



THE END IS NEVER PRETTY

Nessuno meets Barrett her first week in Monterey, her first class at the Defense Language Institute. He's half an inch taller and lean, wearing those half-frame wire-rims that try so hard to be fashionable, black hair and blue eyes. She pegs him for an analyst. They're in the Russian Refresher together, an intensive four hours every day with an instructor who is positively fascist about hitting the accent right. She learns his name through the roll, but that's all; the rote memorization is daunting, two hundred new words every week that don't leave time for much more than homework and headaches.

A month and a half later, now with Russia behind her, Nessuno switches to Uzbek. Barrett is there again. It's a much smaller class, the coursework moderately lighter. It's not until that first three-hour blast is over that they actually find themselves at the same coffee shop on Alvarado Street. She's drinking a double espresso, the sugar cube dissolving between her teeth, flash cards flicking past on her laptop monitor. She looks up to see him standing opposite her, the other side of the little table.

"My brain already hurts," he says, and he grins.

“It’ll get worse,” Nessuno says.

“Brian Barrett.” He offers a hand.

“Like the rifle.” His grip is good, fingers long. “Petra Nessuno.”

“Need a study partner, Petra Nessuno?”

Without hesitation, she says, “God yes, please.”

###

Heath taught that there was no such thing as cover, which was to say that cover was the only truth that mattered. You cannot pretend to be the person you need to be to do what must be done, Heath would say. You *are* that person. The instant you doubt that, they’ll smoke you out and tear you up. The instant you allow yourself to think that you are in any way lying, that is the moment the person you are doing it to will realize something is wrong. Maybe they won’t know what; and maybe they won’t know why; but they will feel that sense of *off*, the hairs rising on the back of their neck, hear that voice in the back of their mind begin to whisper and question, and that is the beginning of the end.

“And the end is never pretty. And it’s always worse for women,” Heath concluded.

Heath liked her “ands,” used them with Peter Falk-ish enthusiasm, inevitably adding just one more thing. Petra imagined diagramming her lectures onto rolls of butcher paper that spilled out like an infinite hallway runner.

Heath handed her the files to prove the point. Some had photos. She was right.

It wasn’t pretty.

###

Barrett, it turns out, isn’t an analyst at all but a Special Agent for the FBI.

They never talk about why they need these languages they're studying so intently or how they'll use them. Nessuno guesses he's got to be on the CIS Organized Crime Taskforce, that Barrett targets those Eastern European bandits who literally sell anything and anyone they can get their hands on if there's a profit to be found in it. Maybe tasked to the nuke-hunters, the ones chasing fissionable material around the world. She approves of that, thinking that their operational theaters overlap, at least incidentally.

When they do trade war stories it's always in the past tense, the details omitted to protect the guilty. The time she was on a Cultural Support Team attached to an operator detachment and one of the black-clad women lead her into a hut with a half-dozen toddlers playing amidst the mix-and-match materiel of an IED factory. The time he was in a foot-race with a suspect in West Hollywood and got an unasked-for assist from the guy dressed as Superman outside of Grauman's Chinese Theatre. They share the personal details in brief: he's from Nebraska, mother still teaching primary school, father dead from cancer before he graduated college; she's born in Philly, but moved to Chicago when she was seven, and her parents still run a restaurant at Six Corners. He's got three years on her, thirty, never married, no kids, and when he asks her, she can answer the same, only younger.

First kiss is on Fisherman's Wharf. It's a Friday evening and early summer and cool on the water, and the sea lions are a raucous audience, barking and snorting and snotting amidst the pylons below. It's a good one, the one they've both been waiting for, and it leads to more, the curve running from tentative to passion steep and quick.

"Who knew language intensive could lead to this?" Barrett says when they break to catch their breath.

“It’s all about mastering a new tongue,” Nessuno tells him.

She takes his hand and leads him back to her apartment. They’re indoors until Saturday night before finally venturing out for dinner and a stop by his place for a change of clothes. Then they’re back to hers for more of the same, the sex touched with both urgency and the sense of the forbidden. It’s not strictly an affair; neither is betraying another’s trust. Rather, there’s a peculiar sense of dalliance between two services, two different parts of the same world that could only happen here and now. When the time comes, they will each say good-bye and return to their duty. Each understands this without ever needing to say so aloud. What they have is for the moment alone, and the knowledge of this inevitable end brings a melancholia that makes it all the better, makes them savor and relish one another all the more.

