Drowning Deep

by Somedrunkpirate

Summary

Don’t follow the rabbit. He knows this. Don’t fall into the rabbit hole of memories. You’ll drown.

But Illya lives there, deep in the past, it’s the only way he gets through the day.

Notes

A scene that got stuck in my head. Not planning to continue it atm, but I appreciate it if people let me know if they would be interested/have ideas :)

Edit 2017 August 13th:
Due to the lovely people responding to this with enthusiasm and ideas this work officially has an actual plot and will be written while being posted! It's now a wip, and I have no clue how long it's going to be, but I'm definitely excited.
2020 November

Illya remembers the sea in a deep red.

Illya remembers feeling whole. He remembers feeling alive. He remembers being useful.

Don’t follow the rabbit. He knows this. Don’t fall into the rabbit hole of memories. You’ll drown.

But Illya lives there, deep in the past, it’s the only way he gets through the day.

The expectations are unbearable, but the silence is even more so. He stays, he trains, he lives in his room, waking up everyday expecting to drift again. He readies himself for a day of battle until he remembers. Until he realises. He breathes, deep, once twice, clenches his fists, his hands shake. The tremor takes over his body. Red water, drowning, a scream. Sometimes, he takes back control and calms himself down before the monster comes out. Other times, he comes back to himself after a few seconds of red and black invading his vision, and then there is another dent in the iron clad walls of his room, another knuckle broken. Today, it’s the latter.

Illya sighs and grabs a rag from a drawer. It’s been a year like this, he’s used to it. He manages.

There is a knock on his door. “Kuryakin.”

“Sir.” Illya stands up straight, in position, bloodied rag in his aching fist.

Oleg looks from the rag to the new dent in the wall and raises and eyebrow, but only says, “At ease.”

Illya relaxes minutely, and throws the rag in the sink next to him. He sits down at the edge of the bed, hands on his knees, and waits for whatever Oleg is here for. He doesn’t visit often, but that is to be expected. A broken pilot is not worthy of time of the highest commander of the Russian Jeager Initiative. Oleg’s the one that allowed him to stay after the incident, despite his visible fragmentation. Oleg here means one of two things.

His time is up, or there is a task for him.

Illya wants to be in service, but he will not beg. He just waits.

“Kuryakin. You were a good pilot. One of the best,” Oleg starts. Illya tries not to flinch at the past tense, but he knows he did not succeed. Oleg sees right through him, always has.

“I believe you still have the potential to be a great one. But for that, you need a co-pilot.”

“All compatibility test were unsuccessful, Sir.” He tried all recruits within the first month after he got back. They were either too weak willed and broke under Illya’s relentless memories, or they were too empathising and could not compartmentalize the anger in the drift. He almost drove one of the recruits in the rabbit hole. A young man, almost a boy, that had sought peace in his memories to escape the red sea of Illya’s pain. Even now, thinking about it makes him sick with guilt, and with envy. Illya wishes he could escape it too.

“I know.” Oleg is closer now. Illya holds eye contact and straightens his back. He can’t show weakness to a man who knows the depth of his weaknesses.
“We looked elsewhere. We found a pilot for you. Pack your bags, you’re leaving in two hours.”

Leaving. Leaving the place that ties him to his memories, keeps his mind from going in shambles. He sees Oleg’s dark eyes, level and certain. Illya can’t refuse this. He has no choice.

So he nods.

Oleg nods back, satisfied. “You’re going to Hongkong, an international jaeger effort is being organised. They need the best. The Red Peril travels with you, they have the tech to repair it.”

Illya nods again. Clenches his fists. His knuckles have stopped bleeding.

Oleg makes to leave but Illya calls him back just before he can. “Who is it. Sir?”

“Napoleon Solo.” There is a hint of a cruel smile on Oleg’s face, he licks his lips before turning away.

Illya blinks and waits on the click of the door, the receding footsteps.

A deep breath. A tremor. Another dent in the iron clad wall.
January 2015

Chapter Summary

A young man is leaning against the cement wall of the Hall, his piercing eyes watching Illya from afar. He’s handsome; neat black hair gelled back to his neck, broad shoulders and sharp jaw line.

Blue eyes.

Illya glares. The stranger doesn’t look away.

Chapter Notes

I want to thank everyone who encouraged me to go on writing. It means a lot to me!

To make things clear, the previous chapter was set in 2020 November and this chapter will be 2015 January. Past and Present will alternate throughout the story, although not always in the same order.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2015 January

There are many reasons why anyone with an inkling of self preservation tends to avoid Illya.

His reputation precedes him. There are entire holes punched out of his past by all existing levels of classified. Which is why everyone on base knows all the facts. It doesn’t matter if you’re in the Army camps or the Defender training programme, the walls have ears and recruits love to gossip.

The first person who dared to ask after Illya’s father had his head slammed against a metal table. Most stopped asking questions after that.

They stopped speaking to him all together.

Illya likes it that way.

That doesn’t mean they stop looking.

Someone is always watching him. Illya feels the telltale tingle in the back of his neck again and twists around. A young man is leaning against the cement wall of the Hall, his piercing eyes watching Illya from afar. He’s handsome; neat black hair gelled back to his neck, broad shoulders and sharp jaw line.

Blue eyes.

Illya glares. The stranger doesn’t look away.
This... is new.

Before Illya can guess why this new recruit doesn’t seem to be intimidated, someone calls for the stranger's attention and their connection is broken.

“Vincenzo!”

The stranger looks away and grins. “Only my mother calls me that, Alexei. Call me Vince,” Alexei chuckles and grins back. “Get your ass over here, Vince. I saved you a seat.”

Illya notes that they're on first name basis despite the difference in rank; Alexei being the sergeant of the B–squad.

“You hold a lot of interest in the location of my ass. Do you need to tell me something?” Vincenzo quips, walking away from the wall.

He nears Illya and Illya tenses, but Vincenzo doesn’t even glance at him.

