seen anything there. She hadn’t been one for fantasies, then.

Harrison nods. “Well, in England, the only grounds for divorce is what’s called an ‘irretrievable breakdown of marriage’. You prove that grounds for the court.”

“Right.”

“You might be able to file based on unreasonable behaviour, if you feel you can justify that. Alternatively, you can move out, and then in two years, you can file for a divorce citing separation. Considering you and Niko don’t have any children, or particularly complicated assets, it should be a relatively simple process.”

Simple, Eve thinks.

Harrison adds, “It’s certainly manageable without a lawyer if you do your own research, but many people do hire an attorney to mediate.”

“I’m good at research,” Eve tells him.

And she is.

On Harrison’s desk, the phone rings. “That’ll be Mandy. My seven o’clock must be here.”

Eve hopes they’re a nice couple. She hopes they’re one of the ones who stays together; that they only need a few actionables from Harrison to be happy and connected and in love.

She hopes that for them, and just the same, not for herself.

Maybe it’s over, Eve thinks, when you’re asking yourself if it’s over.
“Thanks for your time,” Eve says. “Not just right now. This last year. You’ve helped me a lot.”

“That’s excellent to hear, Eve.”

They stand. They shake hands.

It’s the end of something.

She calls Niko back as soon as she leaves the building.

He picks up on the first ring. “What the hell, Eve?”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I was --”

Was what? Having a crisis in an alleyway? Visiting our couples’ counsellor to get advice about divorcing you?

Eve’s not talking to him about this over the phone. She’s not talking to him about this today.

“I was --”

“Eve?”

“I thought I’d left myself logged on at work.”

“What?”

“I thought hadn’t logged out of my account on my work computer. And I had a bunch of secure files open, and I’d get in so much trouble if someone found them --” It’s the world’s worst excuse, but if she rambles enough, then maybe Niko will just accept it. “-- and I knew I wouldn’t be able to relax if there was a possibility that I’d --”

And he does. “Is it all sorted now?”

“Yeah. I’m on my way back.”

“Okay. You could’ve just told me what was wrong instead of barging out.”

“Yeah, that was a bit dramatic.”

“Just a bit.” He laughs, quiet.

She laughs too. Suddenly, it’s easy. Suddenly, him needing to know these things isn’t overbearing. It’s not pressing her down into some tiny corner of the world, because --

All the walls are gone.

Eve isn’t a person trapped, anymore. She’s a person standing someplace, and there are no walls, and there is light coming in.

“I’ll bring home some dessert, alright? What are you in the mood for?”

“I thought you ate at work.”

“I did,” she agrees. “But I can eat again with you.”

“Cheesecake, then.”
“Okay. Cheesecake it is.”

There’s some part of Eve that wishes they’ll stay friends after all this, if only because he’s been in her life for so long that she can’t imagine him completely gone.

But how could they be friends?

How could they sit across from each other ten years from now and catch up over cheesecake, while understanding in a softly gutting way that the better they knew each other the less they liked each other, that they don’t have anything in common except a particular overlap of place and time?

She’d rather miss him than have him, and that’s not love.

“I’ll see you soon,” she says.

---

Eve is too wired to sleep. Her body and brain are a mess of adrenaline and worry and joy and exhaustion and excitement, and it’s all too much to process, to break down into bite-size pieces and swallow.

Niko has been out since nine, barely moving at all in the last hour. He’s stealing blankets and she lets him, this once, now that they’re nearly at the end. The finish line is in sight, and Eve at once has the energy to run that last hundred-yard stretch. Let him have the blankets, let him play alt-folk; Eve will soon have a duvet and a radio of her own.

It will be strange, sleeping with no one beside her.

But Eve will get used to it.

Her phone buzzes on the nightstand, and Eve reaches for it too fast, makes herself slow down once her fingers touch the case. It’s probably Elena -- maybe her date went badly, or really well. Or it’s Kenny, wondering if he really has to digitise the Q2 files before Friday next. Or maybe it’s a half-price promotion alert from that pizza place she gave her number to, so that she could get a discount that one time.

It’s almost definitely not --

But it is.

V [10:15pm] did you know that london is 1572 km2
V [10:15pm] *606 sq miles

The glow of her phone screen is burn-bright in the darkness, and Eve can’t bring herself to care at all.

Me [10:17pm] I know what square kilometers are.
Me [10:17pm] Thanks for the fun fact?

V [10:18pm] i’m just saying
V [10:18pm] that’s very big
Eve’s not entirely sure where she’s going with this, but Villanelle is one of those people with whom it’s always going *somewhere*. Oddly enough, Carolyn and Villanelle are similar in that way -- everything they do is deliberate. In Carolyn’s case, that deliberate approach is the result of needing to be in control, of being mentally twenty steps ahead and gently steering the ship. For Villanelle, though, it’s about desire, and it’s about focus; every action will have a reaction, and Villanelle stumbles down a flight of impulses until she arrives at what she wants -- whatever she wants.

Me [10:20pm] I guess it is

V [10:21pm] too big to see much of in one day
V [10:21pm] it would take lots and lots of days

Me [10:21pm] Probably

V [10:21pm] Eve
V [10:22pm] that was an invitation not an observation

V [10:22pm] Eveeeee

Eve smiles. At her phone. It’s just Eve, alone in the dark, smiling at her screen like an idiot.

She kills the smile, because --

It’s asking for trouble, in that way small private thrills sometimes are.

Me [10:24pm] Hugo says it’s not cool to double-text

V [10:24pm] i want to talk to you
V [10:24pm] i can be cool in my own time

Me [10:25pm] Where would you like to go?
Me [10:25pm] In London

V [10:25pm] back to that boutique firstly
V [10:25pm] 1400£ is not an unreasonable amount for a dress

Me [10:26pm] It is

V [10:26pm] isn’t

Me [10:26pm] It is

V [10:26pm] isn’t

Eve doesn’t use emojis often, but if she texts back *It is* again, this could go on indefinitely.

But she’s also not going to concede that fourteen hundred pounds is an appropriate price tag for a single article of clothing, because unless it’s patterned with next week’s winning lottery numbers, it’s a ridiculous sum.

Me [10:27pm]

V [10:27pm] ouch Eve
V [10:27pm] you have hurt my feelings
Eve can imagine Villanelle’s smirk.

Too easily, actually.

How much time does she spend looking at Villanelle’s mouth?

Me [10:28pm] Is that so?

V [10:28pm] yes
V [10:28pm] deeply
V [10:28pm] you could kiss it better though

Despite everything, there’s a warmth billowing diaphanous in Eve’s chest. It’s idiotic and ridiculous and undeniably there, and --

Eve gives herself a moment, just a moment, to close her eyes and think of it, blurring memory and fantasy into a kiss into another kiss another kiss another kiss another kiss.

Then she opens her eyes.

Me [10:29pm] Isn’t kissing it better for when you’re actually hurt?

V [10:29pm] are you saying you have to hurt me before you’ll kiss me?
V [10:29pm] kinky

Me [10:30pm] That is NOT what I said

V [10:30pm] oh okay
V [10:31pm] so you’ll kiss me without hurting me
V [10:31pm] ?

Eve wonders briefly if Villanelle has ever in her life had a kiss that hurt her, if Villanelle knows what it’s like for a kiss to be undercut by its own ending.

But no -- every one of Villanelle’s kisses has a life of its own, a fierce wildness that doesn’t live in other people, but in Villanelle herself, always ready for the next, the next, the next.

Eve clears her throat.

Me [10:32pm] Where else in London do you want to go?

V [10:33pm] there’s this place on the corner of De Prewet Av and Helm St

Eve copy-pastes the address into Google, and flicks through a dozen photos of immaculate accommodations.

For some reason, in Eve’s head, Villanelle was still living at the hotel where they’d gone that first night; Villanelle was texting her from that same bed.

Me [10:35pm] I looked it up
Me [10:35pm] That’s a luxury apartment building
Me [10:36pm] It doesn’t count as sightseeing if we stay in one room the whole time

Eve pictures it and doesn’t picture it.
Niko is asleep beside her. He’s not snoring tonight.

The quiet makes it easy to forget him entirely.

Staying in one room with Villanelle is --

Eve wonders how long she’d last. If it would be just outside, or up against the door, or in the hallway that she would cave and kiss Villanelle.

V [10:36pm] rude
V [10:36pm] i have more than one room
V [10:37pm] is it sightseeing if i see you in all of them?

Eve really does roll her eyes this time. If Villanelle were in front of her, were kneeling next to the bed with her hand gently resting on Eve’s hip through the covers as she whispered these things -- it would stutter Eve’s heartbeat long before the words themselves could be processed.

Villanelle being on the other side of the city spares Eve that. Villanelle is less suave, more cheesy, but the really stupid thing is that it’s working in an entirely different way. This moment of small, dumb fun messes with her just as much as those aching instances of proximity do, when Villanelle leans into that space between too close and not close enough.

Me [10:38pm] Just so you know you’re much better at flirting in person than over text.

V [10:39pm] come over and i’ll flirt with you in person then

Eve --

She’s not going to get out of bed and go, of course she’s not, of course she’s not, but there’s the skin of a second where she very nearly almost does.


V [10:47pm] goodnight, Eve

Eve wakes up before her alarm. She goes for a jog. She comes home and drinks coffee and eats leftover cheesecake and calls it breakfast.

She spends the morning with her laptop on the couch, her back to the wall where Niko can’t see over her shoulder, slogging through everything she can find on divorce law in the UK. Eventually, she concludes that separation for two years is probably the path of least resistance. Claiming unreasonable behaviour seems excessive, especially considering she’s the petitioner, and Niko hasn’t wronged her in any way; the only truth she can tell the court is the same truth she’d told Harrison:

I don’t want to be married to Niko.

So Eve closes her tabs -- tries not to see law and think Villanelle, because it’s beyond pathetic to associate an entire societal institution with one woman.

Besides, the real divorce paperwork won’t be a problem for a while yet.
Instead, she starts looking for apartment listings. She’s the one filing; she’s not going to kick Niko out of the house. They’ll probably sell it, when it comes to dividing everything up neatly, but for now -- she’ll be the one to leave.

She scrolls through options, and adjusts the search parameters to pet-free. Niko’s keeping the chicken, whether he wants to or not.

It’s also got to be ready to let soon -- Niko is flying out to Warsaw Wednesday evening, and she needs to have this conversation before he goes. Then he’ll have time away from her to process, will have the support of his parents, won’t have to face work while he comes to terms with this shift in their world.

It takes her hours, trying to track down an apartment that’s actually habitable, that’s near the underground but not so near that it’s horribly expensive, that’s not a million miles away from anything interesting.

The place she settles on, in the end, is a bit shit. It’s cramped and in a neighbourhood that she knows will be too loud too late most nights, but Eve doesn’t need a lot of space, and she’s a sound sleeper.

She contacts the landlord and sets up a time after work Monday to view the apartment. There’s only a short-term lease available -- three months -- but that suits Eve just fine. In three months, she can take her sweet time to find someplace perfect, but right now --

Right now, all that matters is that it can be hers.

She’s said it aloud -- to Harrison, to herself -- but telling Elena is what makes it real.

They meet at a cafe two blocks down from M-SIX, just before work. It’s early, unreasonably early, but Eve had sent one succinct, direct text message, punctuated with a please, and Elena had said yes immediately, like she knew.

They find a table in a back corner, and it’s quiet enough, but not so quiet that the silence becomes a spotlight, a waiting maw that must be filled with words.

Elena regards her evenly over the top of her hot chocolate. “So.”

“So.”

“You wanna tell me what’s going on, or am I prying it out of you?” she asks, cheerful. “You know how I love to pry, but we do have to be at work in half an hour, so we may have to skip to the part where you tell me.”

“Alright,” Eve concedes, dragging a hand through her too-messy hair; making it presentable has been a losing battle all morning. “We can skip to that part.”

“Excellent.” Elena grins. “First, though -- is it juicy? I have to be in the right headspace.”

“It’s -- big.”

Elena sets her drinks down and drops her chin into her palm, and gives Eve her full attention, eyes gleaming, unblinking. “Alright, I’m ready. Lay it on me.”
Eve takes a breath. Holds it. Lets it go.

“Eve?”

“I’m leaving Niko,” she says. “I’m done.”

Elena’s expression flickers over with something, and then it’s gone. The edge of her lips tugs up, but just as quickly, just as reflexively, she’s impassive again. “Are you sure?”

“Am I sure?”

Elena reaches across the table and grabs Eve’s hands in her own. “Babe, I’m not questioning your life decisions. But last time I kind of ran my mouth a bit, and I’d rather not say things we’ll both have to pretend I didn’t say if --”

“This is for real,” Eve replies; definitive, decisive. “I just -- I can’t keep doing this. This can’t be my life, you know?”

Eve’s heard a thousand times that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result, but maybe that’s the definition of mundanity, too. Repeating patterns and problems and people and hoping that against the odds, something will make you feel awake.

“Alright, then.” Elena nods, once. “I’m proud of you.”

And it’s not like a montage passes between them, and they each think of the lunch breaks spent venting; of gritted honesty at holiday parties after too much liquor; of all of Eve’s unnecessary overtime --

But maybe that’s because these moments have become facts, have become a part of Eve and Elena’s understanding of her, so this finality feels less like an ending and more an inevitable part of a whole.

“Thanks.”

Eve is proud of herself, too.

“Is it -- official? Like, do you need a couch to crash on? Because mine kinda sucks but it’s all yours.”

“No, we haven’t had that conversation yet. But I’m sorting things out.” She’d done a cursory lap around the house this morning, mentally trying to split their stuff into hers or Niko’s; she’s acquired fewer things in their life together than she would’ve thought. “I’m seeing an apartment after work.”

Elena oohs. “Want some company?”

“Yeah. That’d be -- that’d be nice.” Eve releases Elena’s hands to raise her own coffee to her lips, and takes a long sip. “I feel weird,” she confesses.

There’s a pause.

“ Weird how?”

“I thought it would be worse.”

When Niko left last year, by this time, Eve was looking over at a sleeping Villanelle, slowly painting herself in resignation and letting it weigh her down. Going back to Niko had seemed pragmatic, responsible -- unavoidable, even. So she’d gone.
She'd gone, certain of that worseness, but here she is.

And she's fine.

Eve sighs. “What does it say about me that I can leave a good person after fifteen years of marriage and just feel relieved?”

“It says that they were the wrong person for you,” Elena reaffirms, encouraging. “And that you weren’t where you were meant to be.”

“I think I’m meant to be at a bar.”

“It’s eight a.m.,” Elena reminds her, “but hold that thought. Oh, we totally have to go out. I want to see you in action.”

“In action?”

“Yeah. Don’t think I’ve forgotten you turning up on my doorstep post-one night stand way back when. You can get it,” Elena crows, flicking a sugar packet at Eve and winking, gleeful.

“Okay, she hit on me.”

“Do I finally get to hear this story, now?”

“No.”

“You’re going to tell me someday, you know.”

“I know.” It’s a matter of time and wine. “But not yet.”

Villanelle is wearing a flowing red outfit that seems specifically designed to drop jaws; it’s probably more suited to a formal event than another day at the office, but Eve can’t bring herself to mind. Like, at all.

She wonders, as they comb through HR records, how extensive Villanelle’s wardrobe is, and how long Eve would have to know her before seeing the same outfit twice.

(Months? Years?)

She’d like to see all of Villanelle’s clothes again, but that’s less do with the clothes and more to do with --

Well.

The day goes by quickly-slowly: quickly, when they’re jumping from file to file, flagging suspicious spikes in M-SIX’s fortune, reading up on hirings and firings; slowly, when Villanelle stretches, or leans closer, or holds Eve’s gaze a beat too long.

It’s eight hours of sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, fingers brushing as they pass pages between them, and Eve catalogues each touch the way she catalogues the names and dates they find. She’s not quite sure when they abandoned working opposite each other, or whether she was the one to move or
Villanelle was, but regardless, here they are.

And then it’s after five, and Elena’s texting that she’s ready when Eve is, and Eve starts packing up.

“You could stay,” Villanelle says. “A bit later. We could keep working. Have dinner.” She grins. “You know I have excellent taste.”

“I think we covered enough ground. And I’ve got to go.”

Villanelle’s eyebrow quirks for a second. “Home? You weren’t in such a rush on the weekend.” Weekend is drawn out, not sing-song or teasing, but two hard syllables: a word that is a stand-in for something else.

For coffee and walking and Eve grabbing Villanelle’s hand and forcibly tugging her away from that dress in that shop, and almost forgetting to let go.

Eve swallows. “No. I’m going out.” She could say she’s looking for a new apartment. She could say she’s leaving her husband. But she doesn’t. “I’ve got a thing. With Elena.”

She doesn’t because --

Because --

Because soon, she isn’t going to be in a relationship anymore, and that leaves the terrifying possibility that Villanelle will get bored once Eve has lost the allure of the forbidden.

She’d rather not know.

Not yet.

“A thing with Elena?” Villanelle’s eyes have narrowed slightly.

“Yeah.” Eve slings her bag over her shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

“Mm.”

Eve pauses at the door, shifting her weight, needing to leave but not quite ready to. “You look really nice today,” she says, before her brain can list the reasons it’s a bad idea.

Villanelle preens. Then -- “I am always gorgeous,” she asserts, all unwavering confidence.

“Uh huh.”

“You are gorgeous as well,” Villanelle adds. “Even more so in here. This lighting is very good for you. You should stay.”

Eve smiles, and shakes her head, but humours her a little just the same. “The sun is setting. The light will change.”

She waves -- small, awkward, a sudden physical compulsion that’s just one shiver of a way to draw this out another second -- and then she steps out into the hall and closes the door behind her.
The apartment is fine.

Elena tells her the walls are too thin and never to move in below people with a baby -- “Seriously, Eve, they’re not cute enough to compensate for all the noise they make.” -- and that she’ll probably get mugged on her way home.

But Eve likes the wide windows and there's enough space to fit everything she really needs, and she just has to hand over her first month of rent, last month, and sign.

She signs.

When Eve tells Niko she’s leaving, it goes like this: he is angry, he is sad, he is confused.

Angry, sad, confused.

On repeat.

Last time the end had been signalled by a slammed door, but this time, it drags on and on, as if Eve’s turned off the ventilator and is listening to hours of rattling breaths as she waits for their marriage to finally die.