“This could be distracting,” Barrett says Sunday afternoon.

“I should fucking well hope so.”

He laughs. “Talk dirty to me in Uzbek.”

She does.

###

It takes two months of placement post the additional briefing and training, by which time she’s been Elisabetta Villanova long enough for her dreams to become Petra Nessuno’s own. CWO-2 Petra Nessuno is ephemeral, ghostly, a manifestation that arises only when needs must, at dead-drops and brush-passes and counter-surveillance; emerging only long enough to make contact, to pass and receive intel before turning to vapor once again. It is not that Petra Nessuno is forgotten, not at all; she is ever-present, a mute observer who only breaks her silence to whisper orders, opinions, and advice in Elisabetta Villanova’s ear.

Initial target for entry is a man named Carlo Pallazzini, the meeting in Dubai, at Nad Al Sheba, the sheiks and the jockeys and their camels, a distracting amount of wealth on display. They've picked the same winner by coincidence. He likes what he sees enough to buy a celebratory bottle of Champagne to share. He is in "business." She's in "art." They exchange cards and a few very carefully-worded questions, and then leave it at that.

Eleven days later, he runs into her - or believes he does - at a private party at the Galleria Borghese in Rome. They discuss their shared appreciation of Caravaggio. She knows it already, but when he tells her he collects, she's pleasantly surprised. He asks if Rome is home, and she laughs and tells him only sometimes. He asks how long she's staying, and she says until the day after tomorrow, at which point he asks to buy her dinner. They meet the next night at the Fortunato al Pantheon. He insists on paying.

She lets him kiss her good night, and they exchange private numbers.

###

Sex, Heath said.

You have my complete attention, Nessuno said.

Are you queasy about killing the enemy, Heath asked.

No more than I should be.

Are you queasy about sleeping with the target?

She started to say no, was about to say no, but Heath didn't let her.

Get your head straight on that, Heath said. Your mission is to kill the enemy, you use a gun, you use a knife, you use a fucking stick if you have to or your bare damn hands, and you don't hesitate. Your mission is to get close to your target, to learn what he or she knows, and

getting you on your back will help that, how is that different? How is that different than a stick or a knife or a gun? If you cannot get straight on that, if you're going to go all squeamish about spreading your legs if and when the time comes, there's the door, Chief.

Nessuno didn't move.

Heath paused, then sat down opposite. Spread her palms, raised her arms in a shrug before dropping them again.

Fucked up Puritan ancestry, that's what it is, Heath said. People want to muddy it up, but it's the same dispensation. You are your cover, there is no difference, and that means your body is your cover, too. I'm not saying give it up first chance you get, because the promise is always better than the reality, or almost always at any rate, and hope and desire will keep them coming back for more. Up to a point, and you know that, too. And yes, I am saying there are some out there who have no problem with you fucking killing a man, but they have a huge problem with you killing a man you're fucking.

And they're wrong. They'll get uncomfortable with it, and maybe they'll call you a whore, and you'll have to deal with that, too.

Nessuno grinned, trying to escape Heath's sudden intensity. Joking, asks, and you're going to teach me how to fuck like a pro, ma'am?

Let's just say that Elisabetta definitely knows what to do under the covers, Heath answered.

###

It never comes to that with Pallazzini. The promise is more than enough to keep him coming back another three times over the next six weeks.

Then he calls and asks when she'll next be in Moscow. She tells him what she's sure he already knows, what he's already learned from his own investigations into her. Her background and her finances and her relationships, all of them carefully constructed, monitored, and maintained. Yes, she'll be in Moscow on Tuesday, as a matter of fact. He sets a meeting at the Baltschug Kempinski.

"Are you getting a room?" she asks.

"Business before pleasure," he says.

###

They meet in the Cafe Kranzler, off the lobby, Tuesday late in the afternoon. He's ordered caviar and Champagne, and their conversation is in Italian.

"So, I have a problem," Pallazzini says. "A friend of mine, he's come into ownership of a piece, and he wants to sell it, you know. These rich Russians, they buy up everything they can, don't know what to do with it, don't know what it's worth. This piece, he's looking for a private sale. I told him you could help him."

She turns her glass of Champagne between her fingers, smiles slightly. "Private."

"Yes. And I need to know, before I introduce you, is this something you can do? Is this something you can arrange?"

"It would depend on the piece." She hesitates, lets her smile show a little more. She knows what he's really asking. Is she willing to stray off the straight and narrow? Bend the law? Perhaps even break it? "And my commission."