Alexei laughs and shakes his head. “Shut the fuck up,” he says and claps Vincenzo on the back as they sit down.

Illya refocuses on his breakfast, forcing himself to eat the dry toast and greasy sausages.

Alexei and his squad have always been obnoxious, but with Vincenzo they’re even worse. The guy seems to be popular and a comedian, getting his squadmates to laugh periodically

They hang on his every word.

And Illya listens, and watches, and realises that the tables have turned.

Now, he’s the one who’s staring. He’s the one who’s intrigued, intimidated, and too cowardly to do anything about it.

Illya scoffs to himself, but the moment he tries to look away, Vincenzo meets his gaze.

Illya freezes, caught out, and Vincenzo–

Vincenzo grins.

—

Illya has his ways of collecting information. It doesn’t always have to include punching. More the implication that he has fists that can be used.

His connections came through and mailed a neatly formatted document to Illya’s ‘screen, along with notes and recordings of Vincenzo “Vince” White.

According to the data, Vincenzo was a child to an Italian mother and an American father, who abandoned them at a young age. They moved to distant relatives in Russia when Vincenzo was seven, and they rotated from and to Russia and Italy every few years until Vincenzo stayed in Italy to study leaving his mother in Russia. After this, the information devolves into rumors and hearsay. No one quite knows why Vincenzo ended up in a Jaeger training program, certainly with a familial connection to the USA.

Illya muses that that might be the reason. Command would love to have a ‘turned’ American in
their troops, he could be their golden child. *Russia has the best Jaeger program! See how the American chooses ours over theirs! Sign up now!*

And besides, how American can a person who grew up in Italy and Russia be? More American than is preferred, of course, but not all hope is lost for Vincenzo. There is no data of ever visiting America, but there are many gaps in his history. It reminds Illya of his own.

A sudden thought catches Illya off guard. *I want to know what’s missing. I want to know him.*

As a rule, Illya isn’t interested in people.

They’re loud and brash and try his patience with every breath they dare to take. There are theories that his inherent distrust of people is the reason Illya has so many problems with the Drift, but as he doesn’t trust his instructor’s insights, he doesn’t think about that too much.

He will find someone to Drift with, he just has to be patient. An urge to get to know a stranger is highly unusual. But might also be a spark of hope.

Maybe, this is the person Illya has been looking for all this time.

The person who can make him into what he’s always wanted to be.

Every Jaeger pilot needs a companion. Someone to be your other half, to share the neural strain of controlling a mechanical suit so tall those fancy New York skyscrapers are dwarfed by it.

Illya is at the top of his classes, the best in his squad and one of the best in the history of the training program. But without a co–pilot, all that potential is worth exactly nothing.

Illya remembers the way Vincenzo held his gaze, smiled in the face of his glare. He has a type of confidence and strength in him, an attitude Illya’s never seen before. He seemed almost amused at Illya’s attempts to scare him off.

Vincenzo might be strong enough to be Illya’s partner.

But, Illya doesn’t want to put hope into someone he knows almost nothing about. That’s a waste of his time and effort.

He needs more than the meager data he has on his ‘screen. He reads through all of it once more, trying to find something else in between the lines, but nothing new catches his eye. He sighs. This demands something more complex than a little research. This asks for surveillance and maybe some illegal hacking.

First things first. Illya knows a guy who makes quality bugs.

Illya needs to find out where Vincenzo stores his shoes.

—

After listening to Vincenzo’s feet in squeaky trainers for over three days he can make one definite conclusion: Vincenzo is an asshole.

His easy confidence is nothing more than a cocky layer of camaraderie composed of jabs and chirps, all the while badmouthing his ‘friends’ the moment their backs are turned. It’s like he’s playing a game, weeding his way through his acquaintances and knowing exactly what to say to elicit the preferred response. He’s slippery, charismatic and skilled at what he does.
Illya is almost jealous when he’s not intensely frustrated; social abilities never came easy to him. He’s always been more dependent on his physicality than on his shining personality.

Illya’s never had a soft spot for the B–squad, but they way Vincenzo enchants them worries him. They don’t deserve a squadmate who pretends to like them more than he seems to.

Despite Vincenzo’s undeniable mastery of charm, it had been surprisingly easy to bug him, almost too easy. Illya had kept a log of the security and ways into the system incase anything like this ever came up, so finding a gap between all the streams of recruits and avoiding the camera’s was child’s play. The only thing Illya had to do after, was connecting the bugs to his ‘screen and run a program disguised as a music app, so he can listen to Vincenzo the whole day without looking suspicious.

Vincenzo is a new recruit for this camp, but because of his age – Illya guesses somewhere between 19 and 21 – he’s been bumped up into the second year B–squad, only a year behind Illya’s A squad.

Illya is surprised to learn that he’s already been around for more than a week. Illya keeps a diligent eye on the new recruits, because they know his story but have not yet experienced the consequences of annoying him. It’s almost a rite of passage. Taunt the traitor’s son, try not to be killed.

When Illya listens to Vincenzo joke around during his squad’s morning run, he realises that he hadn’t known about Vincenzo because he hadn’t partaken in this tradition. Illya had no reason to notice him until that fateful morning in Hall.

Maybe he’s planning something more long term, something bigger than an insult thrown during training or a food tray pushed off a table. He certainly seems the type for it. Illya touches his father’s watch wearily. Vincenzo can hardly scheme something effective while bugged the whole way through. Illya will stay vigilant.

“Who’s that?” Vincenzo’s voice suddenly sounds through Illya’s earbuds while he’s scooping some rice on his plate for dinner. He finishes getting his food, but listens attentively.

“Who?” Alexei’s voice is almost too soft to hear.

“The guy who looks like he can choke a Kaiju with his bare hands,” Vincenzo replies. “The blond at the front of the line.”

Alexei laughs so hard the sound fills the Hall. “That’s Kuryakin. You better stay away from him.”

“Why?”