The *what* of it is the surprisingly easy to get through. Later, she won’t remember if the band-aid rip is “We should get divorced”, or “I’m leaving you”, or “We can’t be married anymore”, but it doesn’t matter. Not really.

*When* is now. *When* is between them getting home from work on Wednesday and him heading out to make his flight, so they don’t have to become a couch-sleeping cliche. You slice, you don’t tear, if you want a clean break.

They spend a while on the *why*. That takes them through angry, sad, confused at least four times over. There’s yelling. There’s softness. There’s explanations and defenses and raw frustration that Eve smooths over and back into practiced patience.

Once that’s through, there’s the *how*. No, she’s not kicking him out. Actually, she has somewhere to go. Yes, she’ll be gone before he gets back. Yes, they’ll be amicable. No, they won’t need lawyers.

Yes, two years, and then they can make it official.

(Angry-sad-confused angry-sad-confused angry-sad-confused angry-sad-confused.)

And then they get to the *who*.

To the, “Is there somebody else?”

*Yes*, she nearly screams. The *me who goes to Nice and sleeps with strangers in clubs and doesn’t listen to alt-folk and never plays bridge and eats ready-meals and watches horror movies in the cinema and wears her hair down*.

*That Eve. I’m leaving you for her.*

And if that Eve ever happens to sleep with that same stranger again -- that stranger who isn’t just a name and a face but a real person now who takes up so much space in Eve’s mind -- then that’s none
of Niko’s business.

Villanelle is Someone, in a capital S way.

But she’s not someone else.

Villanelle is too bold and too much and too whole and too present to ever bear a suffix like else.

But Niko won’t understand that, not any of it, so she says, “No. Nobody. This is about us, Niko. God, are you really happy? Like this? With me?”

He doesn’t reply. His jaw works, and he stares at her like he’s never seen her before.

Maybe he never really has.

“We tried,” Eve says, firmer now. “We didn’t work. There’s no shame in admitting that, Niko. No one can say we didn’t try really fucking hard. But I can’t try anymore. I can’t do it.”

“Do you really want to be those people, Eve?” He groans, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Mid-life crisis divorce people?”

(Angry.)

“I’d rather have a mid-life crisis than get old with regrets.” It’s not a crisis, it’s a waking-up, but whatever he needs to call it is fine with her.

“Is that what we are? A regret?”

(Sad.)

“No. No, Niko, we’re not a regret.” Eve’s so many millions of choices deep into this now that she can’t trace it back to the source, can’t figure out how to imagine her life if they’d never done all this. “But can’t you feel us becoming one? Can’t you feel it every day?”

“I thought we were working on this. Couples’ therapy --”

(Confused.)

“Niko.” Because they’re circled over this already, already, already.

Eve will talk about this for as long as he needs to. She owes him that.

But there’s nothing more to say; not really.

It’s another half an hour before he leaves. It’s not quiet, like she’d started to think it might be, but with another final burst of energy.

Maybe that’s what he needs to actually walk out the door.

Anger.

Maybe once he’s in the cab, on the way to the airport, it’s sadness.

Maybe on the plane, it’ll mellow into confusion again.

Eventually, though, all of it will become less, become more muted, until it turns from feeling to thought, and this makes sense to him, too.
He’ll be grateful, one day.

He can hate her for a while, but eventually, some time, he won’t anymore.

Eve stands in the kitchen that used to be theirs, surrounded by things that were theirs, and feels the their dissolve in the air around her.

It’s calm.

It’s gentle.

Eve stares down at the golden band on her finger.

Remembers: I forgot to take that off .

She’d considered then, fleetingly, under the burn of Villanelle’s gaze, how soon was too soon. Whether it would feel impulsive or tacky or tasteless to remove it.

But right now, as she slips her ring off her finger and sets it on the counter, it doesn’t feel like any of those things.

It’s just right .

They’re over.

Eve should start packing, should call her mother, should do one of Harrison’s mindfulness exercises.

She should.

Instead, she goes to the store and buys a pint of rocky road ice cream.

Chapter End Notes

smell you later niko!!!!!!

Also I am on discord as saltandsunscreen#5177 if anyone wants to chat :D

if this chapter seemed a little rougher it's because it only went through one major draft... i was actually alright with it so i didnt rework it as much as i have the others (which usually go through 3-4 drafts), but that might show. i hope it doesn’t, but it might.

Also I'm 20, I've never been in a serious relationship, and I've never been to couples counselling, so if you have had either of those things and I'm a bit off in my guestimates of how it all goes, sorry I googled how to get divorced in the UK, but again, there's probably a fair bit of inaccuracy there.
Elena, Kenny -- hell, even Hugo -- they all offer to help Eve move, but she turns them down. She’s not entirely sure why, but this feels like something she has to do herself. Which she’ll probably regret by the time she’s lugging a third box of books into her new building’s elevator, but in theory, there’s something poetic about it.

Packing is -- cathartic. Drifting slowly through each room of the house, like a ghost abruptly made real again, desperate to touch every once-lost thing. She runs her fingers over photo frames, straightens upholstery, takes the stairs slowly; it’s a smooth goodbye, one long sensory farewell.

She starts in the kitchen, in the sunlight, thinks: *This lighting is very good for you. You should stay.* Tries to un-think it again.

*You should stay.*

She turns the radio all the way up, just shy of loud enough for her neighbours to complain, and sings along to *Kids in America* while she tries to work out if Niko having the high ground means she has to let him keep the good forks.

*Probably not, right?*

She *is* the one leaving him, but if he gets to stay in the house, then she’s more than entitled to the good forks, surely. And at least half the knives, even if she doesn’t really cook. Maybe she’ll learn. Maybe Separated-and-Soon-to-Be-Divorced Eve is the kind of person who cooks.
She scans a page of the recipe books Niko has left open on the bench, and --

Separated-and-Soon-to-Be-Divorced Eve can probably order takeout and microwave ready-meals just fine. And she knows how to chop vegetables and bake them, so if push comes to shove, she can avoid scurvy well enough.

After the kitchen, she raids the front room, then the hall, then the bathroom, then the bedroom, stopping off at the various cupboards and shelves as she goes.

In the end, she leaves Niko with most of it. He’s the one who finds comfort in a well-worn armchair, or likes to reminisce over souvenirs. He’s always been the sort to keep his best memories outside of his body, but Eve lives in her head; she’s happiest there.

She hires a car and spends most of Saturday driving boxes of belongings from the old house to her new apartment, and then Sunday is passed waiting for the delivery guys to arrive with the bed frame and mattress she ordered. Even if hers and Niko’s bed was something she could’ve somehow taken half of, she wouldn’t. Their imprints have sunk too deep into it, and Eve doesn’t want their old shapes and hollows to follow her into this new life; not Niko, and not the morning-light guilt of having dreamed of not-Niko.

Elena texts her more than usual. Mostly, the messages are memes (some of which Eve even understands), and more often than not, divorce memes, which is a subgenre Eve wouldn’t have thought existed. Elena’s always been one to face things head-on rather than dance around them, and Eve appreciates her bluntness, her determinedness to make this fun and funny.

And it is fun, kind of. Redecorating and rearranging and taking an alien space and making it her own. It feels less like a new home and more like a holiday flat she’s playing designer with, but Eve’s going to let this strange energy carry her as far through this as possible.

Realities like bills and silence will hit soon enough, but for now, it’s an endless up and up, it’s Eve lying on her cold floor and staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling and thinking, thank fuck.

And then saying it aloud to herself, into the spooling twilight.

“Thank fuck.”

Elena insists on having a housewarming party, which is apparently just a fancy name for the two of them getting drunk on margaritas and swearing their way through putting Eve’s bed frame together.

“Ugh,” Elena complains. “It’s like, why do you need a fucking PhD to build anything from Ikea?”

“Maybe you just need to be sober.”

“No, I definitely wouldn’t be better at this sober.” Elena tosses a large screw from hand to hand, with more coordination than Eve could muster after this much tequila. “I’d probably just be way more frustrated.”

Eve hums, staring blankly down at the little stick figure on the instruction sheet, who almost certainly has a PhD, because he seems to be assembling his bed frame easily. “Probably,” she agrees.
“Speaking of frustrated --”

“Nope.”

“-- when are we going to go out and get you laid?”

“Elena.”

“Seriously, Eve. Tequila is expensive. I bought you this bottle because I’m an excellent friend, but if we go to a bar, there will be lots of lovely people who’ll buy this shit for us,” she points out. “Because we’re hot.”

“I can afford my own tequila.”

“And you can fuck yourself, too, but --”

The half of the bed frame they’ve managed to put together keels over, narrowly missing Eve’s foot and scoring a mark on the floor.

“Oops,” Elena murmurs. “How much was your security deposit, again?”

“Enough that I’m not willing to drink another margarita before I finish this,” Eve replies, dragging a hand over her face, hoping her brain will kick back into gear in another minute.

“I’m going to order us a pizza,” Elena says, decidedly. “You’re on your own.”

She stands and walks out of the bedroom, only slightly unbalanced, and leaves Eve staring at the wreck of her bed. Is she too old to get away with sleeping on a mattress on the floor? Is that chic and hipster, or just pathetic?

She knows the answer to that, but it’s so tempting to try and convince herself otherwise.

But then Elena’s back, crouched beside her. “Babe, my phone’s dead. You got a charger?”

“Oh. Not USB-C, sorry.”

“Damn.”

For a beat, the idea of pizza seems heartbreakingly distant, and then Eve realises that Elena’s not the only one with a phone capable of dialing Joe’s Original. “Here, just use mine --” Eve wrangles her phone from her pocket, taps in her password.

“One, two, three, four, Eve?” Elena shakes her head, disappointed. “Really?”

“Shut up. You didn’t see that, okay?” She presses her phone into Elena’s hands and goes back to scowling at the sheer number of vowels crammed into the name of her bed frame of choice.

There’s a pause. The alcohol in Eve’s mind weaves through and between the seconds, stretching them out, bloating them until everything is foggy and infinite.

“Should I pretend that I don’t see this, either?” Elena asks, and Eve can’t really make sense of her tone of voice.

It’s definitely a little too excited, considering the last thing that Eve googled was *place selling sheets near me*, because Niko might think beige is the last word in tasteful linen, but Eve doesn’t.
“See what?”

Elena holds the phone out, and Eve blinks at the screen, waiting for everything to focus.

Oh.

Shit.

It’s her text thread with Villanelle, which Eve had opened earlier because -- because --

She wasn’t *rereading* it, or anything like that. But she’d been replying to Elena’s *on my way* text, and Villanelle’s thread had been just below it, and --

She’d tapped on it, all impulse.

She’d curbed the impulse just as quickly too, for the record. She’d allowed herself a second to stare at *come over and i’ll flirt with you in person then*, and then she’d shut her phone off decisively and gone to get a pair of scissors to hack through some of the leftover packing tape.

“V?”

“Villanelle,” Eve clarifies weakly.

“That was rhetorical, but thank you for your honesty.” Elena’s eyes are lit up. “Oh, this is *perfect*. I totally called it! Didn’t I? I said she fancied you when she bought us that super expensive coffee.”

“Um,” Eve says. Eve’s a grownup. She doesn’t blush. But she does, this once, because alcohol, because Villanelle.

“Um? Spill,” Elena encourages. She drops down opposite Eve, close enough that their knees brush. She’s not much for personal space after a few drinks, but Eve’s never minded that. “This is flirting.”

Elena clacks a nail against the screen hard, nodding. “This is definitely flirting.”

And Eve’s just intoxicated enough that disclosing isn’t seeming quite like the bad idea it once had.

“I --” She stops.

Elena messily prods Eve’s shoulder. “It might be better to talk about it than you think,” she says. Then, generously -- “I’m not going to make you, though.”

Eve scoffs. “I’d like to see you try.”

“I took karate when I was seven for, like, two months, so you might want to re-think that.”

Eve laughs at the immediate picture of a teeny tiny Elena doing spinning kicks.

“Come on,” Elena prompts, drawing out the *on* until Eve’s sure she’s just having fun with the sound of it. “I’m your best friend, and *must* hear about your office romance. It’s the law.” Elena pauses. “And if it’s not, I’m sure Villanelle could add it in for me. As a favour.”

“I don’t think Villanelle is in charge of what the law is.”

Elena waves a hand vaguely. “Whatever.” She wriggles in place. “You won’t tell me your one-night stand story. I can accept that,” she says, magnanimously. “But this? Eve. This is full-on harlequin novel shit. The beginnings of a torrid affair with the woman whose office you now spend eighty percent of your time in --”
Eve swallows, twists her hands together. “Okay, firstly, it’s not an office romance --” It’s not any kind of romance. It’s not. “-- or a torrid affair. It’s just -- it’s --”

“Sexting?”

“I am not sexting her.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m not,” Eve repeats, but her whole body feels hot, and Elena’s not even right. They were just talking. “It was -- work-related.”

Okay, that was pathetic.

“I too often text my colleagues to come over to my place at ten o’clock at night for work-related reasons,” Elena confirms, rolling her eyes. “There’s no shame in flirting, Eve. You’re single. You’re mingling.”

"Mingling,” Eve repeats, frowning. “I -- I don’t think that’s what I’m doing.”

“Whatever you want to call it. This is good, babe. This is you getting out there.”

“Right.” Eve fumbles for the tequila bottle that they’d set safely in the corner and swallows a mouthful straight; she’s drunk enough that she barely winces at the feel of it rasping down her throat.

“Don’t hold back.” Elena grins. “She has that vibe, you know? Like she’s wicked great in bed.”

“She is,” the tequila answers, before Eve can get around to saying anything but that .

Eve can divide the next moment into two precise parts: Elena, dead frozen; and Elena, vibrant and vibrating, thrilled.


Eve backtracks. “No! Well, yes. Fine, yes.” Six times, Villanelle had been so kind to remind her, as if Eve could’ve somehow ever forgotten. “But also no.”

Elena blinks. “Yes and no? Eve, I know Niko was a bit meh, but sex is actually pretty definitive --”

Eve elbows her. “Shut up. I meant -- well, yes, but not how you’re thinking.”

“Okay, I may mostly fuck guys but I do know how lesbian --”

“No, I mean. I haven’t had sex with her since we started working together,” Eve clarifies. “Last year, when Niko left -- and I -- she was -- it’s not like I knew that I’d have to --”

Knew that she’d have to argue with her over whether that boutique is close enough for them to return to on their break, Eve’s issues with the prices notwithstanding.

Knew that she’d have to switch lunches with her because midway through, Villanelle decided she doesn’t like caesar salad anymore.

Knew that she’d accidentally drag her shirt up while trying to take off her sweater and spend the next five minutes trying and failing to get Villanelle back on task (but also probably not really even trying that hard).
Because if she’d known all that --

Eve would’ve accepted that glass of Veuve Clicquot anyway, kissed her in the alley anyway, gone back to her hotel room anyway.

“Oh my god,” Elena gapes. “Oh my god. Villanelle was your one-night stand?”

Eve closes her eyes. “Yeah.” Opens them again.

“So you hooked up with her a year ago, and then -- she’s just there, at the merger briefing?”

“Pretty much.”

“You must’ve been losing your shit. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

Eve can’t really believe she didn’t tell her, either. “It was -- unexpected.”

“Unexpected,” Elena echoes.

And then she starts laughing.

It’s drunk, but it’s real: this laughing at life, at the ridiculousness of it all, of their tiny refracted world.

Eve laughs too. Laughs and laughs and laughs.

It’s a moment that’s been waiting in the wings for weeks, for months, maybe years; this utterly reckless joy and entirely wild hysteria.

She laughs because she’s never been all that good at talking or crying, because there’s so much inside her that she won’t let out in other ways.

They manage to calm themselves down again after a few minutes and some deliberately slow breaths; Eve remembers being stress-strung in college, awake until three a.m., and falling into this strange vacuum of vacancy and amusement with her roommate over textbooks and headaches.

“Wait!” Elena slaps Eve’s shoulder lightly. “I asked if you knew her. She was totally staring at you, and I thought it was weird. Oh, this makes so much sense.”

“It does?”

“As if you would ever go to a conference without me. I’m so fun.” She sighs. “Who knew, when you showed up on my doorstep, you were fresh off fucking a future colleague. Kudos, Eve.”

“Thanks?”

Eve takes another swig of tequila, and passes the bottle to Elena, who swallows a large mouthful and shudders regretfully.

“Pizza,” Eve says finally. “We were getting pizza.” She fumbles her way through her contacts to find Joe’s, and orders half her favourite toppings, half Elena’s.

They give up on their sorry excuse for a bed frame once the pizza arrives, and eat it on Eve’s new rug -- a cast-off of Elena’s, donated to “glitz-up” Eve’s apartment. Elena regales her with extravagant stories of her own late-night misadventures, and by the time they’re down to their last slices, Eve has been instructed to list all the things she won’t miss about being married, to remind herself of the many merits of being single.
Eve, as they debate whether these are one and the same list or indeed two separate ones, is struck by a sudden wave of affection for Elena, who has spent the past week checking in, and making sure Eve’s steady, that she’s confident in her decision and she’s got the tools to move on.

Elena is a fucking badass, and Eve tells her that.

"I am,” Elena agrees, “but you have to say it sans-tequila for it to really count.”

Eve writes *Elena is a badass* on the back of her hand in a biro she grabs from the coffee table jar -- a reminder for the morning.

“Seriously, though,” she says. “Thanks for this. For everything.”

“If I’d known tequila makes you emotional, I would’ve brought vodka,” Elena jokes. Then -- “You’re welcome, Eve.”

It’s not until Elena’s uber is downstairs and they’ve two-thirds sobered up that the topic of Villanelle comes up again.

“Didn’t you say you left?” Elena asks, as she’s shrugging on her coat. “That morning, after you met at the club. You left before she woke up, right?”

Eve doesn’t think about that moment often now, because --

It could’ve gone one of two ways, and she can’t stand either. Can’t stand that they might’ve had an awkward two-minute conversation in their underwear and gone their separate ways; can’t stand that they might’ve stayed in that hotel room all day, might’ve swapped numbers and seen each other again sometime, on their own terms.

They both hurt, for different reasons. And Eve doesn’t want to dwell on the fact that they hurt at all.