"How much is the commission?"

“For something like this? I would want thirty percent, perhaps more. It would depend on the piece.”

“We split the commission.”

“We do? How very generous of you, Carlo.”

“My finder’s fee.”

She shakes her head. “But I’ll be doing all the work. That doesn’t seem quite fair to me.”

“You’ll be doing no work at all if you don’t get the introduction.”

She shakes her head.

He takes a moment, butters his toast, eats his caviar, washes it down. Leans forward with a smile of his own, taking her hands in his. But there’s no smile in his words.

“You think I don’t know about you, Elisabetta?” His thumbs stroke the backs of her hands idly as he speaks, but she can feel his grip tighten. “You think I didn’t look into you before bringing you this? You’re not a virgin. I know what you make, and I know what you’re spending. I even know how much you’re hurting right now. So you will ask for thirty percent, and you will settle for twenty-five, and that is what we will split.”

He’s looking into her eyes, and she thinks to tell him that she knows all about him, as well. That she knows just how much he owes and to whom. That she knows about the weapons that have vanished from NATO stockpiles throughout Afghanistan, that she knows about the ones that most recently were stolen from Kunduz Airfield in the north. The ones that he tried to sell last week but couldn’t, because someone had tipped the authorities off, and the shipment was seized.

She looks at his hands holding hers. She smiles again, and says, “Well, when you put it like that.”

###

It’s a Molenaer, The Cheaters, stolen from the Netherlands last year, and the man who reveals it to her says, in Russian, “The seller assured me its provenance was true and legally acquired. He even had the paperwork to assure the claim. You can imagine my surprise, then, at learning it had been stolen, and that I had been duped.”

“I can, indeed,” she murmurs, her attention entirely on the canvas that has been unrolled on the table between them. She bends to give the painting a closer examination, takes the small glass she carries from her purse, looking harder, checking the brushwork and the edges, even though she’s already certain it’s real. Government work brings government training, and after DLI and Monterey there was art history, taught to her by a professor from Harvard, who despite himself was thrilled to be involved in something secret. She knows it’s the real thing, but she takes her time, so this Russian and his two off-the-shelf bodyguards and even Pallazzini can stare at her in this position, rather than at the painting. Pallazzini and the bodyguards do, but the other man does not, she notes.

Satisfied, she straightens, replaces the glass, says in Russian, “I would think it’s authentic. You can assure yourself that the only lie you were told was about its origins.”

“That matters to me,” the man says. “I would not care to be betrayed a second time.”

“It’s in excellent condition. You could certainly have it returned, either through yourself or an intermediary, without much difficulty. I would be happy to help.”

“Ah.” His eyes do not leave her, gauging her. “That is not an option. I spent a lot of money buying the piece, and even a finder’s fee would not compensate for the loss. What I would much rather do is sell it, you see.”

“There are men who would pay handsomely to own it,” she agrees.

“That was my thinking. Carlo’s, as well, I might add. Which is why I was so eager to meet you, Signora Villanova.”

She smiles. The man is tall, slender, his hair long and straight, to his shoulders or just beneath. She puts him in his mid-thirties, the wire-rim glasses he’s wearing along with the long hair giving him the appearance of a man perhaps younger than that. The suit is muted, but expensive, and still he is watching her, appraising her the same way she appeared to appraise the Molenaer.

“This kind of piece can be difficult to sell,” she says slowly. “You want the right buyer, of course, but also someone who can arrange things with the appropriate discretion. The piece is on INTERPOL’s watch list, after all. Avoiding legal... let’s call it ‘confusion,’ yes? That will require patience.”

“That would be crucial.”

“Anyone who arranged the sale would therefore expect appropriate compensation.”

“I was thinking fifteen-percent?”

“It couldn’t be done for less than fifty.”

He smiles. “As much as I am in a hurry to see it sold, I am not in that much of a hurry. Twenty.”

“Forty.”

“Twenty-five.”

She shakes her head slightly. “There is obvious risk, here.”

“You’re not a woman adverse to risk, Miss Villanova,” he says. “If you were, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I am also not cheap.”

His smile broadens. “How many languages do you speak?”

“Nine.”

“Nine? Really? Fluently?”

“My Italian, English, Russian, Uzbek, and German are fluent. Spanish and some dialects less so. I speak Farsi well enough to avoid embarrassment, as well.”