“Your pretty face won’t be as pretty after he punches your jaw into pieces,” Alexei says. “Believe me, I have personal experience. The bruises lasted for months, and I had the feeling he still held back.”

Illya picks up his tray and walks toward his solitary table in the back corner of the Hall. He carefully doesn’t look at Vincenzo and Alexei as he moves past them.

“Why did he punch you?” Vincenzo asks with ill-hidden interest, and Illya can imagine the cocky grin on his face.

“I might have said something about his dad,” Alexei says. “Don’t talk about his dad to him, or talk at all. Maybe stop breathing all together, it’s safer that way.”
“You think I couldn’t take him?” Vincenzo asks. “I’m fast, and smart. He’s all bulk and mass, I think I could find a way.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. But by all means, I would love to see you try,” Alexei laughs. “Hey! Kuryakin! Vincenzo here has a question about your dear old dad! He asked if he was a traitor and a pervert, or only a traitor? I must admit that I don't know for sure.”

A sudden silence falls.

People stop talking or eating and collectively hold their breaths. Someone drops a fork to the ground, the sharp clang piercing through the tense quiet.

“What did you just do, fucker,” Vincenzo whispers. Illya turns around and stands up straight, his fists clenched tight and his mind peaked, focused, and red in anger. He avoids looking at Vincenzo, but meets Alexei’s gaze head on.

Alexei pales. “I made a mistake.”

Vincenzo curses again and Illya yanks out his earbuds. He makes his way to their table, never breaking eye–contact with Alexei. He holds himself strongly, but Illya notes the fear in his eye’s with a rush of satisfaction.

The rest of the B–Squad moves away from the table; there is no group mentality here.

For everyone but Vincenzo, who stays seated next to Alexei.

It almost surprises Illya out of his anger. Once again Vincenzo seems to be immune to Illya. Illya’s eyes flicker towards him, and sees that he’s watching him warily, but with an undertone of amusement, of interest.

Vincenzo realise Illya’s attention has shifted because he sits up straight and smiles a charming smile. “Illya, my friend here is a dimwitted idiot who needs to keep his mouth shut more often.”

Alexei shakes himself out of his frozen fear and scoffs, affronted. “You were the one who said you could take him.”

Vincenzo throws a glare at Alexei and punches him in the shoulder. Then he turns back to Illya with grin and a wink. “He’s a total waste of space. You don’t need to damage him more than he already is.”

Illya’s anger slowly ebbs away in the face of those piercing blue eyes and that – painfully beautiful – smile. His burning rage melts into frustration. No one should have this effect on him, but Vincenzo plays with his emotions effortlessly. Twists them around with clever words and enchanting smiles. Just like he does with his squadmates.

A tremor pulses through Illya’s body and he leans forward in a split second, gripping their table in his hands and flipping the whole thing over, food and drink flying everywhere.

“Leave. Me. Alone,” Illya grits out, and stalks out of the Hall.

He can hear the noise start up again the moment he rounds the corner. All witnesses of the new Kuryakin drama talking loudly or starting to eat again now that the excitement is over.

Illya leaves them be and quickly walks to his room. He sinks against the door when he closes it behind him, taking deep breaths in and out. His ‘screen buzzes, and he takes out his earbuds,
putting one of them in his ear.

“What the fuck,” Alexei raves loudly. “What the fuck man.”

“I agree that that was impressive, but why are you yelling?” Vincenzo sighs.

“You don’t know what you just did, Vince,” Alexei says. “You don’t know.”

“So tell me.”

“I’ve known Kuryakin for two fucking years,” Alexei starts. “And that whole time there has not been one occasion where someone pissed him off and no one ended up in Medical.”

“Oh,” Vincenzo says intelligently.

“You have a gift, man,” Alexei says, sounding highly impressed. “A goddamn gift. A Kuryakin controlling gift.”

Vincenzo hums. “Interesting.”

“Definitely,” Alexei laughs.

Illya takes the earbud out and throws his ‘screen to the other side of his room.

For Vincenzo it might have been interesting, but Illya is still reeling and decides that terrifying is a more accurate description.

Vincenzo White is a terrifying, beautiful, asshole of an American and despite all the warning signs flashing neon in Illya’s mind's eye, the thought persists.

*I want to know him. I want to know him. I want to know everything about him.*

Chapter End Notes

I've taken a little creative freedom in the timeline and techniques of Pacific rim, so don't be too surprised if it doesn't match up with the movie. The canon story line won't be used, and at the moment I don't have any characters of the movie planned, but let me know if you have a fave you'd like to have a lil side role in the story and I'll see what I can do!

This is the only big writing project I'm focussing on atm, so the frequency of updates will depend on the muse and how obedient RL will be the coming time.

Hearing from y'all really helps motivate me, so if you liked it a comment would be lovely <3

Thank you Brooke for the beta, you're the best.

(And just in case: Vincenzo is indeed Napoleon with another name. :))
It’s pouring while they wait on the tarmac.

The rain soaks through Illya’s jacket, but he refuses to step under Oleg’s umbrella. It might be an exercise of self punishment, but compared to some other habits Illya had developed after the incident, getting wet is innocent.

It’s probably why Oleg allows him to do it.

His silence is a heavy presence at Illya’s side. Illya doesn’t know why he’s here, but he’s starting to suspect Oleg isn’t merely seeing him off.

Illya balks at the idea of sharing an airplane with Oleg, being scrutinized while he pretends to read a paper. There is never a time Illya doesn’t feel judged by him, and Illya knows the judgement is nothing positive.

Oleg’s phone buzzes, and he quirks a smile at his screen. Illya feels like he should capture this miracle, but can’t be bothered to.

“Our ride will arrive in two minutes,” Oleg says. “Play nice.”

Illya’s stomach drops.

“He’s on the plane?”

Oleg only hums and resumes his silence. Illya knows he’s enjoying this.