"Yeah,” she confirms. “I did.”

Elena’s mouth twists down. “I know that’s pretty standard form for hookups, but how’d she take that?”

“What?” Eve shrugs. “She’s fine with it. She’s never brought it up.”

Although that’s not entirely true. She had, once.

*Are you glad you left that morning?*

But she’d been winding Eve up. She’d been pushing her buttons, reminding Eve of how she’d forfeited her short-lived dreams of Nice and freedom and rebuilding her life.

Only Eve has clawed some of those dreams back. She’s left Niko, her job is more interesting than it’s ever been, and in a year or so she’ll be able to afford a trip to Nice, if she’s smart with her money and passes on a few indulgences.

So there.

It occurs to her that she probably owes Villanelle a thank you for that. Because Eve did all this on her own, she did, but Villanelle forced her to look at her life straight-on again: she’d needed that.

And if it wasn’t closer to dawn than midnight, if Villanelle wasn’t almost certainly *out* for the evening, then Eve might’ve called her right then. Might’ve said thank you and meant it.
Eve waits for the opportunity to tell her in person. For some clear-cut, empty-space of a moment gifted to her, a blank she can fill with a mumbled *I think I needed to hear all that, so.*

But the right time just -- doesn’t come.

It’s not when Villanelle catches Eve’s hand on Monday morning, reads *Elena is a badass* in fading ink and spends the next few hours wheedling for context that Eve refuses to give up.

It’s not when Villanelle arrives, fuming, because someone clipped her motorbike while it was parked, and left a sheer through the paintwork. When Eve goes, “You have a motorbike?” in apparently exactly the right tone, because *that’s* a one-eighty, and suddenly, Villanelle is showing Eve pictures of Villanelle astride a medium-sized recent European make, all chrome and leather, and *okay okay.*

It’s not when they spend an afternoon passing the phone back and forth between them, negotiating their way up a chain of executives at Vander Hatchens, trying to get put through to VP Anderson Morello. When Eve’s onto her fourteenth minute arguing with a guy in Accounts who’s called her *sweetie* about a dozen times already and is leading her around in circles; she’s imagining whacking him over the head with her heaviest file and it’s probably showing on her face. Villanelle is grinning at her, makes a production of opening a new tab and finding a service that sends envelopes full of messy glitter to people.

And it’s not the dozen times Eve has seen Villanelle glance at Eve’s fingers, looking at what’s no longer there. Occasionally, Villanelle might be gearing up to say something about the absence of her ring, but Eve always keeps talking faster, more intently, because no. They’re not having this conversation: not now, not yet.

Because what if Villanelle doesn’t understand that for the handful of ways that fine, yes, Eve leaving her marriage *was* about Villanelle, there are a hundred thousand ways it had nothing to do with her at all?

Worse, what if Villanelle *does* understand? Villanelle, who is already so much more real, more beautifully rendered, more flawed and complex and funny and stupid than the woman Eve once kissed -- a woman who felt so present but now barely seems a phantom by comparison. What if this Villanelle, that she is just beginning to know, becomes the kind of person Eve can talk to about things, actually *talk*?

Eve’s afraid that she’s not as afraid of that as she should be.

“I’m not wasting another fifty phone calls trying to track this guy down,” Eve says, reaching the corner of Villanelle’s office and spinning to walk the length of it again, frustration articulated in her stride. “He clearly isn’t going to talk to us. No use banging our heads against the wall.”

Vander Hatchens has been running them around for two days, and Eve’s done.
Villanelle wrinkles her nose. “Yes. I am sick of hold music.”

“We’ve got to get to him somehow. In person, I mean. If we want his attention, we can’t wait for it -- we’ve got to take it.” Eve’s research has never got her out of the office before, but everything is changing, moving faster, and she’s going with it.

“Take it? Eve, you sound so cunning,” Villanelle drawls, cheek in her palm and her lips ticking up as she watches Eve pace, tracks her progress back and forth.

Eve pulls out her phone and searches Vander Hatchens, trying to find any public access events they’re having, anything open-door that might let them in and give them a shot at making contact with Anderson Morello. “What about their gala? That’s Saturday night. We should go.” They’ll find Morello, and whichever one of them he takes to can chat him up, milk him for the details they need.

“Slow down, Eve. It’ll be sold out by now,” Villanelle reminds her, pulling up the same press release on her monitor and scanning the details. “Also, even if there were still tickets, I refuse to pay fifteen hundred pounds a plate to raise money for a men’s football club. Even for the chance to accost slimy VPs. Now, if it were a charity for something cool, like sharks, then --”

“That guy in accounts -- the sniffly one -- he said Morello leaves for Japan on Sunday. We’re not going to get another good shot like this for at least a month.”

Carolyn is patient, but not infinitely so; they need results soon. At their most recent check-in, Eve told her that the short-term hiring and firing of Samuel Pleat -- who now works at Vander Hatchens - - was their most promising lead yet; his arrival and dismissal coincided with M-SIX investing in Pleat’s brother-in-law’s hedge fund, the day it went public to investors.

They need to figure out who told Morello to hire Pleat to give him a cushiony landing -- whether it was Kyle Bayer, or someone even higher up at M-SIX.

“We’re going to that gala,” Eve says firmly. “We find a way.”

Villanelle arches an eyebrow. “You want to gatecrash their corporate fundraiser?”

“Yeah.”

“They will have security,” Villanelle reminds her.

“You don’t have to pretend that’s ever stopped you. I’m not going to dob you into Konstantin,” Eve replies, although she doesn’t doubt that Konstantin is more than aware of Villanelle’s affinity for ending up in places she shouldn’t.

Villanelle grins. “Well, in that case.” She lounges back in her chair, relaxed and artful at once. “If we are going to find this Morello, and we are going to gatecrash to do it, then we need to look the part.”

“The part being people who pay fifteen hundred pounds a plate to support a football club?”


As she is now, languid and effortlessly fashionable, Villanelle could be an old-money pinup, some wealthy grad-schooler interning at the family business. And yes, Betkin & Vasiliev is something of a family business, but Eve’s never doubted -- however well-off Villanelle might be and might always have been -- that she’s worked for her place here.

“I don’t have anything that looks that part.”
And Villanelle, if the way she lights up is anything to go by, has been waiting on Eve to say exactly that. “Then we’ll have to go get you something that does.”

Eve’s not much of a shopper. She likes it well enough, when the mood strikes, but the mood hardly ever does. She’s never really had much occasion for it -- there was nobody to impress, and no events that required more than what she had in her closet.

But now here she is, at the end of her work day, back at that boutique that charges more per outfit than Eve’s new landlord does in fortnightly rent. Because of course Villanelle, who is incapable of not having the last word, has brought her back to the very shop Eve once hauled her out of.

“Don’t worry,” Villanelle murmurs, when she feels Eve freeze a little -- and she’s not really supposed to be close enough to feel Eve freeze, but whatever. “I can put it on my corporate card. An expense.”

“An expense.”

“Yup.”

Eve was given a corporate card years ago, for a particular event, and in the two hours it was in her possession, she wasn’t even allowed to buy a coffee.

But Villanelle seems more concerned with the displays of formalwear than she is with how they’re funding this, and --

Fuck it. Just this once, Eve decides to not care. Worst-case scenario, she’s left on the hook for the bill, and she can probably manage it, if it does come to that.

Villanelle casts through the first rack, apparently magnetised to the most bold, outrageous, statement-piece dresses, the ones designed to make the wearer memorable, that have first impressions in the seams and stitching.

Eve leaves her to it, and breaks off in search of the more subtle. She’s already far enough out of her comfort zone as it is.

She finds a dark blue dress that’s nice, that she likes -- it plunges a little too deep at the neckline, and there’s a scooped-out back, but she can make it work.

She snatches up the hanger and goes back to Villanelle, who in the fifteen minutes that Eve has been gone, has managed to accumulate at least six potential cocktail dresses.

Villanelle glances at Eve's choice appraisingly, but Eve holds her ground, sets her jaw in challenge.

"Shall we go try them on?" Villanelle suggests.

They walk over to the dressing rooms, but while Eve goes to the first booth, Villanelle drops down onto the small couch across from them.

"Are you --"

"You go on. I would like to see yours first," Villanelle says. And then, when Eve hesitates a beat --
"Do you want me to come in with you, Eve? Because I am more than happy to --"

Eve rolls her eyes and heads into the changing room. It’s larger and nicer than any she’s ever been in before -- lit gently, no harsh fluorescent overheads. All three of the walls she stands facing are mirrored, reflecting back Eve and the cream-coloured door; to her left and right, infinite Eves glance around.

It should make Eve overly conscious of herself, but somehow, it doesn’t.

She shucks out of her layers and wriggles her way into the new dress, tugging it gently, arranging it on her figure.

It's nice.

It’s almost the same colour, too, as the one she wore the night she met Villanelle, and yeah, Eve's going to file that away as a coincidence rather than some kind of subconscious influence.

She shakes her hair out and stands straight in front of the mirror.

Good. She looks good.

"Eve," Villanelle calls, and Eve’s name echoes slightly in the smaller space. "You are taking forever. I want to see."

The impatience in her voice shouldn't make Eve's heart shiver, but it does.

She unlocks the door and steps out.

On the couch, Villanelle sits up straighter. She drags her gaze over Eve, the kind of slow that's so slow it becomes a kind of quick -- quick in Eve's pulse, quick in her blood.

There’s a minute that cascades, seconds lost in some swirling current that Eve is unable to measure, equally unable to resist.

And then, finally --

"You can't wear a bra with that," Villanelle tells her, throat rusty. "It'll -- it's -- the wrong cut."

"Fine," Eve agrees, because maybe right now she'd agree to anything if it meant Villanelle never looked away. She trails her hands over the bodice. "I like it, but it's missing something, you know?"

"A --" Villanelle cuts herself off and stands up, ducking back to the main floor of the shop. In the count of ten she's back, pressing a woven belt into Eve's hands. "This."

Eve loops it around her waist, and threads it tight, and yeah, that's what this needed.

"Thanks."

Villanelle nods. "Of course." Then -- "It is a good choice. It suits you."

Eve knows that if she gave Villanelle free run of the store and half an hour of her time, they could find her something better, and Villanelle probably knows it too. But Eve doesn't want that, not right now. This is a work event, and she needs to be comfortable, focused.

Focusing will be harder if she knows she’s wearing something Villanelle wanted to see her in.
But maybe next time -- if there's a next time, *if* -- she'll let Villanelle pick something for her.

Content with her choice, Eve changes back into her regular clothes while Villanelle takes the booth next to her, and Eve pretends not to hear the rustle of fabric that means that Villanelle's one wall away in nothing but her underwear.

She's only waiting on the couch a minute or so when Villanelle comes out in the first of her picks -- something ankle-length and purple that's gorgeous on her but not really Villanelle at all.

Eve shakes her head.

The next outfit is a jumpsuit that Eve quite likes, and likes even more when Villanelle turns -- gratuitous -- to allow Eve to see it from every angle, despite the fact that Eve definitely didn't ask her to do so.

"I am buying this," Villanelle declares, satisfied, "but not for the gala."

Then there's outfits three, four, and five in montage-succession, and each time they rank and re-rank them, and it's surprisingly fun. Clothes shopping is more entertaining with Villanelle’s enthusiasm and sharp commentary, more fun when Eve isn't the one forced through the effort of repeatedly undressing and redressing herself. Plus, it gives her an excuse to look at Villanelle for as long as she wants.

And she does want.

Villanelle disappears again to change into her sixth selection, and Eve’s only just pulled out her phone to check her emails when --

“Eve?”

Eve glances over at the changing booth she knows Villanelle is in. “Yeah?”

“Can you help me with this?”

There's the snick of a lock, and then the changing booth’s door nudges open an inch: an invitation.

Although it seems generous to call it an invitation when it’s not something Eve can refuse, not really; there’s no choice involved in the way she’s drawn forward, in the way she slips inside, heedless, reckless, less-less-less.

Villanelle is facing away from the door, watching Eve’s reflection as Eve moves closer, into the room.

The zip up the back of Villanelle’s sixth dress is half undone, leaving the smooth expanse of her shoulders and the straight of her spine clear for Eve to see, to never unsee.

Villanelle has one, two, three, small faded freckles starred out across her skin. Eve wonders how she could’ve somehow forgotten the exact placement of them -- but then again, time has been a beastly and zealous thing; unpitying of Eve’s quiet attempts to climb back into the past.

“What do you need help with?” Eve asks, and her voice is hollow and low to the ground.

Villanelle tilts her head. Eve could check her reflection to read her expression, but her gaze has beached itself on Villanelle’s shoulder blades, and she can’t look away.

“I can’t get the zipper all the way up,” Villanelle says, her every syllable like ink clouding water.
But then --

Eve blinks, blinks of out this haze, but not entirely. “You’re lying.” She remembers how flexible Villanelle is. Remembers *vividly*, and there’s no way in hell she can’t handle this zipper when she’s managed to get five other similar dresses on and off in the last half hour.

This time, in the mirror, she catches the flash of Villanelle’s grin. “Okay, I’m lying,” she concedes, after putting up absolutely no fight at all. “Do I at least get points for effort?”

Eve’s body is screaming that Villanelle can have points for whatever she wants, but what she says is, “No. Execution lacks originality.”

Villanelle gasps, offended. “I’ll have you know I got this move from an obscure Katherine Heigl movie --”

“I don’t think I’d call any of Katherine Heigl’s movies *obscure* --”

And then Villanelle’s turning around, too fast for Eve to get a thought in edgewise, and she’s backing Eve against the door she just closed, flicking the lock again expertly, and just like that, Eve is --

Trapped, as Villanelle’s arms come up to brace either side of her body.

Villanelle is close.

Jesus Christ, she’s *so close*, and Eve isn’t really married anymore so she doesn’t have to pretend her brain isn’t drowning in *finally*.

And because nothing is ever as easy as it should be, especially not this, Eve also has the fleeting mental image of Villanelle languishing on her couch watching Netflix, seeing this scene play out on the screen and smirking happily as she steals it for herself.

Something in Eve’s chest goes a little bit warm, and fuck that. Eve can’t deal with that right now, because it’s *Villanelle*, for crying out loud; because it’s Villanelle, and also because Villanelle is about three inches away from her and Eve can feel her body heat.

“So,” Eve croaks, “do you get all your seduction tips from rom-coms, or --”

Villanelle smiles again, and Eve fixes on the movement of her lips and recalls them moving against her own. “Do you think I need tips, Eve?”

God, no.

But Eve can’t actually quite breathe, and Villanelle probably knows it, and there’s no *way* she’s letting her win this round, not so easily.

This isn’t like it was, back at the club, when they didn’t know each other, when Eve could let this unknowable stranger wind her up and drive her wild.

Villanelle isn’t a stranger anymore, she’s not quite so unknowable, and that’s been Eve’s problem since they met again. Because this isn’t about *letting* anymore, it’s about *having*, and it’s all so different now.

“I’d be happy to give you some advice,” Eve says, and it’s her and not-her; it’s confidence she might’ve drawn from Villanelle or from deeper down in herself but -- it doesn’t matter, because the
words don’t waver and Villanelle’s eyes flash with delight.

"Okay, Eve," she whispers back, and her stare flicks to Eve's mouth, then up again to meet her eyes. "Advise me."

So Eve reaches around, slides her hand from the caress-slope of Villanelle’s neck and down the ladder of her spine, achingly slow, so that each vertebrae is a breath. At every matched inhale, their chests brush, and Eve loses whatever oxygen she’s scavenged from the air.

When she reaches Villanelle’s zipper, instead of dragging it up, Eve drags it down, until it reaches the end of its run, at the small of Villanelle's back.

She can see Villanelle swallow. There's a giddy rush of power in how Villanelle won't, won't, won't move, not even an inch, so long as Eve keeps doing what she’s doing --

Eve releases the zipper, and instead, sets her hands on Villanelle's hips, digging her thumbs hard into the slant of the bones.

Then she walks Villanelle backwards towards the mirror opposite, one step, two steps, keeping them flush together, and Villanelle's hands are unmoored in the air, not quite sure where to settle.

Eventually, they tangle in Eve's hair, tight, her fingers sure: delicate, but not in the business of letting go.

Eve twists them around at the last second so it’s her back that hits the mirror instead -- so Villanelle can see Eve and herself and the ways they're touching infinitely reflected in either direction.

They stay like that, for a beat, a beat, a beat.

And then Eve leans up, and places one very, very soft kiss at the corner of Villanelle's mouth, and murmurs, "I'm not fucking you in a public changing room."

It might be a victory if Eve’s skin wasn’t blazing, if she wasn’t so achingly awake.

Villanelle makes a tiny sound that Eve can't quite riddle out -- maybe it's disappointment or amusement or surprise or maybe she just got stuck on fucking and hasn't put the rest of it together yet.

And then some of the daze in Villanelle's eyes clears, and she pouts. "You are a tease."

"Yeah," Eve agrees, because she definitely is, and this was beyond stupid, because there's no way to mess with Villanelle like this without messing with herself as well.

And because there's something addictive about how Villanelle's body responds at just a touch, at just a suggestion, about how Eve has all her focus in this moment.

It's mesmerising, it’s brutal, it’s violently lovely, and it was never, ever like this with Niko; Eve can admit that now.

She forces herself to release Villanelle, to take her hands off Villanelle’s hips and nudge her away. To brush past her and walk towards the door.

Distance isn’t a cure or a vaccination, but it is a stopgap, and that’ll have to do.

But --
Villanelle’s hand is catching her hand, is tugging her back, is spinning her -- all momentum, Eve’s body finding its way back to Villanelle’s body.

Villanelle’s arm winds around her waist, and she gives Eve a second, a whole second to pull away, and Eve doesn’t, because this feeling has cut the brake line and --

Villanelle kisses her.

Actually kisses her.

It’s lips and teeth and tongue and fuck, how is this better than Eve remembers? It’s supposed to be worse. That’s the deal. Rose-tinted glasses, nostalgia, et cetera. Nothing can ever live up to by-gones idealised, right?

Except this.

This is --

How did Eve go a year without this?

Villanelle’s hands drag up her sides to sit high on her ribs, and she sucks on Eve’s bottom lip, bites down, just for a second.