An eyebrow rasies. “Uzbek? Really?”

“My father is Uzbek,” she says. “My mother Italian. I was born in Chicago.”

“I am Uzbek,” the man says. “You have a U.S. passport, then?”

“And Italian.”

The man looks to Pallazzini for the first time. From the corner of her eye, she see them sharing a smile.

“Thirty percent,” the Uzbek says, at length. “In the spirit of what, I hope, will be a profitable arrangement for all concerned.”

He offers her his hand. She takes it, finds that his grip is insubstantial, like holding fog.

“I never got your name.”

“No,” he says. “You never did.”

###

It takes the Molenaer plus two more pieces, a Picasso and a set of coins recovered from the looting of Baghdad, all brokered over the next four months, before she gets it, before she gets the name of the man she's been after all along.

The way she gets it is over drinks at Dukes, in London. It's December, rainy and chill, and he asks to meet her at the hotel bar. The invitation takes her by surprise. Until now, all communication has been through Pallazzini. This time, the message comes in an envelope with her name typed upon it, awaiting her at the front desk of the Athenaeum, where she has been staying only a dozen blocks away from Dukes. The note inside is hand-written, inviting her for drinks and to toast their recent successes, signed "your Uzbek partner."

He's waiting for her when she arrives, in the far corner, a white-coated bartender and his drinks trolley standing beside the small table. The Uzbek rises when he sees her, and his smile seems genuine as he looks her over head to toe. He takes her hand and kisses it lightly. Something has changed. For a moment she is aware of the lie she is living, banishes the thought with savage speed.

"Vosil," he says to her, still bent, still holding her hand, gazing up at her. He's speaking English, barely accented. "Vosil Tohir."

"Thank you," she says. "I don't normally meet total strangers in bars, you know. Even ones as nice as this."

"Strangers no more, Elisabet." Vosil Tohir says, seating her before settling opposite. "Have you been here before? They say Ian Fleming drank here, that this is where he discovered the vodka martini. They make them true, so true, in fact, there's a limit of two."

"As I've had none, I'll have one to start," she says.

Vosil Tohir shows the man waiting patiently by his cart two fingers. Together they watch the drinks be prepared with efficient ceremony. Then the glasses are placed, and they are alone at the table, though the bar itself is growing steadily more crowded.

“The money came through?” she asks after tasting her cocktail. She can already tell that there’s a very good reason the limit is two.

“As of this morning. I must remember to thank Carlo for introducing us.”

“One of the few good turns he’s done me.”

“Your relationship with him is not everything you wish?”

“My business hasn’t suffered.”

“That was not what I meant.”

She swallows in time to keep from releasing a very inelegant shower of vodka martini, laughs against the back of her hand. “You think I’m sleeping with him?”

“He would have me believe it. From your reaction, I sense another betrayal.”

“Carlo has a hint of desperation about him, I’m sure you’ve sensed it. I prefer my men more assured.”

She can feel his gaze on her, heavier. “Do you?”

The drink is threatening to muddle her thoughts, and she picks her words with care. “I think you can tell.”

“I have taken a room here,” he says, after a moment’s thought.

“I’d hoped so,” she tells him.

###

These are hard motherfuckers, you understand that? Heath said. They're hard and they're ruthless but the worst of them are the smart ones. If they weren't, we wouldn't need to do this, we'd stick to fucking wet-work and drone strikes and that would be that. This guy or these guys or whoever the fuck they are, they're smart enough we don't even have names. And the smart ones, Chief, they'll fuck you up in more ways than one.

Nessuno nodded, I understand.

Heath glared. No, you fucking don't. Smart means careful, and that means they'll be up your ass with a microscope, they'll be chasing every detail, they'll check everything you say. And once they do that, they'll check again, and they'll let you think you've crossed the bridge, that you're in, but you're not. There's always one more thing, there's always one last test, just to make sure. And then it'll come, the favor or job or act that they'll put before you, and that is when you know, and that is when the gates swing wide before you and you can see where you've been trying to get all along. But to cross over, oh, sweetheart, it's made to hurt you, you hear me? It's made to hurt you and to hold over you and to make you theirs.

Heath stopped abruptly, frowned, stared at the blank white wall.

To make your theirs forever.

The silence extended, drawn out until Nessuno could hear the muffled sounds of activity in the hall outside of their little classroom, until Nessuno wondered if Heath was still with her at all.

There are things I won't do, Nessuno said, finally.