The plane is white and relatively small. It looks like it was bought by an American businessman with more ambition than actual riches, nothing close to the private planes Russian oligarchs fly around with.

Oleg steps forward first, trotting up the dropped down stairs. He stops to shake out his umbrella before entering. “Any time now, Kuryakin.”

Illya huffs, his hand tenses around the band of his bag. He forces himself to take a step. And another. Waiting isn’t going to make this any better.

Their seating is minimal, only two sets of chairs across from one another on either side of the aisle.

Oleg is already seated across from Sanders, shaking his hand. They both give the impression they’re not paying attention, but Illya knows they’re listening carefully. Spies will be spies.

Illya looks away from them and drops his bag to the floor. He feels that someone is watching him, but he isn’t ready. Not just yet. This is all going too fast.

Illya leans down and pulls out a book from his bag and his lunch container.

Don’t look. Not yet.
He puts them on the chair to his right and pulls his bag up to store it in the overhead storage compartments.

Illya closes his eyes for a second and takes a calming breath. He picks up his book and lunch and sits down. He’s still not looking up, but he sees high quality Italian shoes and the edge of dark blue suit pants. If Illya stretches his legs only a little, he would touch Napoleon’s knees. He contemplates doing it for a split second.

He imagines reaching over and kissing Napoleon just to see what he would do.

Illya shakes his head minutely and breathes, opening up his book. There is a slight tremble in his hand.

“Are you going to avoid looking at me forever, Peril?” Napoleon drawls suddenly.

The nickname guts him, more so than the familiar voice. Memories flood back and Illya is drowning. This is worse than he thought. This hurts more than he ever imagined and there are no iron clad walls to punch.

His book is shaking in his hands, the paper crumpling, and it takes everything not to break the plane down. He can feel Oleg’s gaze on him. He can feel Napoleon’s eyes piercing him into pieces.

He can’t let him win. He can’t fail.

Illya drags himself out of his red storm and finds a sharp smile somewhere. “I never wanted to see you, Vincenzo. I did not choose to be here.”

Illya looks up and meets Napoleon’s glare. He sees how Napoleon flickers between his treacherous charming smile and a grimace of frustration. Illya sees him smooth out his expression from true emotion to a lie without words.

Napoleon looks indulgent, almost amused, and Illya feels sick.

“There you are, Illya,” Napoleon says pleasantly. “I missed your eyes, the years have been hell without them.”

Illya looks away. He can’t. This is torture.

“I’m glad we have another chance to work together,” Napoleon continues. “We were such a successful team in the past.”

Bile rises in Illya’s throat. He realises he hadn’t expected Napoleon to be cruel. That was a naïve mistake. Everything he ever knew about Napoleon is false. He only knew Vincenzo; the mask and lie. Nothing was real.

He’d known this, but having it confirmed rips out his heart and tears it into pieces.

The rage comes, but ebbs away in the face of Napoleon’s brilliant smile. As it always has. Illya feels numb, and exhausted. He breaks.

“Why are you doing this,” Illya sighs, letting his head fall back onto the headrest. He closes his eyes. “There is nothing to gain from hurting me more, Solo.”

There is a catch of breath, but Napoleon doesn’t respond.
After a pause, Illya opens his eyes wearily and looks at Napoleon.

Napoleon is-

Illya can’t believe what he’s seeing because nothing Napoleon ever does is genuine, but Napoleon looks like he’s been punched in the gut. His face is pale and his fingers are white, clenching his glass of whiskey. He’s looking outside with his shoulders hunched and twisted away and it almost looks like he’s shaking.

Illya’s heart pounds but he can’t trust this, he can’t hope-

Napoleon takes a ragged breath. “I’m sorry.”

Illya tenses. “Don’t.”

The silence stretches, and it’s only now that Illya remembers they have witnesses to their emotional implosion.

Oleg is watching them with something close to scientific curiosity, while Sanders looks like he wishes he had popcorn with him.

Illya glares at them.

“Well, now that we have had our lovely reunion, please strap yourselves in because we’re flying in a minute. We’ll start to debrief when we’re up in the air.”

Illya glares some more.

“Kuryakin, go read your book,” Sanders adds.

Illya is proud of himself that he doesn’t throw it at him, and finally starts to read.

--

The debrief is shorter than Illya expected.

Though, Oleg and Sanders are both men of action rather than words, so he should’ve known.

According to the two of them, the IJE had been established because the tear is showing signs of increased activity and Hong Kong called out a code red to the rest of the world.

But more than that, the International Jaeger Effort is a way to force America and Russia to work together on this, instead of wasting time continuing their endless conflict.

“You two are the ‘subtle’ mascots of the whole diplomatic shitshow,” Sanders explains. “If an American and a Russian can drift together... We think it will shut up all political players who still fight against prioritizing the Jaeger initiative over international conflicts.”

“Aleksi is coming to Hong Kong too, with his partner. I’ve been informed the both of you knew him,” Oleg adds.

Illya tenses.

Napoleon hums vaguely.

“There are two other Jaegers in action. The Chinese have their Starshooter and the Navo brings
“their Peacemaker.”

“So this IJE has four Jaegers. That’s it? We don’t even know if we’ll be able to perform in the field,” Napoleon scoffs.

“The more success we have, the more resources we can demand. That’s how it works, plain and simple. So when you’re fighting, make sure there are camera’s nearby.”

And with that, the debrief seemed to be over.

Illya goes back to reading, but no words seem to come through the mess of thoughts in his mind. Napoleon is silent, looking outside, and Illya has trouble keeping his eyes away from him. Now that he looked once, he can’t stop.

It’s been years since he’d last seen that face. Illya’s missed everything, from the sharp jawline to his shoulders to the way he slouches in a seat. Napoleon looks so much like the man he’d known so intimately for so long, but at the same time, he looks like a different person altogether.

To start, Vincenzo never wore suits. Illya’s only ever seen in him training gear or casual slacks, looking like a thousand recruits and never seeming to be out of place. Illya knows now that that was the point.