And then she disentangles herself from Eve, shifts away so they’re nearly touching now, but not.

"I can be a tease too," Villanelle tells her, and it’s just a little too on the breathless side to be smug.

Except it’s not really teasing, is it, when Eve knows that if she leant back in, Villanelle would keep kissing her, touching her just like this, and it wouldn’t have to end until it did.

And it will end.

There’s no way for Eve to be clever or strong about this; she’s going to give in, and the chips will fall -- however they fall.

But this gala is important, and Eve doesn’t fancy explaining to Carolyn that it all went awry because she couldn’t hold off fucking her coworker an extra couple of days.

Doesn’t fancy how the fallout from it might upend her new life, not when she -- when she cares, now. About Villanelle.

“Turn around,” Eve says quietly, “and I’ll zip you up.”

Villanelle gives her another second, to change her mind. In that second, Eve nearly does. A thousand times, she nearly does.

But then Villanelle turns at last, and at last Eve breathes out. This time, it’s quick: she holds the fabric together and draws the zip up; it’s efficient, but not quite clinical. Eve isn’t capable of that, not with a smear of Villanelle’s gloss still shiny on her lip.

After a moment of regarding herself in the mirror, Eve behind her, Villanelle says, “I like this one best of all of them.”

“Okay,” Eve agrees. “Then let’s get you that one.”
i hope this chapter delivered on some of what y'all have been waiting for
Saturday passes in a lethargic, stilted way: each minute drags, but there’s no smoothness to the stretch of it -- instead, the hours bump awkwardly into one another, never sure how much space they ought to take up.

Eve spends the day determinedly, deliberately, not thinking about Villanelle. She’s had a lot of practice at this over the past year or so, although she’s yet to get any better at it. Villanelle has a way of staining her mind like a watercolour, so that no matter how Eve tries to crowd her out, the ghost of her tints everything.

So Eve jogs. She tries making cookies. Gives up on making cookies. She reads. Revises the Morello file. Unpacks the last two boxes in her bedroom. Listens to half a podcast.

Some of it works -- for ten minutes, twenty, fifty. But eventually, something will bring a flash of Villanelle back. Her kiss. Her hands at Eve’s waist. Tease, curled breathless around her accent.

Just after three, she caves, and calls Elena.

“Eve, you should know that I’m at a very critical juncture in a Bake-Off rerun, so I hope this important,” she answers, after three rings.

In the background, Eve can hear the muted tones of a fretful conversation. Presumably, someone is pushing the time limit, or an ingredient has been misplaced.

Eve swallows.
She’ll feel better if she talks to Elena. She will. The dust will eddy and the silt will settle, and everything will seem a shade clearer.

“Eve?”

“Villanelle kissed me,” Eve rushes out, and there’s the decades-stale lilt of high school in this moment, in calling up her best friend to tell her something so simple and small that has grown a hundred sizes in her head. “Yesterday. She kissed me yesterday.”

There’s a pause, and then the background noise shuts off entirely. “If you try and just give me the Cliff’s Notes version on this, Eve, so help me god --”

So Eve tells her everything. It’s like blood-letting, right? If it’s on the outside of her and not the inside, then maybe it can’t fill her up anymore.

“And then you paid for the dresses and left?”

“No, Elena. We stole the dresses,” Eve replies, dryly.

“Shut up. Did she say anything to you, after? Did you say anything to her?”

“No.” Eve can’t decide if she wants to be lying on her couch or pacing. There’s a shaking restlessness underscored by some soft exhaustion, and she can’t commit to either. “She got a call from Konstantin she had to take, so I told her I’d meet her at M-SIX tonight and we could head over to the gala together. And then I -- left.”

Eve had turned and disappeared into the crowd, and once she was a block away, or maybe two blocks, everything had started to sort itself out in her brain again, and she’d realised she was going in the wrong direction.

She’d touched her lips, just for a second, as if the fading traces of Villanelle’s kiss could be a good luck charm, but she’s not relating that fact to Elena. She’d never live it down.

“Ran away, more like,” Elena chides.

“Walked quickly,” Eve corrects, but -- that just makes her think of meeting Villanelle over again, that awkward day in the elevator. It should make her cringe, but there’s something else to it, now. A sepia sort of fondness that has no business being there.

“Am I getting pics of you in this hot new dress, by the way?”

“No.” Eve’s never really got the hang of taking photos of herself; it’s awkward and uncomfortable and she never looks how she wants. She’s not meant to be seen while still. Eve lives in motion, motion always, and that screams out of the pictures she finds herself stuck in, blurry and discomfited.

“You can wear it next time we go out, then.” And then, with a salacious grin that Eve can hear -- “If Villanelle doesn’t totally ruin it when she tears it off you tonight, that is.”

Eve has several vivid memories of Villanelle tearing a dress off her, but that’s beyond not helpful right now. “She’s not going to tear it off me.”

“Why not?”

Eve doesn’t respond.

Elena sighs, and then, all laboured patience, like she’s explaining something to a small child --
“Look. You want to fuck her. She clearly wants to fuck you. You’re both consenting adults. What’s wrong with railing each other into oblivion?”

Eve licks her lips. Protests, half-hearted. “We work together.”

“So don’t fuck her while you’re working. Wait until after. I really don’t think Carolyn gives a shit what or who you do in your spare time, Eve.”

And no, it’s not the most professional thing in the world to sleep with a colleague, but Elena’s right -- as long as they keep delivering results, Carolyn won’t care.

Eve breathes out, as if the weight of everything is kept in her lungs.

“I just -- I just --” she stops.

“Babe.”

“It’s going to be over, you know?” Eve says, finally, and it’s clumsy and vague because she doesn’t really know what she means until she means it. “I’ll be fine when it is, I know I will be --” She will be. “-- but I don’t want it to be over. Yet.”

Elena’s quiet for a moment. Then -- “Eve, you know I love you, so don’t take this the wrong way. But that’s pretty stupid.”

“I --”

“I know Villanelle gives off more fuckboy vibes than even, like, Hugo, but there’s no point missing out on something great -- even if it’s just for a night -- because you’re not dead sure of what’ll happen afterwards. Nobody’s sure of anything, babe. You’ve just gotta live anyway.”

“I like being sure.”

“I know you do. And you also like being right. But there’s a good chance you’re wrong about. Like. Everything.”

Eve sputters. “Excuse me?”

“Well, not everything. I meant with Villanelle.”

“You’re being unnecessarily opaque.”

“I think she likes you.”

There’s a flash of warmth, a fin breaking the surface of a lake, and then Eve marbles it out into a millpond again: Villanelle likes a lot of things, until she doesn’t. She’s reckless and wild and shifting. It makes her fascinating, but it also makes her predictable. Wherever she starts, it’s only a matter of time before she’s on to the next thing, whatever it is.

Which is okay. It’s the way of things, right?

It’s just --

Eve’s got used to them. Far too quickly, she’s started to settle into how they are, and the second she gives in, that changes.

But change is good. It’s good. It can take a while to fit, and sometimes it hurts a little, but it hurts less
than spreading roots in concrete ground, and trying to grow where it’s all too hard.

Eve lives in motion, right? She needs something that makes her feel alive, but she doesn’t need it to last.

She won’t come across someone like Villanelle ever again, but that’s alright. She can chase that thrill in other places, other things, and find a hundred ways to never slow down again.

She’s really great at finding things.

“Thanks, Elena,” Eve says, at last.

Elena groans. “I can tell by your tone that you’re ignoring me.”

“I’m not ignoring you.”

“You’re disregarding my professional assessment of the situation.”

“Goodbye,” Eve insists. “I’ll let you know how it goes at the gala.” Elena can’t know why they’re going, exactly, but she’s also been very good about not asking, so Eve hasn’t had to make up an excuse about tonight.

“You better.”

Eve’s just putting the finishing touches on her mascara when the text comes through.

V [7:12pm] change of plans. will pick you up from your house ✌️ see you soon

Eve checks her watch. That might get them there a bit early, but it saves her a train trip to M-SIX, and --

Shit.

“Fuck.” Eve fumbles with her phone, taps the call button once, twice before it works, and the screen lights up, dialing. She presses her phone to ear and listens to the ring tone. “Come on, come on.”

She gets the beep of the line being held up, and then she’s directed to voicemail.

“Pick up,” she says, after Villanelle’s stupid recorded message plays. “I know your phone is literally in your hand right now.”

She ends the call and calls again, listens to it ring through again.

“Damn --”

This time, she texts.

Me [7:16pm] DON’T. Meet me at M6.

There’s no reply. No read receipt.

“Fuck.”
Because Eve’s house isn’t Eve’s house anymore. It’s Niko’s.

**Me [7:17pm]** Villanelle. I’m serious.

Eve waits, waits, waits.

Nothing.

“Fuck.”

She slips her heels on, grabs her clutch, and quickly locks up her apartment, taking the stairs down to the street rather than holding out for the elevator.

Eve hails a cab, and gives the driver the address in a stumbling of syllables. *The* address. *Not her* address. Because it’s not home anymore.

The traffic is good, and the trip only takes about twenty minutes, although Eve’s certain it’s a millennium back-broken in on itself, looping over and under her every breath.

Niko and Villanelle in the same room once was bad enough. But now --

Now she and Niko are over, now she’s kissed Villanelle -- it’s all unbalanced itself over again, got even more complicated.

It doesn’t *feel* unbalanced, but that’s not the point.

It’s forever, it’s forever, and by the time she gets there, there’s already a sleek black town car parked at the curb outside of Eve’s old house.

Eve taps her card to pay for her cab fare and then she’s out the door, up the front steps, and her keys would still work -- Niko won’t have changed the locks -- only she didn’t bring them with her. But when she tries the handle, it turns.

She’s going to *kill* Villanelle, because there’s no chance that this is just an unfortunate coincidence, that she changed their plans last minute to meet Eve somewhere that she wouldn’t even be.

There’s a twist in her stomach that she can’t properly untangle. Too many threads, she supposes.

Eve opens the door, and then she’s in the front hall, the front hall of the house that isn’t her house anymore, and the air seems to thin.

It’s not like she thought she’d never be back here. Of course she would be. But already it’s different, somehow.

Or Eve’s different. She has, with all the hastiness of an overstayed season, become new.

And then she turns the corner and runs straight into Niko’s back.

They both jump, and flinch away from one another.

“Jesus, Eve,” he hisses, clutching his chest.

“Sorry,” she says, glancing at him and then at Villanelle, who’s standing opposite, about five feet away.

Villanelle’s gaze is flicking between Eve and Niko, calculating.
And then it lingers on Eve: on her hair, loose and let down; the colour-swoop of her lipstick; her dress; her shoes, the same ones she wore to the club that night.

As for Villanelle, she looks --

Looks --

Eve should be used to it by now; how Villanelle makes and remakes her own image in an aching vividness each time Eve sees her. But she’s not. It's not even the memory of almost taking that dress off Villanelle in the changing room -- it’s her, it’s the way she wears it, it’s --

It’s not until Niko speaks that Eve remembers he’s there with them.

“You can’t sneak attack people like that,” Niko grits out, frowning at her. “Or barge into people’s homes.”

Okay, she did barge in, but to save him. Or save Villanelle. Or save herself. She’s not figured that out yet. Maybe none of the above. “I didn’t sneak attack you. How was I supposed to know you were right here when you weren’t making any noise? If you aren’t talking, then how can --”

“What kind of conversation am I supposed to be having with --” He gestures at Villanelle, a whiplash of a hand movement.

“Villanelle,” Villanelle supplies.

“I know your name,” Niko responds, with brittle cordiality, before focusing back on Eve. “Why’s she here, dressed like that, to pick you up?”

“It’s for a work thing,” Eve tells him.

“We’re going out,” Villanelle’s not smirking, for once, but there’s the taut of challenge in her tone. Though she’s still shorter than Niko, even in her heels, she seems taller than him, seems to take up more room than he does, with just the set of her shoulders and the bold of her voice.

“To a gala,” Eve clarifies. “For work .”

Niko crosses his arms over his chest. “You usually take the train to work events.”

Eve nearly rolls her eyes, but manages not to. “I was going to take the train. There was a -- miscommunication. She came to get me instead. Last-minute change of plans.”

“I am very chivalrous,” Villanelle says, shrugging. “What kind of person would I be if I didn’t take my very nice car to pick up my colleague?”

“An asshole,” Eve responds, glaring at Villanelle. “Probably the same kind of asshole who shows up places without any warning.”

“Because of chivalry. And I gave warning.”

“Because of nosiness .”


And then she looks at him, actually looks at him. He’s a little paler. His shirt is more rumpled, like he hasn’t even made a pass at ironing it, like he usually does. His stubble has grown into a shadow.
Eve’s lungs cinch around her breaths. Because he’s wearing some kind of grief around himself, and she doesn’t feel it at all.

“How was Warsaw?” she asks. The question deflates between them.

“Not the trip of a lifetime,” he replies, stiffly. “But what did you expect? Hey Mum, Dad, guess what? I —” He cuts himself off, then jabs a finger in Villanelle’s direction. “Can we maybe have this conversation another time? Like, alone?”

“I don’t mind,” Villanelle offers. “I am happy to wait. I am a very patient person, aren’t I, Eve?”

This time, Eve does roll her eyes. “Come on. We’re leaving.”

“Bye, Niko!” Villanelle says, cheerful, waving as she walks past him and out to the door.

Eve takes a step backward, to follow after her. “I -- we’ve got to go, or we’ll be late.”

Niko stares at her for a moment; he feels very far away, but Eve doesn’t try to cross over to him, wherever he’s gone. “Right.”

“I’ll come by again? I’ll text first,” she adds. “But we should set a time to talk. Sort things out, you know?”

He barks out a laugh: a flayed, scabbed-over imitation of humour. “Sure. Let’s get the ball rolling, huh? Let’s make sure we get everything tidied away and never see each other again -- is that it, Eve?”

“You know that’s not what I want,” she says. Not never again. Just -- god, she needs a life, her own life, and he can be a sliver of it, someday. “I’m trying to make this less hard.”

“Yeah.” He scoffs, shakes his head. “It seems really hard for you.”

Eve glares. Because that’s not fair, that’s not. He understands that they’re over, too, really properly over; he understands. She knows he does.

He doesn’t get to be angry at her for not folding into his picket fence dreams, not anymore.

It’s not a competition of who’s hurt more, but if it were --

If it were, why do they only count who hurts right now? What about the hundred thousand papercuts of fifteen years of being the wrong shape and wrong size to slot into Niko’s imagined life?

Behind him, she can see the couches she spent so many months lying on, researching, and the kitchen where she once turned off his radio. It’s strange that these are the first memories that arrive in her mind, despite so many others, and it’s like a coin landing on its edge rather than heads or tails: unlikely and gratifying for it.

For all the ways this house feels different now that it’s no longer hers, it seems the same. There is so little out of place.

Has Niko not got around to changing and rearranging anything, she wonders, or did she really leave so slight an impression here, in fifteen years, and this world was his all along?

“I’ll talk to you later, Niko,” she says, calmly. “When you’re ready. Whenever you’re ready.”

And then she leaves, too, shutting the door behind herself.
It’s a semi-colon of a thing. Final and not final.

In the glow of the streetlight, she can see Villanelle standing by the town car, watching her.

That frustration from before -- from the cab ride over, from inside just now -- it swirls back.

Eve walks right up to her, right into her space, and hisses, “What was that?”

Villanelle arches an eyebrow. “What was what, Eve? I was being chivalrous, remember?”

“By just coming here, out of the blue?”

“You never mentioned you had moved out of this house.”

“Right, but you saw I wasn’t wearing my ring and you wanted to know, so you decided you’d talk to Niko? Find out from someone else?”


“Oh, sure, because you’re so --”

“No, I mean it.” Villanelle catches Eve’s hand and Eve ignores the fact that there’s no instinct to jerk away. “I am serious, Eve. Yes, I am curious, because you have not told me anything --”

“Curious? Nosey --”

“Fine. Nosey,” Villanelle amends, unapologetic. “But I thought you would be here, and he would not, and I could say, Eve, where is your husband? And then you would say --”

“We’re separated, okay?” Eve tells her. And she’s trying to be mad but there is still this tiny windchill of victory down her spine. Separated. “I left. I moved into an apartment. That was the first time I’d seen him since we split, you don’t get to force me into that. That’s something we were supposed to have to deal with in our own time --”

“I didn’t know,” Villanelle assures her, immediately. She squeezes Eve’s fingers, and it’s gentle, dissonant with Eve’s too-fast too-loud words. “I did not know that Eve. You have not explained these things to me.”

And -- well, that’s true. Even if Villanelle had realised Eve and Niko were over, she couldn’t have had any way of determining what the state of their relationship was. Still. “Well, it’s none of your business --”

“It feels like a like a little bit my business, because I really want to --”

“And I didn’t tell you, because I thought that --”

Thought that Villanelle might take it to mean more than it did, might think that Eve was asking for more than Villanelle was willing to give, when she’s not, she’s not.

Villanelle is listening intently, now. “Thought that what?”

But this is not a discussion they’re having just now, not on Eve’s old street, not when they have places to be and there’s the deep but uncertain echo of unfinished kiss between them.

“You can’t do things like this,” Eve says, shifting back a gear, trying to find her feet in this argument once again. “You should’ve tried asking, rather than just showing up here to pry.”
“It was also to be chivalrous,” Villanelle adds, and it’s a bit late, but it is earnest.

“I know.” She does.

“I am sorry.”

“Are you?”

Villanelle hesitates, then her nose scrunches, and she admits, “Maybe less sorry than you are saying I should be.”

And if anything, Eve is familiar with being less sorry than she should be -- for a lot of things. “Because you got what you wanted?”

Villanelle nods. “Yes.” There’s a lull, and then -- “Did you really get in a cab and come all the way here when I texted?”

“Mm.”

“Then I am sorry for that.”

“And for ignoring my messages.” That was a dick move.

“What?” Villanelle’s mouth turns down in confusion, for a second, then her expression clears. “Oh. I turned my phone off.”

“What? Why?”

“Konstantin kept calling me, and I am giving him the ---” She searches for the phrase. “The cold shoulder.”

“Oh.” Eve will enquire after the particulars of that later, but it feels like something she might regret digging into now, on top of everything. “Well. I’m still mad at you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes. Will you let me know when you’re not mad anymore?”