Heath didn't turn from whatever it was she was seeing. Then that's you, Chief, she said. And maybe you'll even get to weigh your options and maybe you can even find some clever

Hollywood-don't-know-shit screenwriter's way out, and wouldn't that be precious? Maybe you can escape and they'll still trust you, and maybe you can duck and even get out alive.

But maybe you won't

You didn't, Nessuno asked, knowing the answer but needing to hear it.

There's a reason I'm an instructor and not an operator, Chief.

And?

And I get to live with that for the rest of my days, Heath said. However many more of them I can stomach.

###

Vosil Tohir has her using those passports and those languages. Mostly it's to carry messages to people she's never seen before and will never see again. Sometimes it's money, sometimes it's something else, but she has to be careful about when she looks, because it's clear that Vosil Tohir was the target, but there's a new one, now. Because Vosil Tohir gives the orders, but he also takes them, and the question is, from who?

Another six months, more, and she sees him irregularly, Paris, London, St. Petersburg, Tashkent, Berlin. Sometimes he wants her beside him to translate, and once he gives her a gun to carry concealed into a meeting, taking pleasure in showing her what she already knows about how to use it, where to hide it on her body. Twice he wants her to verify translations as they happen, and in Tripoli, he asks her to entertain a friend of his.

He gives her new passports with new names to use, with instructions that they only ever be used the once, for this trip or that one, and then burned. No phone calls, nothing written down,

and sometimes he shows up by surprise, and sometimes she knows it's coming, because she knew she was being followed.

But not always.

She knows he's making sure, and she is Elisabetta Villanova so much now that CWO-2 Petra Nessuno is in danger of being left so far behind she'll be lost altogether. Some days she wakes up and it's an effort to remember the word of the day. Some days she wakes up and the fear crashes down and claws at her heart and clutches her gut and threatens to rise into panic. Some days she opens her eyes, and he's been watching her sleep, and she can tell he's gone through her clothes and her bag and her things.

Then he smiles and kisses her and tells her where she's going next, but not why.

###

It has been over eight months, the beginning of another winter, this time in Prague. They are tangled in sheets and catching their breath, and he kisses her brow, her nose, her lips, then suddenly slips away from her, out of the bed. She watches as he takes one robe and wraps himself, then tosses the other at her, on the bed.

"Come with me tonight," Vasil Tohir says. "I'll need my translator."

###

They drive for almost an hour in the darkness before pulling off to a side road, and it's another ten minutes before they reach the farmhouse. It's four in the morning, and Nessuno has been whispering the whole time, warning that this cannot be anything good. Vasil Tohir has remained silent throughout their drive, occasionally humming to himself, and she has known better than to ask.

But now they're parked, and he kills the engine. She sees shapes of men coming out of the darkness, and they're armed. They don't approach.

He turns in his seat to face her.

"We've made some good money together, love," he says. He's speaking in Uzbek.

"We've had some good times, don't you think?"

She indicates the shapes in the darkness with her chin. "Vosil. What's going on? Who are they?"

He touches her cheek, takes her chin in his hand, turning her eyes to his. "I'm very fond of you, Elisabet. You know that, yes?"

"You're scaring me," she says. It is the most honest thing she's said in years.

"Yes. Yes, I am." He studies her a moment longer, drops his hand, and is getting out of the car. She turns to follow, finds one of the shapes is at the door, the weapon in one hand, the other ushering her out, now guiding her, not quite pushing, not quite holding. The other shape falls in with them, at her side. All three of them follow Vosil Tohir towards the farm house. Lamplight is leaking from between the boards, harsh and white.

A third man with a weapon is just inside, and he speaks in Russian to Tohir as they enter.

"He protests his innocence, swears he's told no one a word."

"Do we believe him?"

The man shrugs. The farmhouse is large, musty with its years and all that its held. The memory of livestock and manure and urine remains in the air. Dilapidated stables to one side, four stalls with their doors closed, their latches rusted and pitted with age. The man who spoke leads them to the second stall from the left.

She can hear whimpering from within. It sounds like a child nursing a broken bone.