Napoleon in a suit is enchanting, the opposite of inconspicuous. If he’d been in a crowd, he’d pull all eyes toward him. Maybe that’s the point too.

The way his waistcoat tailors his figure is something Illya wasn’t prepared to handle and he shifts in his seat. When he looks up again, Napoleon is watching him with something dark in his eyes, knowing. Illya feels a flush of shame.

Napoleon is dangerous, a stranger. Illya sees scars on his hands he’s never seen before. He sees the lines below his eyes, a new tick in his jaw. Who is this man sitting before him?

Illya doesn’t want to know.

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After landing, they’re quickly ushered inside because in Hong Kong it’s also raining.

The storm is inescapable in more ways than one.

They’re brought to a big conference room with screens covering the south wall. A man with white dusted gray hair is drinking something that seems to be tea in the corner, and stands up to greet them. “Gentlemen, welcome. These are our new soldiers?”

Oleg replies in agreement behind Illya, and the man smiles.

“This is Waverly, the idiot stuck running the IJE,” Sanders explains to Illya and Napoleon.

Waverly smiles politely, if not a little hurried. “I imagine you two had a good time catching up in the plane, but I’m afraid it’s all back to business here. We’re a little bit in a time constraint and have a lot of things to go through.”

“Fun,” Napoleon comments deadpan.

Waverly spears a beat at that but lets it go a second later. “I’ve been informed it’s been year since you were suited up last?”
“Yes,” Ilya says, and to his surprise Napoleon nods too.

Illya’s not been keeping up with the news over the last year, watching the fights or hearing the pilot’s reports sends him into flashbacks.

But Napoleon had been a successful pilot for a time with his co-pilot Victoria Vinciguerra. Illya suddenly desperately wants to know why he quit. Napoleon watches him as if he knows what Illya’s thinking.

“The death of a partner will do that to you,” Napoleon comments, and Illya doesn’t know if he’s talking about himself or if it’s an indirect insult.

“Condolences,” Waverley says, and he sounds genuine. “Illya, your mother has always been a great inspiration of mine and for many people on this team. On behalf the whole IJE we want to thank you and your mother for your service in the Red Peril.”

Illya wants to be anywhere that’s not here.

Luckily, Oleg seems to have the same idea. “The point is that you’ll have training to attend to. We need you in top form. You’ll train together to strengthen your drift. We’ll have to wait until the Red Peril is repaired for anything further, but the more we can prepare beforehand the better.”

Illya tenses at the idea of having to spend day in and day out training with Napoleon. But it makes sense, and he’s not going to protest.

Which is why Napoleon, of course, does. “I think we might need some time apart first. To adjust.” He sounds diplomatic, pleasant, as if wanting to be away from your drift partner is reasonable and not catastrophic.

Waverly raises his eyebrows. “Are they drift compatible? Have they ever been tested?”

Illya and Napoleon chorus, “No,” while Sanders and Oleg nod in unison.

Waverly raises his eyebrows higher.

“They’re compatible,” Sanders assures him. “They just… need to work through some issues.”

Waverly sighs. “I trust your judgement, but this needs to be fixed as soon as possible, please.”

“We’ll see to it,” Oleg says. It sounds like a threat. It most likely is.

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After Waverley had his time in the spotlight, he leaves in a flurry of activity, techs and organizing management hurrying after him.

Sanders and Napoleon walk away to ‘take a leak,’ according to Sanders and Illya is beckoned by Oleg to the back of the conference room.

Illya sits down with his bag on his lap and waits.

“You’ll need to start trusting him in order to drift,” Oleg begins. “You have no choice.”

“How can I trust him with my mind when he betrayed my country right under my nose?” Illya asks.

*How can I trust him when he pretended to--*
That we were–

“Countries are not relevant anymore, Kuryakin. There is nothing to betray when in a decade no
nation survives the attacks. It’s time to set the past aside, and fight for the future.”

But Illya doesn’t live for the future, he hasn’t for a long time.

His burning past is all that’s left for him. Illya wanted a future with Napoleon, a future fighting
alongside his mother. But those futures lit up in flames and Illya is alone in a present covered in
ashes.

Illya clenches his fists.

Oleg sighs. “Don’t put your personal emotions before the good of the people, Kuryakin. You’re not
that important.”

Illya stands up and walks away, not waiting for dismissal.

He stalks towards his room – “61A, it has a nice seaside view,” Waverley had said – and passes
Napoleon in the hallway.

“Fun times?” Napoleon asks.

Illya ignores him and throws his door closed, hard. There is a small window allowing Illya to
watch the sea swell and the rain pour down. The room is cold but Illya feels too warm, his lungs
constricting around quickened breaths. His knuckles are still bruised, and Illya drowns.

Time slips.

A seagull screeches in front of his window and Illya’s fists are bleeding. His blankets are ripped
into pieces and there is paper everywhere. Illya takes a deep breath. He feels a tingle on the back of
his neck.

Napoleon is standing in the doorway, arms crossed, eyes wide.

Illya laughs lowly. “I am broken, Solo. This is normal for me now.”

Napoleon curses softly.

“Go away, Cowboy. You’re not needed here.”

Napoleon flinches. “Illya-”

Illya interrupts him with a glare. “Go. Now.”

Napoleon leaves.

Illya collapses in his bed, and hasn’t felt this alone for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the comments and kudos! It really helps motivate me to continue.
And again thank you Brooke for beta'ing this chapter.
A working system never stays.

A week after the almost-fight, Illya’s bugs don’t respond anymore. Vincenzo must’ve found them and removed all of them while he slept.

Illya curses and deletes all traces of the recordings on his ‘screen.

That’s just what he needed today.

Every year, Illya notices the difference in how people treat him. They’re quieter, look away more. It won’t last. Tomorrow will be back to normal. But now it almost seems like they’ve found something close to respect. Or they’ve logically assumed that if anyone pisses Illya off today, they won’t get away with functioning body parts.