“Uh. Yeah?” Eve replies, and this seems to satisfy Villanelle.

And then it’s just done. The heat of indignance and annoyance sift away, and Eve’s just left facing Villanelle, and feeling -- fine. Feeling better, actually.

Fights with Niko sunk hooked nails into their every interaction for days, or existed as a subtle plague that smogged their space for weeks. It shouldn’t surprise Eve that Villanelle bounces off this as easily and effortlessly as everything else in her life.

“You are very gorgeous, by the way,” Villanelle says, and her gaze rakes over Eve once more, and Eve feels it on her skin, through her clothes. “You should wear your hair down more often.”

And -- fuck it, Eve lets herself look Villanelle up and down too, despite how it makes her want things she definitely can’t have with Niko only twenty feet and a half-closed curtain away, despite how it makes Villanelle entirely too pleased with herself.
“We’re really going to be late,” Eve sighs, at last. “We have to go.”

This time, Villanelle doesn’t try and hold the door open for her, and lets Eve instead walk around to the other side.

The partition is already up, when Eve slides in, and wonders if they have the same driver as last time, or if Villanelle was irritating this one on the way over, somehow. Both seem equally likely.

They’ve been on the road for less than ten seconds when Villanelle says, “See? Isn’t this much better than taking the train?”

“You’re the worst.”

Villanelle grins at her, and there’s something genuinely happy in it, and that catches Eve by surprise, even as she finds herself smiling back. “By the way, have I told you my plan for getting you past the gala’s security?”

“Me? What about you?”

“Eve, I am very mysterious. I have made arrangements for myself.” Eve thinks she’s possibly better off in the dark about those arrangements. “I will get in, and then you will come up the front entrance, and I will get you past. I am very crafty.”

“I’m glad you have an idea, at least.”

Villanelle nods. “Would you like to know? Or would you prefer a surprise?”

A surprise is just asking for something to go horribly wrong. “I’d like to know.”

“Okay, so --”

Chapter End Notes

i promise they'll hook up next chapter i just needed to get the niko thing cleared up.

BY THE WAY does anyone have any tips on paying for being alive while completing postgrad? so far i’ve got acquiring a sugar daddy, winning the lottery. and that's it. i cant TA bc i'd need to be doing my PhD and im only up to my masters.

also i totally welcome constructive criticism but please also remember i do this as a fun thing in my spare time, so it's never going to be perfect.
Most of the ride passes in silence. Eve hates it. Eve hates it because it’s not uncomfortable, it’s not stilted or boring. It’s --

Nice. Nice with an edge, sure. There’s that curl of tension that always twists between them, and the adrenaline-spritz of knowing they’re about to break and bend all kinds of rules; neither of them is all the way relaxed. But. It’s not the suffocating absence of having nothing to say, or of not wanting to talk -- it’s a smooth, drawn moment of peace, where they can each be in their own heads and still together.

It’s not supposed to be this way. Villanelle is always on, always loud and busy and bright, but now there is this softer, pensive version of her as she alternates between staring out the window at the London lights and glancing over at Eve again.

Eve is used to the Villanelle winding her up and running her around, but this -- the simple texture of merely waiting, not having to do or be, it’s too much. It’s too close. It’s not something Eve should be okay with, but she is.

She is, and that’s it’s own problem.

“You are frowning a lot,” Villanelle observes, finally, when they’re in the sludge of traffic about two blocks from their destination. “Because you are nervous? Or still mad?”

Nervous would be easier. Still mad would be easier. Or spin the wheel and pick a lie of her own. God knows that Eve has got unbelievably good at gathering her emotions up like wilted flowers and moving them out of sight, replacing them with glittering artificial bouquets that never wither or darken or age. Niko has seen so many of her plastic stems and painted petals.

Except the temptation to lie to Villanelle never comes. Eve refuses to consider what that means, and instead itches in the unfamiliar catharsis of a small truth. “I’m thinking.”

“I’m not. You should try it sometime,” Villanelle pastes on a deliberately vacant expression,
exaggerated. “It’s very soothing.”
Eve grins at that. “Uh huh.”
“What are you thinking about?”
“How we’re not talking.”

Villanelle’s brow furrows slightly -- just a tiny crease of confusion that isn’t cute, for the record. It’s not. “We are talking.”

“Not right now. I mean, like, a second ago.”

“Oh.” Villanelle tilts her head. “I can talk if you want? I’m excellent at it. But I thought you would need some quiet for a bit.”

And she’s not wrong. It had taken Eve a few minutes to sort through seeing Niko again: everything that it was and it wasn’t.

Because they had been apart long enough for guilt to set in, for regret to set in, and Eve had assumed that it would -- had caved to the threat of it when she went back to him more than a year ago now -- but the crush of it never came.

She’s a hundred kinds of okay; okay even that she is okay -- unafraid that she’s terrible for not missing the man she once promised to spend the rest of her life with.

“That’s not quite what I meant,” Eve says. “But thank you.”
She leaves it there.

She doesn’t know how to explain that Villanelle is fascinating even at rest, even turned away. Or how to communicate a feeling she doesn’t quite understand herself -- she’s not clear on the sensation or the emotion, only the certainty that it’s new. That it never existed around Niko and never could’ve.

“What did you mean?” Villanelle presses.

The car is stopping. They’re here.

But Villanelle doesn’t look away; she waits on Eve to answer.

“Nevermind,” Eve says. “I’ll tell you later.”

“But --”

“Later.”

Villanelle pouts for one, two, three, before apparently realising that Eve isn’t going to budge on this. Not right now, not when they’ve got to find Morello and get this sorted out.

She huffs. “Fine. I will text you in a minute. Come up the front way, alright? Do not try to be sneaky. You do not have to be.”

“Alright,” Eve agrees, humouring her, because it’s not like they haven’t already been over this.

Villanelle’s gaze stays on hers, making sure they’re clear, and then the hesitancy is gone, a tide
pulled back and replaced with excitement anew. “This is going to be fun, Eve.”

The energy is catching, but Eve forces herself to breathe out. “It’s work. Don’t forget.”

“It is work, but it is also us. And we are very fun.” Villanelle bites her lip -- unashamedly intentional, and there’s this pressure between them: not too heavy, just a shaken-soda sense that everything will fizz over in a moment, in another moment.

And then Villanelle is popping the car door open and slipping out into the street.

Eve watches her through the window. Even though the sidewalk is crowded, Villanelle doesn’t blend in. She’s incapable of it. Grey coats and the people in them eddie around her, wake waves parting against a ship, and Villanelle doesn’t notice them either, doesn’t spare a single one of them a shard of her attention. It’s as if Villanelle is living in a world made only for her, that no other human has ever set foot in -- until she turns, right before the corner, to look back at Eve.

She’s too far away to possibly realise that Eve is looking at her too, but maybe she knows anyway.

Villanelle has always been the kind to know anyway.

Eve blinks -- only for a fraction of a second, but somehow Villanelle is already gone, disappeared off to the gala. She can only have made it another two steps, but they’re the two steps that take her out of sight, and Eve feels like there’s probably something to be said for that. How it’s only ever a matter of inches: having someone or not having them.

She starts at the sound of whirring as the partition comes down.

“You’re not going with her?” the driver asks.

Eve catches his eye in the rear view. “No, I am. Just. We’re staggering it.”

“Right. I’ll tour the block until you guys are ready to meet back here, yeah?”

“Thanks.” Eve fidgets in place. It’s been fifty seconds, maybe. At a push. There’s no way Villanelle has made it in yet.

Still, she has her phone in her hand, waiting for it to vibrate.

Waiting-waiting-waiting-waiting-

The driver clears his throat. “You all good?”

“Hm? Oh. Yes. I’m fine,” she tells him, flashing a reassuring smile.

Maybe she was a little nervous before, but she’s not anymore. Not now that she’s seen Villanelle’s enthusiasm, been reminded of her effortless confidence; nothing could go wrong. That’s not the story Villanelle lives in. As long as Eve settles onto those pages with her for the next few hours -- the glorishly inked words of a charmed life -- they’ll both be fine.

She’ll go up to the front of the building. She’ll talk to the bouncer. Villanelle will step out, claim to be her colleague -- which is true, even if it feels like an understatement -- who came in early with both their tickets, and they’ll be artfully difficult until it’s easier to just wave them through.

They’ll both be fine.

Her phone buzzes and Eve’s heart kicks in her chest, but --
**Elena is a badass [8:23pm]** shagged her yet??

Eve rolls her eyes, but she’s too warm and her pulse is too fast, so she hardly has even the semblance of high ground.

**Me [8:24pm]** I’m not shagging her.

**Elena is a badass [8:24pm]** whtver u say babe

**Elena is a badass [8:25pm]** but u r tho, huh

There’s no point arguing with her, not when Eve definitely can’t win and isn’t even sure why she’s pushing back. It’s not a matter of pride or dignity, because giving in and sleeping with Villanelle again would cost her neither. It’s more about proving Elena right, so immediately and so inevitably, that Eve is resisting.

Her phone starts ringing. Eve shakes her head, watching the foot traffic in the street as she reflexively thumbs the answer button and holds the phone up to her ear.

“I’m not fucking her, can you let it drop?”

There’s a pause, and then because coincidence is a straight-up bitch, it’s not Elena who says, “Well, now I’m not going to let it drop.”

“Jesus, Villanelle.” Something dislocates in Eve, and it’s not quite panic or embarrassment, but it’s in that vein. “I thought you said you’d text.”

“I wanted to tell you that there are news cameras at the front, so you’d have some warning to avoid them. Better that there’s no record of us here,” Villanelle replies, and Eve can’t get a read on her tone. “But this is much more interesting.”

Eve groans. “It’s really not. I just -- I thought you were Elena.”

Villanelle carries on, unwilling to let it go. “Because there are two options, yes? One, you are talking to Elena about some woman who is not me. In that case, I am glad you are not fucking her.” It’s unapologetic, and Eve can almost hear the arch of Villanelle’s eyebrow in her voice. “Or two, you are talking about me.”

Eve tips her head back, and stares up at the ceiling. “And if it’s two?”

“If it’s two, then you should get out of the car, because I would like to get the information from Morello and still have plenty of time to change your mind about not fucking me.”

And Eve can’t really help her breath hitching, even though Villanelle probably heard it down the line, even though she’s probably smirking right now --

Eve’s giving the driver a small wave and getting out of the car, her body processing the instruction while her mind gets fish-hooked on other things. “You think you’ll need plenty of time?” It’s a lazy kind of flirting that flares in her stomach, makes a warmth in her throat and in her chest. There’s no reason, now, not to give as good as she gets.

There never really was.

“Well, I’d prefer to use most of that time for other things, but it’s up to you.”
Eve swallows. Because Villanelle is sweet-talking her, she is, but she also sounds dead serious. It’s not some shining, fogged-glass fast-breath hypothetical; it’s real and in front of them. It’s possible, abruptly.

It’s been possible since she first saw Villanelle in that conference room, but tonight there’s not the fading image of Niko between them and they’re not within the walls of M-SIX and any excuse Eve might’ve had has simmered away with the afternoon.

Except that for all the ways this is a beginning, it’s an ending, too.

But --

But it’s an ending that aches to be lived in. It’s a part of Eve already, even though it hasn’t happened yet. It’s written someplace in her that she recognises.

“I’ll be there in a minute. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready. Waiting on you,” Villanelle replies, and at that, Eve hangs up, and keeps walking.

The air is puckered with humidity -- it’s not quite spitting, but there’s a lethargy to the night that means the clouds will drop soon, and it’ll be raining properly before midnight.

Eve makes her way from the crescent of one streetlight to the next, her heels clacking against concrete as she passes from light to dark, light to dark, light again.

The gala is being held at some fancy function hall -- Eve’s never even been to this area, but Villanelle has attended an event at the same space before, and she assures Eve that it’s overstated, bordering on ugly. Which could mean anything, given Villanelle’s eclectic impression of what exactly constitutes taste.

Eve rounds the corner to find an imposing sandstone building. The media Villanelle mentioned are clustered in a little group on the sidewalk, presumably waiting on the men’s football team to arrive. Eve subtly makes her way around them, and up to the vast front doors, settling into the small trickling of other guests still arriving.

Two bouncers are positioned there, making conversation with the attendees as they check their tickets, waving them through and wishing them a good night.

Eve heads over to the closer of the two. He smiles at her. “Hi, welcome to --”

There’s not even a beat for the wraith of worry to set in; he doesn’t get to finish his sentence before Villanelle’s stepping out from inside the venue, brushing by him on her way to stand at Eve’s side.

“Oh, baby, there you are,” Villanelle rushes out -- it’s a little put upon, like she’s been making herself anxious over when Eve will arrive. Villanelle, who sounds English at the minute, having apparently decided this will give them some sort of advantage, and the accent change should throw Eve, but somehow, it doesn’t.

Instead, Eve gets stuck on baby, because -- they’re playing colleagues, aren’t they? But then Villanelle is tangling their fingers together, tugging lightly on her hand, and okay okay. Villanelle’s palm is soft and warm and they’re here for a reason; Eve can’t get caught up in this right now, she’s just got to go with it.

Villanelle rolls her eyes at Eve, but it’s for the bouncer’s benefit -- all manufactured fondness that is so difficult to see through. “I can never get her to leave the office before the American market
“Closes,” Villanelle confides to him, deftly navigating the shift from slightly harried to indulgent, as if it’s all fine now that Eve’s here. “Come on, we have to go say hi to David.”

Eve’s not sure if that’s a deliberate namedrop or Villanelle is just counting on some generic important guy named David already having arrived.

The bouncer hesitates. “I--”

“Oh, your friend Greg --” Villanelle gestures to the other bouncer. “He took our tickets already. He told me it was fine?”

She nudges Eve gently, subtly, and Eve remembers the fragment of their original plan that’s yet to go off the rails -- be more trouble than they’re worth. In Eve’s experience, a little rudeness makes everything run smoother. So as much as she wishes it wasn’t the case --

“Look,” she says flatly. “I’m already late. I want to go in and have a drink, and I really don’t appreciate you holding us up --”

“Baby,” Villanelle interrupts. “It’s fine --” Because apparently Villanelle gets to be the polite one, which isn’t quite upside down but it’s certainly more than a semitone off how they usually are.

And yes, they were supposed to both be an inconvenience, but maybe if the bouncer is afraid they’re about to have a disagreement in the entryway, that’ll be some extra motivation to shuffle them along.

“No,” Eve says, over Villanelle’s muted protest. “I’ve had a long day, and I’m really not in the mood to deal with this kind of nonsense --”

“It’s fine,” the bouncer says quickly, with that shiny, forced niceness that Eve recalls wearing as a waitress in her early twenties. She feels a twinge of apology but refuses to let it show on her face. “Go on through. Have a great night, ladies.”

They’re just barely out of the bouncer’s eyeline when Villanelle’s slightly awkward expression morphs into amusement. “You were right,” she whispers, delighted, and god, Eve can almost feel her words against the arch of her cheek. “You are good at being mean.”

“What happened to colleagues?” Eve hisses back, as they make their way through the foyer. “We decided colleagues would be fine.”

Villanelle gasps in mock indignation. “You mean you don’t think I made a good trophy wife? I think I’d be an excellent trophy wife.”

“You’d go crazy. No problems to solve.”

“Maybe I could switch to making problems. I’d be amazing at that.”

“You would be.”

“What about you?”

“Would I make a good trophy wife?”

“No. What would you do if not working at M-SIX? Would you make problems, too?”

And the first thing in Eve’s head is her research, is those folders on her laptop and the stacks of paper on her desk, but before she can decide whether to tell Villanelle about that, they enter the function hall, and Eve’s thoughts are entirely overridden by the spectacle of it.
The sheer scale of the luxury that echoes throughout the space is something else. Wealth is lacquered over everything: the tiny, beautiful canapes; the dresses and suits that mill together; the champagne; the words that simper in the fugue of it.

There’s maybe two hundred people here, but they only need to speak to one of them.

“They should just donate what they spent on all this,” Eve mutters. “Then they wouldn’t need to have a fundraiser at all.”

Villanelle hums. “That would make sense if this were really a fundraiser.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just an excuse to be rich loudly,” Villanelle reminds her. “They don’t care about the football team. They care about being extremely expensive from every angle.”

“So we should eat as many of their canapes for free as we can, is what you’re saying.”

“They also have champagne.”

Villanelle stops one of the circling waiters and passes one of the flutes to Eve, then takes another for herself. Eve normally holds drinks in her right hand, and it’s the flicker of strangeness in accepting it with her left that makes her realise she’s still holding on to Villanelle.

Or Villanelle is still holding onto her. Whichever way around it goes.

Either Villanelle hasn’t noticed yet, or it’s not bothering her, because she doesn’t make to let go. “The cheers thing is a bit obnoxious, but we are here to be obnoxious, are we not?”

“We’re here to find Morello.”

“And be obnoxious.”

Eve’s not sure they should be having an alcohol while they’re working. And yeah, it’s only one glass, but it’s — it’s layering intoxication over impulse control while she’s around Villanelle, of all people; it’s their particular history with expensive champagne.

But.

She clinks her glass to Villanelle’s. “So you’ll fit right in.”

“You are so rude to me, Eve.” Villanelle shakes her head mournfully, as though Eve has just told her something deeply tragic. “So rude.” She drags her thumb over the back of Eve’s hand.

Eve takes a sip of her champagne and tries to focus again. She could go back and forth with Villanelle indefinitely, but they’re not here for that, they’re not here for how Eve is too aware of their every touch. They’re here to find out whatever they can from Morello, and they won’t get anywhere by standing here and talking to each other.

“We should -- get started.”

Villanelle blinks herself from some kind of invisible daze. “Yes. Okay.”

Eve almost suggests they split up to try and locate Morello faster, but truthfully, that doesn’t appeal at all. There are certainly worse things in the world than having Villanelle this close, murmuring commentary about the guests as they move around the room, and Eve’s not about to give it up for the
sake of sorting this out more quickly.

They manage to avoid conversation with anyone else, gravitating closer to one another and carefully drifting away from the few who try to engage them. They can’t afford to get trapped in some conversation and burn their rationed minutes, can’t afford to be memorable, to have the wrong people ask too many questions. The less attention that falls on M-SIX at this time, the better.