Tohir adjusts his glasses with a sigh, then suddenly takes hold of her by the left wrist. She starts to speak, but then one of the men swings open the door, and inside she sees Pallazzini lying on his side on old, moldy straw. His suit, like all of his suits ever, is expensive and well-tailored, but now it is spattered in blood, a crimson stain of it down the front of his shirt. His face is lesson in brutality, skin avulsed from his left cheek, a gash below his left eye. His right has swollen shut. His lips are torn, parted as he wheezes for air, and she can see that his front teeth, the ones that remain, at least, are broken. Sweat, mucous, blood, all of it marks him, and she remembers kissing that mouth, and she cannot help but shudder, and Tohir, his hand still on her, feels it.

“Where we are now,” Tohir whispers in her ear, “is beyond compromise. I want to trust you, Elisabet.”

She forces herself to look at him and not Pallazzini. “Have I ever given you reason not to?”

His smile seems genuinely sad. “I don’t need a reason, love.”

She can think of nothing to say. There is no way to disguise her fear. He can surely feel it through her skin, she imagines he can hear the thrum of her heartbeat, sense the panic that is writhing, trying to break free of her control. The sensation is not unlike falling. She doesn’t know who she is anymore. She doesn’t know why she is here.

Tohir holds out a hand and the man who spoke gives him the pistol. Tohir now puts the gun into her hand, tenderly folding her fingers around its grip. She knows every eye is upon her, from Pallazzini still sobbing softly on the ground to the men with their guns around her.

“He knows you and he knows me.” Behind the lenses of his glasses, his eyes are almost half-lidded, sleepy. “I want to trust you, Elisabet.”

The scent of the barn has coated her mouth, caked in her throat. She swallows, tries to wet dry lips with her tongue, hears herself, hoarse, “Yes.”

“Do you understand what I need from you?”

She nods because she is afraid to make a sound; not because of fear, because that fear has vanished, the panic stilled, but because the relief makes her want to sob, makes her want to cry with joy. His slender fingers still around hers around the pistol now in her hand. Pallazzini trying to speak, a mumble in Italian and the only word she can distinguish is one that translates from any language. No, no, please, no.

Tohir brushes his lips against her cheek, mouth hovering at her ear.

“There is so much I want you to be a part of, Elisabet, so much more we could do with you by my side. I need to trust you. My employer needs to trust you. Can we? Will you let us trust you?”

She turns her head and touches his mouth with her own.

“Yes,” she says.

She shoots Pallazzini twice in the chest, using both hands, firing as if she’s never fired a gun before. Pallazzini’s body rocks on the ground, blood froths over his lips. His eyes glaze and then he does not move again.

She lowers the gun, feels herself trembling. Adrenaline has made every sense acute. Pallazzini voided his bowels, what was left in his bladder, and the scent is peculiarly rank, reminiscent of the battlefield. She struggles to regain herself, turns her head to see Tohir, and he

is watching her, still, but now with the barest of smiles. One of the men with guns has moved, and she hears the complaint of rusted hinges, the sound of another stable door swinging open. She looks.

“That was for the past,” Tohir says. “This is for the future.”

It’s Barrett.

He’s been beaten as well, bound hands and feet. The damage he’s taken has been more judiciously distributed. The missing fingers and the burnt skin, the filthy bandages, the signs of interrogation and torture. His right eye is shot with blood, damage around the orbit, but they’ve left him free to talk, to answer questions. In this fraction of time, in this moment of recognition, she is Petra Nessuno again. She remembers Monterey and Fisherman’s Wharf and the taste and feel and delight of Brian Barrett. She can recall everything as if she is feeling it right then and right there. She sees his good eye widen, the rise of his chest drawing breath, and she knows he remembers everything, too.

She remembers Heath.

She empties the pistol into Barrett’s body before he can say her name.

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His hands are on her hips the moment the door to the room is closed. She’s felt his desire pulsing off him all the way back to Prague, and now, unleashed, he’s uncharacteristically clumsy, his urgency such that he can’t be bothered undressing either of them beyond what needs to be freed for satisfaction. She stares at her hands where she’s braced herself against the wall. She doesn’t know who she is. She doesn’t know why she’s here. She feels like she’s falling.

He finishes and leans against her back, kisses her neck, her shoulders. His hands run along her sides tenderly, and then he withdraws and turns her to face him. Back to the wall, his arms trapping her at either side, and he is kissing her once more, between her breasts, her throat, her mouth, before he stops and stares at her, smiling.

“You are dangerous,” he whispers. “You are amazing. I could love you, Elisabet.”

“Only could?” She smiles the way Elisabetta Villanova smiles at him. “What more do I need to do?”

He laughs, begins removing her shirt.

She talks dirty to him in Uzbek.

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