Illya walks into the Hall and a hush falls over the crowd. He sees Vincenzo look up and say something to Alexei. Illya had gotten so used to knowing what they were saying in such a short time. It feels strange to walk around without Vincenzo’s low voice in his ear.

Illya eats breakfast mechanically and is the first to walk down to the Schedule Wall. The B-Squad and the A-Squad are grouped together for an hour-long block in training hall 4. The day goes downhill from there.

“Instructor Deligan has fallen ill,” the B-Squad instructor explains. “We’re combining the classes for today. We can use these unfortunate circumstances to our advantage and practice our combat on a higher niveau.”

The instructor’s voice booms in the round dome that contains the training area. The two squads are lined up along the walls. As rivals, this training will be a rare opportunity to prove themselves to each other; for the A-Squad to confirm their seniority or for the B-Squad to show their superiority.

Illya sighs to himself. He’s never been into meaningless games like these. There is nothing to learn from rivalry.

The instructor is right however; these circumstances can play to Illya’s advantage. He might not have the bugs anymore, but today he’ll see how Vincenzo fights.

“The A-Squad has a year on the B-Squad, but I want no holding back. Those who are weaker should not be treated gently,” the instructor continues.

Illya sees Alexei and Vincenzo grin at each other. A member of the A-Squad woops in enthusiasm.

“However.” The instructor pauses meaningfully, looking over the whole group until he finally stops at Illya. “These fights are practice rounds. Not holding back does not mean fighting to injure. You’re here to learn, not to hurt your partner.”

Illya doesn’t look away and, after a tense second, the instructor continues.
“Pairs are randomly assigned, we will switch in 30 minutes.” The instructor claps his hands.
“Okay. Lester and Artur, you’re up first.”

A broad but small woman standing at the edge of the B-Squad makes her way down to the centre. Artur, Illya’s sergeant, joins her with a grin, tying up his long blond hair in a bun.

The instructor passes long bamboo combat-sticks to them both. “Three rounds. The first with two hits wins.”

Lester and Artur take the sticks and stand in position across from each other, waiting for the signal.

“Go!”

At once, Artur makes the first attack, a big jump and slash forwards that Lester parries. They resume positions, slowly circling each other. Lester tries for Artur’s legs, but he jumps over and hits Lester’s outstretched arm in the process. They stand back.

“One, zero. Lester, watch your forearms. Again!”

This time Lester makes the first jump. They start a rapid fire exchange of parries and almost-hits, so quickly Illya can barely see the sticks move in the air. Lester persists and pushes Artur to the outer edge of the area. Artur blocks another slash aimed at his chest, but the movements set him off-balance and he falls to the ground, only to be met with Lester’s stick pointing at his chin.

“One all. Lester, making use of your opponent’s balance, good job. Artur, move in circles not in lines.”

Artur huffs at the instruction, but resumes his place in the centre of the circle. Lester waits patiently before him, more alert than Illya’s ever known she could be.

“Last round, the winner will be revealed by this last hit.”

The B-Squad start to chant “Kick his ass, Lessy!” and receive a glare from the instructor and Lester herself, the latter more fondly than the former.

The A-Squad remain quiet, but are watching with a tense focus. They know that if their sergeant loses it will mean a month of ridicule for the whole squad. Illya thinks it might be an educative experience for them.

“Silence, please!” The instructor calls out. “Go!”

Artur and Lester shift in position: circling each other, taking each step carefully. Artur moves forward and Lester swipes low, missing barely. The B-Squad groans in disappointment.

Artur moves back but Lester follows, pressuring Artur to the back of the ring again. Artur sidesteps and twists around. Lester blocks his shot with an outstretched arm but is now trapped on the outer line. She grits her teeth and parries, Artur's shots clashing loudly against her stick.

The chants start up again. The A-Squad are yelling “Stick her, Sarge!” while the B-squad chant a simple, “Lessy! Lessy!” on repeat. Illya’s getting a headache.

Lester gets herself back into the centre of the ring but Illya notices her exhaustion. Arthur's year on her is starting to show in stamina; her swipes are too slow to hit him. She’s regressed to full defence.
It’s now a waiting game for the hit she can’t block.

The A-Squad notice the same thing a second later and are getting rowdy. Arthur's cocky grin grows with the enthusiasm. Illya hopes for a split second that his over-confidence will take him out in the end, but he can barely finish the thought before Artur lands a hit on Lester’s shoulder.

“One, Two. A-Squad wins this match.”

The instructor is almost unhearable over A-Squad’s roaring.

B-Squad is crowing around Lester, clapping her on the back and congratulating her on a good fight. Vincenzo smiles at her and they fist bump companionably. Something churns in Illya’s stomach.

“If you’re done celebrating, I want to ask if anyone knows what Lester and Artur need to work on to improve their combat technique?”

Vincenzo raises his hand at once. The instructor nods at him.

“Artur needs to work on his core balance,” Vincenzo starts and is immediately interrupted by the A-Squads vocal disagreement.

The instructor stares them down before motioning for Vincenzo to continue.

“Artur is a tall guy and has a good handle on the strike techniques, but he leans forward too much and his footwork is much to be desired. If he’d trained his balance and his stance from strike to strike, he wouldn’t need to rely on his muscle mass and his stamina as he did just now.”

The instructor nods thoughtfully.

Artur snorts. “If you think you know it all, pretty boy, why don’t you come and try to test it with me? I’m sure my balance won’t prevent me from kicking you in the face.”

The A-Squad laugh loudly.

All bar Illya, clenching his fists, a slow bubble of red coursing through his body.

Vincenzo only grins casually. “I wouldn’t say no, but it wouldn’t be a fair fight. You’re out of breath and tired from the asskicking Lester handed to you. You barely won and your pride is hurt. You’re going to try and rage on me, which will slow down your tactical thinking, hurt your timing, and worsen your little balance problem. You’ll be down in a second, and I don’t think your ego can take that right now.”