Eve’s starting to think that they’ve messed up -- Morello has bailed or left early or he was never coming -- when Villanelle says, “There.”

She follows Villanelle’s gaze. Morello is immediately recognisable from his photographs -- short greying hair, a crisp suit, a placid sort of expression. He’s chatting to a couple of other men in almost identical tailored tuxes; it’s tediousness manifested. They’re bored and boring.

They can’t ask about Sam Pleat in front of this whole group, not when Carolyn has slapped the kind of gag order on this that means they’re barely allowed to talk about it in the safety of Villanelle’s office, behind a closed door. They could worm their way into the conversation and try to split off with him, but --

“Let’s go over to the bar,” Eve suggests quietly. “His champagne’s empty. Safe bet that he’ll head over there in a minute.”

“Especially with the blond guy who spits when he talks standing right next to him.”

They weave through the crowd, heading to the open bar. Villanelle orders them both gin and tonics.

Eve raises an eyebrow. “Nostalgic?” she dares, and it’s pushing it, it is. Still -- compulsively -- Eve pushes.

But Villanelle shakes her head. “No.” The bartender sets their drinks down. “Nostalgia is a longing for something in the past.”

Eve picks up her gin and tonic, and takes a sip. It hits like that first night, like top shelf spirits and possibility and reckless wishing.

“And we’re not in the past.”

And they’re not, are they; even when Eve hadn’t seen Villanelle in months they were somehow viciously, sweetly of the present, permanently immediate. Unfinished.

It doesn’t feel like they’re close to finished now -- the space between them is decorative at best, Eve is dizzy on Villanelle’s perfume, and it’s a matter of hours before it all falls apart -- and still, Eve maps them laterally rather than longitudinally. She can’t seem to imagine them along a straight line, moving forward to a certain end; instead, they spread and sprawl, consuming three dimensions like they’re curing starvation. From their epicentre, they radiate outwards.

Until the perimeter that is tonight. Until the unscalable wall that is the next time they kiss.

And that guts whatever quick reply has leapt to Eve’s lips.

“Jameson Blended -- a double, please.”

Eve starts at the new voice, and jeez, she was right, Morello is right there. Alone.

Villanelle recovers first, refocusses first. “Excellent choice,” she commends, and just like that,
Villanelle is gone, replaced by the woman with a muted English lilt to her words and a smaller presence -- assured, but not commanding. “We went to the Midleton Distillery for a tour not long ago, didn’t we?” she prompts Eve.

“Yes, it was lovely,” Eve agrees, and god, she wishes Villanelle had picked a different segue because Eve honestly knows nothing about whiskey.

But Morello lights up, and launches into an anecdote about some decades-aged Redbreast he bought himself as a “little treat” the other day, and Villanelle is nodding along, asking where he got it, as if she will actually drop a thousand pounds on a bottle in the near future.

From there, it’s easy enough to keep the conversation going. They introduce themselves, first names only, and they nice-to-meet-you when he reciprocates, as if they don’t already know exactly who he is.

Eve takes the back seat, jumping in often enough to technically be contributing, but content to let Villanelle navigate this language of excess and indulgence, watching instead for a window to organically guide Morello to what they need to know.

They get close, a few times, but Morello misinterprets one of Villanelle’s leading questions, and that accidentally hauls them off on a tangent about yachts. Yachts. Specifically, the merits of renting versus buying them. Eve, for the first time in her life, feels like her research preparation has been entirely inadequate.

It’s been fifteen minutes already since they struck up, and surely the announcement for dinner can’t be too far off, and then they’ll lose him, and it’ll be a nightmare orchestrating another coincidental run-in with him at some later date.

And then Villanelle’s arm slips around her waist, palm settling on Eve’s hip: a quiet touch, like she can tell that Eve’s already lost, trying plot out their next opportunity, rattling off contingencies in silent circles around her mind.

"-- and of course you get to customise it, when it's really your own, but it's like I told my wife -- how often do we get out to the water, anyway? And then there's the dock space, and in truth, it all gets a bit difficult to sort out," Morello complains, pausing his monologue to shove a canape down, dusting a flake of pastry off his lapel.

Villanelle laughs -- light and fluttering, not her real laugh, which is hard and fast, as abrupt as it is pretty. "But there's something to be said for getting to name it, don't you think?"

"You're not wrong," Morello agrees. "Spas and bars aside, half the fun of yachting is getting a good pun on the water."

"A pun? Surely you'd name it after your wife," Villanelle interjects, tutting. "It's not real love until they've named something special after you, right, baby?"

"Right," Eve repeats, trying to inject it with some emphasis, eagerness. Villanelle squeezes her hip, another we've got this.

Eve doesn’t know anything named after anyone, come to think of it. Vice versa, though, there is Villanelle, who has named herself after a poem.

How intricate, how fitting. Eve had been too cavalier way back when about obsession, hadn’t understood the word for its weight.
"I keep trying to persuade this one to go on a nice holiday. I'd adore a few weeks at the harbour," Villanelle sighs, with a put-upon air, as if this is a weekly discussion between the two of them and not merely a wavering ruse. "But no such luck. Always too busy."

Morello tuts. "Now, that's tragic. What's keeping you too busy? A vacation here and there is healthy, you know."

Villanelle's fingers dig in a little harder, just for a second, but Eve doesn't need to signal -- she can see the opening Villanelle has managed to finally carve for them. "I work at M-SIX," Eve tells him. Light. Causal. Hopefully. "I'm sure you've heard about the merger. I'll set aside some time when the dust has settled, but for now, we're in the thick of it."

"Oh, yes, with Aaron Peel's group. Exciting stuff."

"A lot of the details are already ironed out. It's down to rebranding, now."

And then Villanelle is complaining, "And it's always too many hours. You need more support, baby, I've said it before. You ought to make some new hires. Or bring back some old faces. Michael. Although he's in Germany now."

"We could use Sam Pleat back on the team," Eve adds, and she prays it's not too sudden, too heavy-handed. Villanelle could've done it better, probably, but they've already been here too long, and finesse is its own kind of molasses. "But he's over with you at Vander Hatchens, isn't he, Anderson? I can't persuade you to send him back?"

Morello chuckles. "I'm hanging onto him with both hands. An investment, that one. You don't pass up someone recommended by Carolyn Martens herself, not if you're smart. Marvellous woman, that. Old skill tough and new school savvy, eh?"

And Eve --

Eve is kind of frozen, because Carolyn?

There's no way this comes back to Carolyn. There's just not.

"Carolyn?" Maybe she heard wrong. Maybe the alcohol and Villanelle's proximity and the alien feeling of being out from behind her desk have coalesced to misfire in Eve's brain, and this is all an elaborate mistake.

Morello nods. "Oh, yes. I knew from the minute I got her email about Pleat that we had a keeper on our hands. Did you work with him much, in his M-SIX days?"

Carolyn.

"Excuse me, this has reminded me that I've got to make a call," Eve says, plastering politeness over her words and stepping back, out of Villanelle's hold, away from Morello.

Carolyn.

Eve's first instinct is to head for the front exit, but there are still latecomers arriving, and moving against the grain is too noticeable. Instead, she goes for one of the side doors, down some stairs, around a corner, and she's probably well off-limits now but she shoves through into yet another room. A quick glance around tells her she's in a smaller meeting area that clearly hasn't been booked for the evening.
The only light is the tepid shine of the exit sign above her, and it’s quiet. The music from the main hall is distant, more remembered than real, and for the first time in an hour, there’s nobody else around.

Eve breathes out.


Even if, for some reason, Carolyn was going to trade in illicit information -- and Eve’s not blind; it’s unlikely that all of Carolyn’s business practices are above-board -- then she wouldn’t be stupid enough to leave a paper trail. Wouldn’t be stupid enough to green-light Eve and Villanelle chasing this up.

Which means this goes much higher than Bayer, just as Carolyn had implied that day at her house. It means it goes to somebody with enough sway to get IT to give them Carolyn’s email, her permissions, and use them to cover their own tracks.

One of the senior partners, then.

“Fantastic,” Eve groans, leaning back against the wall.

She fishes her phone out of her clutch and dials, waits by Mississippis for Carolyn to pick up.

“Best keep this succinct, Eve,” she answers. “I have company.”

Eve decides to believe that it’s the dinner party kind, and not the other kind of company people have after nine-thirty p.m. on a Saturday. “Carolyn. Listen. Morello -- he says you were the one who pulled the strings and got Pleat hired.”

There’s a pause. “Well, that’s less than ideal, I suppose. Was that all?”

Eve blinks. “Uh, yeah? Carolyn, this means someone has been using your name, and, and --”

“I’d prefer it if you reacted to this revelation in your own time, Eve.” Another beat. “Thank you for your work. Now, go have a drink, but don’t get messy, and leave before the rush. I’ll see you tomorrow to discuss this development.”

“Development? M-SIX could be --”

“In your own time,” Carolyn chides. “Goodnight.”

And then she hangs up.

“What did she say?”

Eve finds herself turning automatically, as if she’s processed the fact that it’s Villanelle, that it’s fine, it’s good, just as quickly as she’s registered the surprise itself. “Nothing. She just -- called it a development.”

Which -- isn’t technically wrong. Eve can feel the grey web of this looping over them, under them, and she can’t quite make out the edges of the lies and misleads, but there’s the tug of them all the same.

They’ll figure it out. They’ll follow the ripples until they find the stone.

Villanelle hums. The red neon light clings to her, and it should look strange, but it doesn’t; it’s
beautiful cast in a different shade. Eve wonders if it’s possible to see Villanelle and not want her.

“You are enjoying this, aren’t you?” Villanelle observes, and her eyes are endlessly dark and burnished with something. “You like the tangles.”

“I like untangling them,” Eve corrects. “At the minute, we’re still finding new tangles.”

“True.” Villanelle nods. “There’s not much we can do until your boss gives us further instructions, though.”

Villanelle’s right about that. No matter what they think is best, this is Carolyn’s show. “She did say to have another drink, but that’s about it.”

“Dinner has started upstairs. I said I had to let you know, and Morello went off to his wife,” Villanelle explains. “Bar’s closed. So if you are after another drink, we’ll have to find it elsewhere.” She takes one, two, three steps closer, and rests her shoulder against the wall, and now Villanelle is halfway in the dark but Eve swears she can still see her in perfect detail.

“Well, Carolyn is my boss. And she did tell me to.”

“Mm. Usually best to do what your boss tells you to.”

And Eve should point out that Villanelle almost never does what Konstantin tells her to; she should say they’ve got to leave. Goodbye, see you on Monday. “Elsewhere, huh?”

“Plenty of bars in London. Restaurants. Clubs,” Villanelle lists off, but it’s languid, disaffected, and none of these are the choice that Eve is supposed to make.

She can play out, beat for beat, how the rest of this goes. Eve will say none of those work for her; Villanelle will mention that actually, she has a few excellent liqueurs stocked at her apartment. It’ll be an homage, almost, to I have some Krug Grande Cuvee in my hotel room and maybe they’ll pretend in the car ride there that Eve’s really only coming over for a drink, or maybe they won’t. Maybe they’ll kiss in the back seat or maybe they’ll kiss when they reach Villanelle’s front door or maybe once they’ve been sitting and talking a while on Villanelle’s couch, dancing around it all.

Eve loves the thrill of this, the game, the pull and push and flirt and fold, but god it’s been so long of just words --

And fuck, Eve is done with words. She’s done with delays and distance and maybes.

She’s kind of a professional at endings, these days. If this is to be the last of them, as they are, then Eve will blink first, Eve will clutch and claw at it until she’s written her greed over Villanelle’s skin and the memory of it never climbs out of her cells.

If it’s going to haunt her, then Eve will choose how it haunts her exactly.

So.

So Eve reaches up, and sets one hand on Villanelle’s waist, and coaxes her closer, and Villanelle goes easily, so easily; if this were an animation then every frame would’ve already been drawn and they would only be catching up to what already exists: the delicate lapse of time as Villanelle traces Eve’s cheek, slow; Eve pressing up, pressing into her, pressing their lips together.

It’s a kiss the way a landslide is a rockfall.
Eve is nowhere else. Eve isn’t on the outside of herself watching or thinking about work or dreaming of somebody who isn’t there. Eve is in her own bones, her own blood, and every fractured thud of how heavily she exists ricochets through her lungs, through the breath gasped into them.

She gets so twisted up in each sensation that pieces go missing between one and the next -- it’s a mess of teeth and tongues and Villanelle’s fingers in her hair and a mark sucked at her collarbone and how every single part of Villanelle responds when Eve makes even the smallest sound.

It’s all touch, all texture, all taste. Eve has always thought of hunger as finite, a definite absence of something; who could’ve known there were so many ways to not have even near enough.


Eve pulls back, realises as she moves that she’s had Villanelle up against the closed door for a while now, that Villanelle’s dress has slipped off one of her shoulders, that she’s gripping Eve’s wrist tightly so that Eve doesn’t take her hand off Villanelle’s thigh.

“Villanelle, what’s --”

“I do not think we should do this.”

“Oh.”

“Here,” she clarifies hastily. “Do this here. The gala is right above us and we would have to be quiet and quick --” And jeez, the door doesn’t even have a lock on it. “-- and I have imagined this a lot of times, Eve, and it is never either of those things.”

I have imagined this a lot of times.

Eve puts a couple of inches between them, and Villanelle lets go of her wrist, her hand shifting to hold Eve’s again instead, only it’s not pretend, now.

Villanelle’s gaze is blown-pupils dark but heated and gentle all at once and this once, it occurs to Eve that maybe --

Maybe --

“Come back to mine?” Villanelle asks, and the question is kiss-bruised in the air.

But Eve’s done with maybes.

Eve prints a yes to Villanelle’s lips, to the line of her jaw, and then lets herself be dragged out the door, up the stairs, past the bouncers, back to the car in some burning rush that she won’t recall anything about except the feel of it. Of this.

Chapter End Notes

i know i said theyd hook up this chapter but. it's 6k and i didnt want it to get exhaustingly long for yall. i'll get 'em next time, folks.

thanks for comments. i adore every single one and read them over again feeling like sunshine. so. love u.
i swear im replying i just had a busy week.
Finally.

With the car doors shut behind them, everything suddenly feels small. Yes, just beyond the windows is London, and behind the partition is the driver, but they are moored in this urgent little world: the back seat, the ceiling light, each other.

Villanelle, for someone who so often exudes a carelessness with her time -- an elaborate patience, as if she will relax indefinitely until tides turn in her favour -- is terrible at waiting. Once something is close enough to touch, she can’t resist touching it. Eve knows this from working with her every day. Eve knows this from the cab ride from the nightclub to Villanelle’s hotel room, when they were almost strangers. Eve knows it from the way Villanelle is toying with the hem of Eve’s dress right now.

“Hands to yourself,” Eve warns, before Villanelle gets braver and Eve gets weaker.

Villanelle’s eyes shift with something dark and pleased. “To myself?” she repeats, and her hand leaves Eve’s thigh to settle at her own neck, then trails down her chest, over her stomach, down --

Eve reaches out and snatches Villanelle’s hand back, weaving their fingers together and keeping her from starting something that they are still eight blocks from being able to finish.

Villanelle doesn’t seem particularly bothered by this arrangement; she hums, leaning across to kiss Eve’s cheek.
Except Eve turns her head so her lips meet Villanelle’s, and yeah, okay, that’s on Eve, that’s Eve’s fault --

The hum still low in Villanelle’s throat simmers into something else that runs through Eve, a shiver of sound, and Jesus, why couldn’t they be in some fucking nowhere country town that’s never so much as heard of traffic?

Eve presses closer, chasing something that isn’t going anywhere. Her seatbelt registers vaguely as some distant, blurry annoyance, but the tug of it is lost underneath everything else.

She wants that nearness, can’t help wanting it, and Villanelle is there, just past halfway, meeting her.

The material of Villanelle’s dress is endlessly silky and rich when Eve drags her palms over it: it’s expensive, luxurious, and so stupid because all Eve needs is for it to be gone, out of her way, off Villanelle’s body.

She can feel Villanelle smile, and it’s different this close; it does different things to her chest.

Like nothing. It does nothing. In fact --

The car stops, and it’s almost like Eve willed it, like she needed a second to get herself together so badly that she forced it into existence.

Only she doesn’t get that second because Villanelle is rapping the partition with her knuckles, thanking the driver when it winds down -- his name is Daniel, apparently -- and then slipping out of the car, and Eve is following her out onto the sidewalk.

This part of town is less awake than the other neighbourhoods they’ve passed through: organic grocers and artisanal bakeries don’t tend to have flashing signs advertising that they’ll stay open until three a.m.. It’s all sleek, tall buildings, modernity dug into the pores of the place. No potholes, no closed businesses. It’s like London’s mantle of precious things, preserved pride of place, no dust, even as the rest of the city continues on in passionate disarray.

Villanelle has caught Eve’s hand in both of hers, and her thumb has found the inside of Eve’s wrist, and it’s running tiny, regular motions. She must be able to feel Eve’s pulse, the chaotic speed of it. A contrast.

Eve takes a breath that’s just muscle movement; no air fills up her lungs. Or maybe it does, and she just doesn’t feel it, or the oxygen percent isn’t high enough to get rid of the spinning in her head.

“Eve?”

Villanelle’s lipstick has worn partially away. Her carefully styled curls have become almost completely untangled.

Eve will admit: she is remembering this, in a very intentional, deliberate, almost desperate way.

Villanelle’s brow creases slightly, but Eve just squeezes her hand and motions towards the front doors of the apartment building, which looks just as it did when Eve searched it up online weeks ago.

She makes her way across the lobby to the elevators, Villanelle’s warmth at her side as they step in. And then not at her side, but in front of her, backing Eve into the chrome panelling and pressing flush against her under some thin pretence of reaching the button for the eighth floor. As if they’re not past pretences, when they were just making out in the back of a car, but there is something
gripping and shuddering about the intensity of it. About the burning gracelessness of a desire that you cannot manage to fit into any faked innocence.

The doors start to close. Finally.

Eve licks her bottom lip, bites down on it, just to watch Villanelle watch her do it.

But Villanelle watching is only ever a thin restraint from Villanelle doing, and --

And then the doors stop as a hand darts between them, and they slide open again. Some young guy in a ruffled suit staggers in, smelling of vodka and smiling. “Alright, ladies?”

Eve’s glad to have never been on the receiving end of this particular glare of Villanelle’s.

Unperturbed, he pushes the button for the eleventh floor. The doors close properly this time, and Villanelle, without hesitation, taps the button for the second floor.

The elevator ascends, some easy-listening music playing from hidden speakers. Villanelle is still so close to her, but the man is right there, and Eve wishes, fervently, that she had the power to make other people disappear.

After the few seconds it takes to move up one level, the elevator car halts again, and the doors open.

Nobody moves.

“Your floor?” the man prompts.

“Yours,” Villanelle replies, flatly. “Get out.”

“I --”

“Out.”

He seems almost like he might argue, but that slouches into a grumble, and he slinks out. Villanelle looks like she’s never been less sorry about anything in her life, although in fairness, that’s an expression she wears an awful lot. She’s never had much discomfort in interrupting other people’s lives to make room for her own.

Eve finds that quality probably more attractive than she really should.

The doors close.

“So --”

“Eve, do not take this the wrong way, because I really do like talking to you very much. But I did not kick him out so I could talk to you,” Villanelle explains, her accent curling thicker than usual, lascivious over the consonants.

Villanelle allows one short moment for her words to sink in, and then she’s kissing Eve again, with such fierce immediacy, eagerness, that Eve’s disappointed when the elevator stops again.

Except --

Except this means they’re only a hallway and a door from not being interrupted again.

Everything slows, a little, as they walk the eighteen steps to Villanelle’s apartment door, as she
unlocks it, as they move inside. There’s a sense of certainty that gentles it all, that gives Eve the breadth and depth in this instant to settle into it.

Villanelle’s apartment, when she flicks the light on, is exactly like and nothing like what Eve imagined -- not that she ever meant to imagine it. It’s a compromise between cluttered and minimalist that should be jarring, but instead, it just seems fervently real, actively existed in. As if Villanelle has collected her life from a hundred different places, and collaged her past on her tables and shelves.

The front room is bigger than Eve’s entire apartment, although that’s hardly surprising. She wants more time to look around, to pick up knick-knacks and books and photographs and turn them over in her hands, to try and extract whatever of Villanelle she can from the things she owns.

But.

She doesn’t have that time, and she won’t get it. Maybe she’ll cast another glance around tomorrow as she leaves, but she’s sure it’d feel too invasive in the cold light of morning. As it is, there are already so many questions aching in her from these broad stroke suggestions of a private history -- who wrote postcards, and what drew Villanelle to these artworks, and why that snowglobe, and and and.

Eve, at once, is a desert creature in the ocean: overwhelmed by something she was only ever meant to have a little of.

She turns. Villanelle is watching her like --

_I have imagined this lots of times._

Eve is about two seconds from just pushing Villanelle onto the closest couch, and fucking her until Eve is finally able to manage a coherent thought about something else, or at least, stop caring that she can’t.

But Villanelle takes a step away. Well, half a step. It’s more a gesture than anything; she doesn’t really manage to put any actual distance between them.

“Not in here,” Villanelle says. “Hammerhead is in here.” She points to the large glass tank against the far wall; it emits a faint blue glow, and Eve can see the delicate shape of the fish, swimming about.

“He’s a fish, Villanelle. Don’t they have three-second memories? I don’t think we’ll scar --”

Villanelle reaches behind herself, draws her zipper down with more fluidity than should be possible, and tugs at the fabric. It slides off her easily, like it wasn’t designed to be worn but to be removed, and Eve might wonder more about how that works if she could find it within herself to care even a tiny bit about the dress, and not just the person who used to be wearing it.

Because Villanelle is --

Is --

Eve’s not sure looking at someone has ever been so much of an experience on its own, completely separate from the want to touch or to have. Touch and have are still at her ribs with their teeth, steady and savage, but for a silvered inch of time, Eve blinks them away.

And just looks.
Villanelle is confidence distilled, is comfort and strength. Eve so often feels as if her own body is some vague thing she uses to take herself from place to place, to pick things up and set them down, but Villanelle’s head and heart and the muscles that make her up are inextricable. Villanelle inhabits her body: relentlessly, purposefully.

It’s a very, very effective way to win an argument; Villanelle is a lawyer, and is supposed to be able to persuade with her words, but this works. This definitely works.

When Villanelle reaches out this time, takes her hand, and pulls her forward -- this is it.

Her future self will be furious with her if Eve spends this letting meanings and implications and regrets run laps around her head. This isn’t supposed to be about overthinking; isn’t supposed to be about thinking at all.

Eve decides to focus on only the sensation of it, like she did the first time -- when Villanelle wasn’t just anybody, but wasn’t quite somebody to her. Not like she is now; more of a somebody than she has any right to be, and --

Focus. She’s focusing.

Focusing on the exact soft warmth of Villanelle’s hips under her hands, the rivulet of the scar on her stomach that Eve noticed last time but couldn’t ask about; can’t ask about now. The indents of her ribs, precise and measured.

Focusing on Villanelle’s mouth at the underside of Eve’s jaw, at the hollow of her throat, the scrape of teeth over her shoulder, the suck of a mark left there. On whispered words that collapse to nothing but betray Eve by gravitating into a sentence all at once, abrupt with no warning: promises added to the stumble of Eve’s heartbeat.

Her resolution slips when Villanelle takes Eve’s dress off carefully -- quickly, but with a deftness that, unlike that first night, keeps her dress in tact, as if she knows that Eve really quite likes this one and would like to be able to wear it again. It slips when Villanelle’s gaze tracks over her, and Eve is so aware of herself and so unbothered by that awareness. She is awake and alive and she wants to be, so that she can be in every part of this.


She chases away the slowness, the gentleness that Villanelle seems to have temporarily caught, and shoves her down onto the bed, straddles her.

Villanelle’s fingers dig into her thighs, and her stare jumps from Eve’s eyes to her lips -- as if she wasn’t kissing them a second ago -- to score over her body -- as if she’s not touching her already.

And --

It’s so much, it’s everything, and Eve just wants --

“I know it has been a year, Eve, but surely you remember what comes next?”

And just like that, Villanelle’s an asshole again, and Eve’s laughing again, even as she can’t quite concentrate, with how close they are. “It hasn’t been a year since I’ve had sex.”

Villanelle wrinkles her nose. “Yes, I do not want to think about your having sex with your soggy moustache of an ex-husband.”
“I don’t really want to think about it either, so can we --”

Villanelle kisses her. It’s messy-deep but unhurried -- luxurious in a way that the crystal champagne glasses and gold-plated countertops at the gala this evening couldn’t imitate.

It’s the beautiful clash of needing something and having it, but still needing it.

Eve means to push Villanelle onto her back, to work her way down her body until a hundred late-night fantasies are written over with the taste of reality.

But Villanelle’s ahead of her, is flipping them, pressing Eve down into the mattress, and she looks -- Eve isn’t sure.

And then Eve’s wrists are being pinned above her head and there’s no ambiguity in Villanelle's expression now.

“I get to fuck you first,” Villanelle says. “You can have a turn later.”

For a year, each encounter has been playing understudy to an echo. Niko, with his rough stubble and rote movements, trying to kiss his way through the membrane of a memory he didn’t know existed. Eve, with closed eyes, torn continuously between imagining and not imagining someone else, somewhere else.

Mostly, she’d decided to work to stay in the moment, to be there with him, in their bedroom and their marriage, and not compare it, contrast it. Because it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t doing any good -- Eve would list the reasons over and over and still, the rough twist of the sheets and his exhales thick at her neck would pale, pale, pale.

But this isn’t a Thursday night rendered in by-the-numbers intimacy.

This is them, and the way they fit together so stupidly well, and Eve almost needs it to be a letdown just so she can move on with her life. Except it isn’t, because Villanelle is vicious with her softness and passion and patience. It’s brutal, the way it builds Eve up and shreds her apart.

The details are different though, this time.

Villanelle talks more -- words pressed to her thighs and hips and the slender inside of her wrist -- and says her name more, *Eve, Eve, Eve* .

It’s not slower, although there are flickering seconds where it feels it. Because Eve gets strung on the tiny things, like the minute changes in Villanelle’s expression.

Then there’s everything else -- they know each other better now, and that weaves through it all.

And of course, of course this wasn’t going to be enough -- even as it’s too much, Eve needs more.

She’s not going to say that, she can’t, she won’t, but.

But Villanelle kisses like maybe that’s true for her, too. Everywhere, she lingers; there’s nothing lost in translation. No gaps left, not even in such hurried greed.
Villanelle is deliberate and artful and present in everything she does, yet she isn’t methodical; her focus is unwavering but her attention jumps around as she’s drawn in by every breath and shift and sound.

Eve doesn’t think anyone’s touched her this way, not really, not ever.

And maybe, although this seems like a much more damning truth, Eve has never tried to touch someone quite like this, either, and suddenly, it’s the only way she can.

When Eve’s dreamed about this, about fucking Villanelle again, she’s always got stuck on making Villanelle want it as badly as Eve, as much and consumingly. Somewhere along the line, she’d convinced herself that Villanelle would be as unflustered and calm about this as she is about most things.

But she isn’t.

Villanelle squirms under her, arches, so responsive that Eve gets caught in winding her up, in trying to see how far she can push this before one of them can’t take it anymore and gives in.

Before Eve, Eve, Eve, before that high, frustrated noise, before Villanelle falls into another language and impulse drowns Eve until she’s gone.

This time, when Eve wakes up, there is no suspended moment of confusion, no slack lapse where she forgets where she is or who she’s with, only for it to come rushing back.

This time, when Eve wakes up, she doesn’t open her eyes. Because --

If she doesn’t open her eyes then it isn’t technically morning yet, and she doesn’t have to run through the motions carved out into the empty day in front of her: get up, get dressed, get out. If she stays asleep -- stays pretending to be asleep -- then all of that can be another five minutes away.

Eve, in the night, has gravitated closer to Villanelle, or maybe vice versa, or maybe they just didn’t fall asleep that far apart. Regardless: there is the gentle heat of her against Eve’s side, the even movements of her breaths. There’s something delicate about it; there’s a permanent softness to Villanelle this way that Eve only catches fleeting glimpses of in their normal life.

Villanelle’s forehead is pressed to Eve’s shoulder, and her toes to Eve’s calf, so she must be curled in some way, just slightly, although Eve won’t look to see exactly. Still, she imagines them from above, how they must seem, but -- but kicks the picture away before the temptation to stretch it out of context tugs too hard.

Instead, Eve catalogues the feeling, then folds it up and away, refusing to quite admit exactly how badly she’s trying to keep it.

Is it knowing that this will never happen again that makes it so necessary to hang onto? With Niko, by the time she cared about whether there would be another night, she already knew for sure that there would be. Would this sense of importance, severity, of impact -- would it be less, if they could have another morning like this?

Eve doesn’t think so, and jeez, isn’t that something she doesn’t want to deal with right now. Or ever.
She gives herself another minute.

She’ll open her eyes in another minute.

Villanelle shifts slightly, and Eve is struck by the stupid, idiotic, ridiculous notion that she shouldn’t have fallen asleep. That instead of hours of calm darkness she could have had this sensation strung out, pulled long, until it was almost something she might’ve been used to.

Instead, she will have a sliver of memory of it: enough to make it something she’ll miss, and nothing more.

But missing this -- missing anything more than the physical release of it -- is a fool’s errand, and she knew that going in. Eve isn’t really in the habit of making herself foolish for other people.

Today is Sunday. It’s still early. Probably. Earlier than ten o’clock, anyway. Which gives Eve just under twenty-four hours before she’s back at M-SIX, back in Villanelle’s office, back to colleagues again.

So.

So Eve is going to head home. She’ll get off the train one stop early and go to that overpriced bakery that she hasn’t yet had an occasion to try, and she’ll get a chocolate croissant. She’ll eat it as she walks home and she’ll think about the weather and how nice of a day it is or isn’t, and pretend that’s enough to take up all the space in her head. She’ll bury herself in research. In the afternoon, she’ll go for a run. After that, she’ll order in, and drink as much wine as she can without it clinging to her come Monday --

Villanelle’s hand moves, and Eve thinks she’s just adjusting in her sleep again. But. She trails the backs of her fingers up Eve’s spine in a smooth, rhythmic sweep, then back down again, and if Eve weren’t so definitely awake by now, then it would probably send her back to sleep.

There’s no way that Villanelle is doing that unconsciously, so she must have woken up, too, Eve hasn’t heard her breathing change. Which means either that Villanelle has been awake for a while now, or that Eve’s been too lost in her own mind, and didn’t notice.

Eve stays still, and Villanelle’s hand traces up and down, up and down, slowly, slowly. It’s --

It’s really fucking relaxing, and Eve doesn’t need that right now. She doesn’t need to melt back into Villanelle’s mattress -- which, she should ask after the brand at some point, because it’s beyond comfortable -- and she doesn’t need to lose any last remaining willpower to get up.

Eve opens her eyes, and stretches slightly, the two interlinked by habit.

“Oh, you are awake,” Villanelle chirps, and her voice is slightly rusty with earliness. It’s painfully attractive and -- maybe not even in a way that makes Eve want to fuck her again; maybe just kiss her again. And kiss her and kiss her and -- “I did not mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t.” Eve assures her, pushing up onto her elbows and glancing over at Villanelle, even though it feels like tempting fate.

Well, tempting herself, really. Fate doesn’t have all that much to do with it.

Eve, once, has seen Villanelle asleep in the morning. The recollections of that have split into fractals, into hazes, and there’s only a dimmed impression remaining of the slope of Villanelle’s naked back and the blankness of her expression, unbroken by dreams. Now, though, Villanelle is a foot away, is
in high definition, is real and immediate. Her hair is messy, but not tangled, spilled over the pillow. She seems -- soft. But it is not this softness that strikes Eve, but rather, some unexpected sense of closeness. As if a space between the two of them that Eve hadn’t ever really stopped to quantify, qualify, has been tamed.

Eve swallows, and sits up properly, dragging a hand through her hair. She stares ahead, at the bookshelf. At the titles too far away for her to really make out. “Right. So. I’ll -- I should --”

She can’t seem to tie the sentence together, to gather up some sentiment and shove it into an excuse, because really, Eve doesn’t have anywhere to be. But Villanelle can fill in the blank for her, surely; she’ll pipe up with some suggestion that Eve can grab onto.

Except she doesn’t. There’s just a slanted pause.

Then -- “What are you doing?” Villanelle’s voice sounds different. Casual, but so specifically almost something else. Like sunbathing at the very edge of a beach cliff: content, but two or three inches from plummeting into the waves.

“Uh.” Eve’s throat is dry. “Leaving?”

“Your husband did not call.” It’s a joke, but it’s too heavy to hold itself up, and gets impaled on the edge in Villanelle’s tone.

Eve scoffs, reflexively. “As if I’d pick up.”

There’s the tiny curve of a smile on Villanelle’s face for a heartbeat, too, and then it dissipates. “So why are you leaving, then?”

And Eve’s kind of thrown that they’re even discussing this at all. She hesitates. Because -- “Because --” She’s supposed to? She doesn’t know what else to do? “Because you want me to?”

Villanelle blinks, tilts her head. “I want you to?” she repeats, blankly.

“Yeah.” Although Eve feels a lot less certain about it now.

“That’s not what I want,” Villanelle drawls, and she sits up too, her hand still warm on Eve’s back. Eve should keep glaring at the bookshelf but instead she turns her head, watching the sheets pool at Villanelle’s waist. Eve thinks of those sculptures with capes and dresses and how the artists made lightness out of stone, and froze flawlessness forever. And how all of them would’ve killed to have been the one to carve this. “What I want is to have breakfast, and a hot shower --” That’s an image. “-- and to fuck you again.” She kisses Eve’s shoulder, on the mark of her own making, but this imprint of her lips burns too, and stays too. Then she shrugs. “But I do not mind so much about the order of things. So. Up to you.”

And Eve sets aside questions around this, how it’s going on too long for her to understand what and where the ending is now -- she sets it all aside and chooses to have Villanelle first, because of course she does.

That’s not something to make a habit of, though.
and now we're in what Marvel would call... Phase 2: oh ShIT fEeLInGS . . and the ultimate question of can Margot keep up tension when they're already regularly having sex...

thank you for all your gorgeous comments last time, and im sorry the replies were so late! i appreciate each and every single one, and im so glad youre here with me <3

also, any writers who read this story -- if you would like to fill in the gap (that would be awesome, but i also know everyone has their own stories and yall are very busy) hmu - write and post your insert and i'll link it! (and be hype and probs write you a lil oneshot as a thank u)
“Carolyn’s going to call soon,” Eve says, into the silence. Villanelle, beside her, is still catching her breath, her face pressed into the pillow. There’s the sudden, unwelcome impulse to touch her. Not to start something up, but just -- just for some kind of because.

Villanelle turns her head to look at Eve, dragging a hand through her hair, pushing it out of her eyes. Eve feels the phantom sensation of it, of having her fingers twisted in it. “So?”

“So, I don’t really want to be on the phone to her like this.” Like: naked, next to an equally naked colleague.

“I do not know if you know this, but right next to the green answer button, there is another button. It is red, and if you --”

“I can’t just blow her off.”

“Sure, you can.”

Eve rolls her eyes. “She’s not my uncle. Not all of us have a get-out-of-jail-free card.”

Villanelle shrugs -- makes a symbolic attempt at it, anyway; just some slack, slipshod muscle movement to summarise a bone-deep carelessness. “You can borrow mine.”

“I really can’t.” Eve’s pretty sure that nepotism is non-transferrable.

Villanelle leans across, kisses her, presses against her lips: “But don’t you want to try?”

Eve lets it linger -- sue her -- before she pulls away, slips off the bed, stands up. “I’m going to shower. Alone,” she adds, when she sees the smirk flick across Villanelle’s mouth.

“But I will get so bored out here, all by myself,” Villanelle complains, draping an arm dramatically across her eyes. Her commitment to the bit only lasts a second, and then she’s sitting up, watching Eve again.
“There’s no one to pour coffee on,” Eve fires back. “I’m sure you’ll be able to limit the trouble you get into.”