Words as sharp as knifes. A white, broad smile to match.

Artur growls and moves forward.

Vincenzo doesn’t even flinch.

“All right.” The instructor’s voice is calm but cuts through the commotion effectively. “If you can’t appreciate useful criticism you’re not welcome in this class. Go to the backroom with Lester and practice. Take the advice you’ve been so graciously given here. Don’t let pride impede progress.”

Artur stares at Vincenzo for a long second that Illya is itching to interrupt. But before he can move and do something, Artur huffs and walks away.

Lester watches after him hesitantly.
“Lester, you need to work on your strike technique. Let Artur explain it to you, it’ll get him out of his tantrum.”

The B–squad laughs, and Illya feels a smile twitch on his face. He’s almost starting to like this instructor.

When Illya looks up, he notices Vincenzo looking at him wide eyed. Illya frowns.

Vincenzo smiles quickly at him before morphing his expression in exaggerated surprise. Illya can almost hear his smug voice from here. I didn’t know you could smile.

Illya glares at him. It feels like the appropriate thing to do. Vincenzo doesn’t stop grinning.

Illya decides Vincenzo is annoying and looks away.

“If we could focus on training again ladies and gentlemen,” the instructor says. “We’re a bit short on time, so we’re splitting the arena in two. Two pairs fighting off. Victor, you can be the referee for the second match for the time being.”

Victor – a silent presence in the A-Squad, and the only one Illya doesn’t despise – nods and stands at the edge of the circle.

“Naida and Fedya, you’re up.”

“Vincenzo-”

Illya’s stomach drops. His mind falls into a contradicting chaos of thoughts. Let me fight him. I don’t want to fight him. Let me–

“–and Felix.”

Illya sighs.

Vincenzo’s gaze flickers over him as he walks into the circle and Illya doesn’t know what he’s thinking.

Vincenzo and Felix are getting in position away from where Illya’s standing, so he tries to find a place closer to the fight.

The instructor calls the match and suddenly it doesn’t matter where Illya’s standing anymore.

Vincenzo’s self confident smirk is validated by the way he holds his body.

Felix is circling around him, trying to find a weakness that isn't there. Felix attempts to hit Vincenzo’s shoulder, but Vincenzo steps around him with an easy air.

He uses his whole body to avoid attempts, his focus on anticipating Felix’s next choice and reacting to it. It’s like a dance, the way he twists and turns, as untouchable in a fight as is he is with his words.

Felix is getting increasingly frustrated and starts to make brash decisions. Vincenzo just darts around him with a smile, casually deflecting but making no attempts to attack himself.

Illya's mesmerised.

It seems like Vincenzo is content with just watching Felix try and fail, as if he is amused by his
failures but respects his persistence. There is no hesitance in his movements as Felix growls and
grunts, there is no tension or fear both in body and mind. Vincenzo is in control in every way.

Once again, Illya is impressed and thoroughly envious.

“Vincenzo, combat isn’t solely avoiding contact. Fight, please,” the instructor says with a tone that
makes clear this isn’t the first time Vincenzo played this trick.

“So sorry for the delay, sir,” Vincenzo says as he jumps over Felix’s low swipe. “He’s just so
passionate, it somehow just doesn’t feel right.”

“Vincenzo,” the instructor threatens.

Vincenzo sighs. “If you insist.”

There is a flash and a cracking sound and suddenly Felix is sat on the ground with his stick broken
in two. Vincenzo leans over and pats Felix gently on the head with his own stick.

“Does that count, sir?” Vincenzo asks innocently.

The instructor sighs. “Someone give Felix a new stick. Vincenzo, this is coming out of your
monthly allowance.”

Vincenzo smiles broadly. “Of course.”

Illya drags his attention away from the centre and looks around the audience of the fights.

Fedya and Nadia already started their second round but it’s clear that everyone is impatiently
waiting for Vincenzo’s fight to continue.

Felix seems to be over his shock and readies himself by twirling his stick around with quick hand
movements. It’s meant to look intimidating, Illya guesses, but Vincenzo isn’t even watching.

Vincenzo isn’t watching because he’s grinning at Illya and Illya doesn’t know what to do with that.

Luckily there is no decision to make because Vincenzo looks away, called back to the fight by the
instructor, with the explicit instruction to, “Actually fight this time, recruit.”

And fight he does. Where he stood like a dancer before, Vincenzo is now poised like a cat
prepared for battle: his back arched and centre low, his stick in both hands, one long claw capable
of defeating the strongest foe. There is a change in his body with each step. He doesn’t wait for
Felix to move but leads the fight instead. A hit and a step to the side. Felix parries and blocks as
quickly as he can but it’s obvious that he can’t keep up.

Felix growls in frustration and swipes desperately for the last time, but Vincenzo places his own
stick across his chest, blocking the attempt and he jumps low, stretching his leg out and twisting
into a spinning kick that hits Felix’s ankle. He loses balance and falls down with a bang.

Vincenzo stands over him, stick pointed at the general direction of Felix’s crotch. Vincenzo smiles.
“I won.”

The B-Squad erupts. They storm around Vincenzo and lift him up in the air. The commotion stops
Nadia and Fedya from their own fight, and like Illya they stare in confusion at the scene.

After Vincenzo is lowered back to the ground, Alexei hugs him enthusiastically. There is
something new there Illya's never seen before, a kind of bond in the group of recruits formed by
their mutual admiration of Vincenzo. Illya knows Vincenzo is shifty and untruthful at his best, and manipulative at his worst. But in some way, despite the deceit, Vincenzo was able to create a group mentality within a week of being there. A loyalty.

Illya shakes his head minutely. The enigma of Vincenzo only grows greater with the day.

It doesn’t help that when Vincenzo notices Illya watching him, he grins again and winks.