Villanelle grins, presumably at the memory of Frank and cold brew. “I am not to be underestimated, Eve.” She pauses. “But you would know that.” She arches an eyebrow, as if Eve won’t have caught her meaning based on inflection alone. Eve would’ve caught it just by knowing Villanelle’s penchant for innuendo, regardless.

“I never underestimated you.” And that’s not entirely correct, but not exactly wrong, either. No, Eve couldn’t have guessed every detail, predicted each touch and taste and moment. But she had a sense of the magnitude of it, the way it would cling to her, the texture of it, even as it sinks into the past.

And Villanelle has earned how pleased she looks with herself, so this once, Eve lets it slide without comment. “Are you sure you don’t want company?” Villanelle tries, and there’s no chance that the way she shifts so the sheet covers even less is unintentional. “Just to really make certain how accurate your estimations were?”

It’s difficult not to consider it, with Villanelle’s gaze trailing over her like that.

Okay, so Eve considers it. Whatever. But she does shake her head, does leave Villanelle on the bed and head into the cool darkness of the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Eve’s running on half the usual amount of sleep, and she’s going to need the clarity only a hot shower can shock her into if she wants half a hope of navigating the rest of this strangeness.

Because it is strange. It doesn’t fit into the space Eve had already carved for it in her mind. Instead of a stiff, measured distance, instead of disclaimers shoehorned into their every phrase, they’re just them. Them as they were yesterday and the day before and all the weeks since Villanelle held the elevator doors and Eve took the stairs -- or before that, even; right back to the club.

So. It’s a good strange.

For the first time, Eve considers that maybe she can have her cake and eat it too, that there won’t be a hidden price tag. Once they leave Villanelle’s apartment, this will be over, but maybe not over in its entirety. They won’t be Villanelle and Eve, on the verge of tearing each other’s clothes off, but perhaps they will be Villanelle and Eve, something.

Not just colleagues, more than a one-night stand. Friends? They could be friends.

“Friends,” Eve says, but it’s an exhalation more than it is a sound.

She shakes it off and switches the light on.

Villanelle’s bathroom is beyond decadent, because of course it is, all blended light colours and beautiful fixtures. There’s a tub, large and deep, the kind Eve would probably kill for, or at least entertain manslaughter for, but she’s never had the space to spare. The vanity is mostly clear -- Villanelle keeps her makeup at her dresser -- save for a few cleansers and moisturisers that would cost more than Eve’s rent.

She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

She looks the same. The sameness seems to have settled better, though. Since leaving Niko, since moving out, since taking instead of just wanting, she feels different when she sees herself. Like some minute lag has stopped blurring the image, and Eve is Eve, all the way through.

She brushes the thought away and steps into the shower, twisting the faucet right round. The water
pressure in Eve’s new apartment is flaky at best, and she’s almost forgotten the comfort of hot water pounding relentlessly against her back, a brutal kind of clean.

She lets time turn nebulous and rise with the steam. Eventually, she forces herself into action, and scrubs the water out of her eyes, grabbing the body wash. She was right, ages ago -- Villanelle’s idea of expensive soap leans less towards Elena’s list of Lush weekly specials, and more towards artisanal French labels that Eve’s not even going to try and pronounce.

It smells like it’s made of ingredients, not numbers. It smells like how Villanelle smells when she leans over Eve’s shoulder at work to read a document that she could just take from her; when she’s not content with just touch and sight and is trying for all of Eve’s senses, a monopoly on Eve’s tiny world.

Ten minutes later, just as she’s putting off stepping out from under the spray, there’s a knock. “Eve, I have a towel for you.”

“Oh, thanks. Come in.”

The door opens, and then Villanelle is there -- abstract, low-detail, on the other side of the fogged glass: an artist’s impression of the original. Somehow, it doesn’t make her feel any less real, or any further away.

There’s the smallest sound, like some stifled syllable suppressed into a sigh. Eve’s not even sure she actually heard anything, over the noise of the shower.

Eve turns the water off, slides the glass panel aside; the steam gasps away, humid as it hangs in the room.

Villanelle’s in a silky robe that she’s made a half-hearted attempt at tying closed, and she’s standing by the sink, picking at the edge of the towel in her arms. She glances up at Eve, tracking droplets as they slip over Eve’s skin, down onto the tiles; Villanelle licks her lips, almost says something, doesn’t.

“Was there something --” Eve starts, trailing off as Villanelle’s gaze snaps up to meet hers.

She moves closer, and accepts the towel when Villanelle passes it to her.

Their fingers brush, and it’s such a laughable insignificant heartbeat of contact to notice, after everything, after these last few hours; even so, Eve notices.

She wraps the towel around herself, trying to keep from losing too much heat.

Or she could let it drop entirely, drag Villanelle closer, untie her robe --

Villanelle clears her throat, picks up a bottle of moisturiser, turns it over and over in her hands, aimless. There’s an excess energy held in her; the languorous contentment from before has simmered away.

Eve tilts her head. “Is --”

“Do you have a preference?”

“Sorry?”

Villanelle frowns, like this isn’t the conversation they’re supposed to be having, even though she
started it. “For breakfast.”

“Oh. Well, I was planning to get a croissant on my way home, so -- I guess I’m kind of in the mood for that, now.” Villanelle’s frown deepens, and Eve backtracks. “We don’t have to get croissants if you don’t like --”

“No, I do,” Villanelle replies, setting the moisturiser down with a thud, too loud.

A shred of caution creeps into Eve’s chest, but she ignores it. “Okay. Shower’s all yours, then.”

“You will still --” Villanelle gestures vaguely, then -- it’s not a groan, just a tiny murmur, embryonic dissatisfaction forced through her teeth. Then in one short breath, it’s gone. “Grab whatever you want from the wardrobe, yes?” she offers, and flashes Eve that smile that’s so familiar, but just slightly different.

Eve hesitates. “Thanks.”

Villanelle’s antsiness is catching, and Eve shuts the door behind her too hard. She doesn’t really know if that was something, or if she’s just sleep-deprived and water-warm and reading into nothings.

As she dries off, she hears the shower turn on again -- and then the muted sound of Villanelle cursing in Russian. The water must be too hot, or maybe she’s dropped something. Eve listens a beat longer, in case something is actually wrong, but it’s quiet.

She crosses over to Villanelle’s wardrobe. The clothes hanging in there are lovely, but -- they’re somehow less without Villanelle wearing them, as if she brings that effortlessly fashionable quality to them, rather than the other way around.

No matter how pretty and designer these outfits are, though, there’s no way that Eve’s wearing a pantsuit on a Sunday morning.

She manages to dig up a pair of jeans that won’t be too long, if she cuffs them -- which will probably horrify Villanelle; nobody cuffs jeans anymore. There’s a handful of blouses that really aren’t going to work on her, but hanging to the far left is a regular shirt: soft, white, and cotton, a too-large loose-fit that stands in stark contrast to everything else. She pulls it off the hanger, and inspects it. Printed on the front is I Adopted a Shark! over a small cartoon of a smiling shark, with the organisation’s name below.

It’s definitely been worn, and that makes Eve smirk, the image of Villanelle tossing up between it being indisputably unstylish, and some sort of pride.

Once she’s dressed -- the shark shirt has got to be twice as comfortable as anything else Villanelle owns, and more comfortable than most of Eve’s clothes, even -- she walks out into the front room.

Hammerhead swims around his tank, and Eve watches him for a while. She can see her own reflection in the tank too, warped slightly and thrown back at her. Eve Polastri, forty-one, newly-separated, running on four hours of sleep, in borrowed jeans and a tee shirt, a hickey visible below her collarbone if she tugs the neckline.

All in all, a pretty good version of Eve Polastri to be.

The weight of what now? that she woke up to hasn’t lifted, but it’s lightened. They’re not awkward, they’re not going to be awkward; they’re finished but not ruined.
And now --

Well. It’s kind of jarring, this realisation that she’s spent so long unconsciously measuring her life by how long since Villanelle, how long until Villanelle again, and now Eve needs a new ruler. A new instrument that isn’t the desperate urge to kiss her.

Which hasn’t gone. It’s still there, a picked scab that still itches, itches worse.

There’s some static feedback-buzz between her head and her chest that stops her pressing too hard at that thought.

Eve shifts her attention from Hammerhead to the rest of the room, to all the tiny fractured windows into Villanelle and her life. She flicks through an old Spanish novel, a poetry collection; holds a delicately-engraved letter-opener up to the light; lingers over a relatively recent photo of Konstantin and Villanelle and a red-headed child -- Villanelle looks bored, but deliberately so. It’s sweet.

Eve’s examining a snowglobe and the model city suspended in it when --

“I got that in Reykjavík,” Villanelle says, and Eve startles, turning around.

Villanelle, unsurprisingly, is not averse to wearing pantsuits on Sunday mornings. Which -- Eve’s hardly going to protest. This Villanelle, with her still-damp hair and barely-buttoned shirt tucked into her slacks, is another Villanelle to add to the collection in Eve’s head that she doesn’t remember starting.

“For work?”

Villanelle glances at the cartoon shark on Eve’s shirt, and the corner of her mouth ticks up in amusement.

“No. I cannot practice law in Iceland,” Villanelle replies. “Just a holiday. A bit over a year ago, now.”

A bit over a year ago: Eve was in marriage counselling twice a week, was telling Elena that the rumours of a merger were only rumours, was just getting into her research.

A bit over a year ago: Eve was thinking of Villanelle too often.

A habit she’s yet to kick.

“Did you like it?” she asks.

Villanelle shrugs. “It was fine. Wasn’t what I was looking for.”

Eve wishes, really wishes, that she had the luxury of going places to figure out that they aren’t where she wants to be, instead of searching up plane tickets and then closing the tab.

“So --”

“Are --”

They both fall silent.

“You first,” Eve says. She was only going to ask whether Villanelle is ready to go.

There’s this soft petrichor feeling of possibility in the air, and Eve is so painfully aware that
possibilities can go in any direction.

Villanelle bites her lip, and then -- “Before, you said -- but -- I did not mean to make you think I would like you to leave,” she hedges. “I do not want that.”

“Oh.” Villanelle can feel quite particular about rudeness; perhaps this is about guests and manners and an et cetera that hasn’t crossed Eve’s mind at all. “No, you didn’t do anything. I was just -- being polite?”


“Yeah. You know --” Eve gestures vaguely, unable to articulate it. “Like. Don’t you -- I mean, you would go after sleeping with someone, usually, right?”

“Yes,” Villanelle agrees slowly, as though she’s not quite sure how these facts connect.

For a second, Eve imagines it: Villanelle, in the dimness of early morning, rolling out of someone’s bed, redressing and leaving with the sun.

Something uncomfortable, some misshapen piece, curdles in Eve’s stomach. She swallows the acid of it. “Exactly, so --”

“But not you.”

“Sorry?”

“I wouldn’t go, if it was with you.”

Eve’s about to point out that the first time, it was Villanelle’s hotel room, and this time, it’s Villanelle’s apartment, so it’s not as if she’s been in a position to leave -- but then she realises what Villanelle is trying to get at.

It’s not a hookup between strangers, no names, sealed away firmly into the past. It’s them.

Eve was right: they’re friends.

Unquestionably, it’s the weirdest friendship she’s ever had --

(The way Villanelle is holding her gaze makes Eve dizzy, makes her see last night on rewind and fast-forward, and god, Eve’s never wanted to fuck any other friend even half this badly. And then there’s the whole -- the everything else of it that lives in Eve where she doesn’t care to go.)

-- but it’s a friendship nonetheless.

“Okay,” Eve says.

Villanelle bobs her head. “So we are --”

“All good,” Eve promises her. “We’re all good. Now. Breakfast?”

She sets the snowglobe back on the shelf.

Villanelle moves closer, catches her hand, squeezes for a second, and it’s heavier, somehow, than holding the entire city of Reykjavík, covered in snow.

Eve is the first to let go.
They pass by the upscale restaurants and brunch spots that burrow through Villanelle’s neighbourhood, and instead find themselves in a small cafe about twenty minutes from the apartment. Once, Eve would’ve taken Villanelle for the kind of person to pick places balanced precariously on the stilts of exclusivity, but she knows better now. Villanelle just does whatever she wants, and what she wants is always the best -- sometimes, that’s the most expensive, but often, it’s these tiny shops that put quality over glamour.

Eve’s probably underdressed for the cafe’s general atmosphere, but Villanelle is overdressed, so they balance out. Sitting across from Villanelle at the table by the window makes Eve think of getting ice cream together, of professionals, and how spectacularly every part of her life since then has crashed and burned in the best way.

They eat and they talk and it’s --

Nice.

*Nice* with more glaring and stalemates and raised eyebrows and mocked decisions and euphemisms than the word directly implies, maybe.

Except -- pancakes and pastry and telling Villanelle about a fire alarm incident in college and feeling a kind of gently settled that stands in contrast and complement to the trip and heady swirl of last night -- *nice* fits.

For years, in the back of her mind, Eve used it to mean *boring*, *stable*, *ordinary* -- Niko was always *nice* -- but now, it’s been given back to her. Remade, to mean: good, peaceful; like orange afternoon poured into Eve’s blood.

It’s not something to dwell on, though, not with Villanelle spinning a no-doubt highly dramatised recount of a case she worked on last year.

“-- and so I sent the three of them back to the show, and called the company to come get his car out of the river,” Villanelle concludes, spearing a strawberry on her fork and popping it into her mouth.

“So what happened to the painting, after all that?”

“They sold it at auction.” Villanelle scoffs. “It was very ugly. Not worth the trouble.” She reaches across and steals a piece of danish, and Eve narrows her eyes at her, even though she wasn’t going to finish it anyway.

“I can’t believe Konstantin let you do that.”

“Ask for forgiveness and not permission.”

“Did you ask forgiveness?”

Villanelle blinks. “No.”

“Yeah, that tracks.”

Eve can’t imagine Villanelle asking forgiveness for anything, thinking twice about anything in the past. Regrets roll off her like rain, and history can’t get a hold: she’s immune to everything that’s
been. It can’t affect her now.

Villanelle drops her chin into her palm. “So, after this, would you like to --”

Eve’s phone rings. “That’ll be Carolyn,” she says, after a beat. She fishes her phone out of her pocket. It’s an unknown number. “Oh. Uh. Hello?”

“Eve,” greets Konstantin; his accent seems thicker down the line. “I hope you are well.”

Across from her, Villanelle drums her fingers against her lips while she waits, mouths not Carolyn?

Eve shakes her head, no . “Uh. Yeah. Yeah, I’m well.” Tired, actually, but there’s literally no way in hell that Eve’s going to mention that to Villanelle’s uncle, even if he couldn’t know precisely why.

“Great. I have tried to call Villanelle but she will not pick up. Could you let her know that we need you both at M-SIX at one o’clock to discuss Morello?”

Eve swallows. “Uh, sure. I’ll text her.” It’s late enough in the day that they could conceivably be hanging out without having spent the night together, but better to play it safe.

There’s a pause. “Okay, you do that. Goodbye.”

The dial tone sounds and Eve sets her phone down. “Konstantin,” she explains.

Villanelle bobs her head, takes a sip of her smoothie. “Who is he making you text? He can be very lazy. It should be his job.”

“You. We have a meeting an M-SIX in just over an hour. Apparently, you won’t pick up.”

“My phone is on silent. I didn’t notice,” Villanelle says, unbothered. “Why would you text me? I am right here.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know that.”

“So tell him that.”

“Right,” Eve says. She doesn’t push it. Villanelle might not face any consequences for sleeping with a coworker, but even if Eve’s ninety-eight percent sure she won’t either, she’s not going to risk it. And --

And the fewer people who know, the better, so that when this is behind them, it’s behind them, not around them.

Because friends is great, it’s really great, and it’s only now she hasn’t lost friends that she’s aware just how much she wants it.

But friends doesn’t cancel out the fact that Eve knows exactly how Villanelle moans; that Eve can’t quite manage to not think about fucking her again.

“I’ve got to go,” Eve tells her, drinking the last of her tea. “I need to get home and change. Can’t wear a shark shirt to see Carolyn.” That’d be interesting. “I’ll -- I’ll see you later, okay?”

She heads up to their counter and pays for them both. It’s quick, just tap-and-go, and she’s on the street by the time Villanelle falls in step with her.

“Eve, wait.”
Villanelle’s hand catches her elbow, and they stop. Eve shifts away from the middle of the sidewalk, so they won’t hold up the other pedestrians.

“Yeah?”

Villanelle hesitates, then -- “You didn’t have to pay.” Her nose wrinkles. It’s cute, in an unfair sort of way, where Eve already knows now that she’ll remember it later.

“I know,” Eve assures her. “But I think it’s more than my turn.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

There is a quiet spectre between them; the sense that they’re locked in place until something changes, that they’re stuck with one step left to go.

“We can do this again?” Villanelle asks, the words almost italic with how they slant into each other, trip over each other: too fast. Her body is relaxed, beautifully and carefully so, smoothed out, as if she’s drawn herself from memory.

Eve doesn’t need an excuse to eat croissants, really, but she’ll take it if Villanelle’s offering. “Sure.”

Villanelle’s clouded expression clears, and it’s only once it’s gone that Eve realises it was there. “Oh, excellent.”

Villanelle tugs her closer, all grace, all ease, and then they’re kissing.

It takes longer for Eve’s brain to catch up than it had in the dressing room, at the gala, in Villanelle’s apartment, because this time, it’s genuinely unexpected. Eve’s lost count of how many times they’ve kissed now, but this still has the breath-stutter of a first kiss, the giddy gravity of a second, the confidence of a third, and it’s too much to fit into Eve’s head so it has to rush through the rest of her.

And then Villanelle pulls away, presses back in for another kiss, a quick one, and then backs away for real, pushing her hands into her pockets. “I’ll see you later,” Villanelle repeats, and then she’s gone, back around the corner.

Eve breathes her brain out a flatline.

Right.

She means do that part of it again.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed it! i’ll be back next week with a new chapter (hopefully. im plagued with more assessment the further we get into semester)
comments help me make my writing better, and my stories more to your tastes, so pls let me
know what's working and what isn't !! thanks for reading :D

@villanevest on tumblr, come holler at me about Killing Eve

currently on a post-assignment stress wave, so my writing will smooth out once i relax a bit,
just pls be patient with me

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!