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Without the distraction of classes – the distraction of Vincenzo – Illya is lost to the time again. He doesn’t feel like eating, so he skips Hall, skips the crowds. It’s starting to get late, but Illya knows that sleep is not something in his grasp tonight. So he finds his own distraction in the workout room.

Illya is drinking some water to quench his thirst, when Vincenzo walks into the darkened gym room.

Distraction, distraction.

Vincenzo nods at him, but doesn’t strike up a conversation. He walks towards the weights and starts his reps.

Illya catches himself staring and forces himself to stop. His arms are tired, his chest aches, but it’s not enough, not yet. Illya grabs his ‘screen and puts on some music, earbuds in and turns on the treadmill on fast.

Illya doesn’t like running on a machine, it doesn’t feel like progress. It’s too how he feels inside sometime. Running without moving, standing in the same place but tired all the same. But they don’t let them run outside at night, and Illya doesn’t want to leave this room with Vincenzo’s silent presence almost calming him down.

Illya doesn’t like the intrinsic effect Vincenzo has on him. He doesn’t understand it. He doesn’t know why. But when the past festers like an open wound instead of the aching scar it usually is, he can’t care why he feels like this, as long as it helps.

Vincenzo ruins it, of course, a second later. “I’m sorry about your father.”

Illya tenses and puts the treadmill on pause. He breathes carefully, his hands clenched around the bars.

“It was today right?” Vincenzo continues softly.

“Yes,” Illya says after a pause. It was today. 16 years ago but today it feels less than that. More real. More now. His father arrested, their family's reputation in shambles. His mother strong but hurt and desperate. Illya betrayed and alone.

His friends turned on him. His teachers turned on him. The world turned on them.

Illya still doesn’t know what his father did, but whatever it was, it wasn’t worth it. Loyalty, family, trust. They were lost to him that day.

“The guys talk about it a lot. Talk about you,” Vincenzo says. He’s still lifting weights, Illya can hear it. Illya looks outside through the window that covers the wall. It’s raining.
“I know,” Illya says. Because he does.

Vincenzo keeps quiet then, the silence only broken when he puts down his weights and walks over to the treadmill next to Illya.

“Why are you talking to me?” Illya asks eventually. Not able to hold the question back, the confusion. “Most people don’t, they avoid me with reason.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Vincenzo says honestly. “They are.”

Illya shakes his head. “Why aren’t you?” *Afraid of me.* He doesn’t say it. But Vincenzo has to understand.

Vincenzo watches him intently.

Illya holds his breath.

“You’re harmless,” Vincenzo starts.

Illya scoffs.

“Not in weakness, but in aggression,” Vincenzo explains with a small smile. “I know guys who hurt people for their own pleasure, but you’re not like that. You only turn to violence when they deserve it, when they provoke you. It’s a defence. You’re only like this because they forced you to. It’s the way you cope with how they treat you.”

Illya feels like he’s been stripped naked. As if Vincenzo had calmly cut away all layers and walls and simply understood what lay beneath. Illya wonders if he’s always this readable and Vincenzo just is the first that took the effort to pay attention to him. Or, Vincenzo is just good at this, analysing people and picking out their truths. It’s ironic that someone who tells lies with both words and actions, can find the truth so easily.

“Are you always like this, Cowboy?”

“Cowboy,” Vincenzo repeats, instead of answering.

Illya shrugs. He doesn’t know why he said that either. “Americans, all the same. Ugly hats and horses.”

Vincenzo laughs. “I wouldn’t know, never been.”

Illya thinks the conversation is done with that. Vincenzo avoided the question just like he does with the B-squad. There is no reason Illya would be different.

But Illya seems to be wrong again.

After a short silence Vincenzo asks, “What do you mean?”

Illya doesn’t need specifications to know what he’s asking about. “You dig and dig into someone’s mind, find a way into it. Get on the good side. Why? Why the effort? What do you get out of it?”

Vincenzo doesn’t respond, and for a second Illya worries he said to much, that he betrayed how much he knows about Vincenzo, that he suspects him from planting the bugs.

Vincenzo turns on his treadmill and runs at a slow pace. “Maybe it’s just my way to cope,” he says, shrugging.
Illya watches him. Watches the way he avoids eye contact, looking outside with a thoughtful expression on his face. “With what?”

Vincenzo shrugs again. “With myself.”

Illya looks away but nods. That’s what they’re all doing, ultimately. Looking for a way to survive themselves. Their own weaknesses, faults and mistakes.

Vincenzo keeps running, and Illya joins in.

They don’t talk anymore, but Illya prefers the silence. There is no pressure for conversation, no tension. Illya doesn’t feel like he has to prepare himself for insults or prying questions. Like Vincenzo said, Illya doesn’t want to fight. Vincenzo made clear that he doesn’t intend for Illya to be provoked by his actions.

Illya still doesn’t know why. Why Vincenzo is different from the others. Why Vincenzo doesn’t enjoy provoking him. He seems honestly curious and interested in Illya for Illya himself, instead of his treacherous past.

There are little hints of Vincenzo that make Illya suspicious, make him fear the influence he already has on him, but the worry is quieted by Vincenzo’s behaviour now.

There is a connection they have that Illya feels without even trying. They’re compatible, Illya knows, and his urge to know the man next to him hasn’t lessened. It has worsened, even.

Vincenzo catches his eye and smiles. It’s a different smile than Illya’s ever seen on him.

No sharp teeth and intense confidence. Softer, hesitant, genuine.

Illya shivers.

And smiles back.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you brooke for the beta!
“Wake up, sunshine, wake up!”
Someone bangs loudly on Illya’s door.
Illya groans, kicking away what’s left of his blanket.
“Come on big guy! Open up.”
Illya grunts. “Who’s there?”
“It’s your friend, Alexei!” A dark brown eye is visible through the peephole of Illya’s door.
Illya walks past it quickly and finds a sweater to shrug on.
“Since when are we friends, Alexei?"
Alexei laughs and that touches a soft nostalgic note in Illya, something not poisoned by Napoleon.
Alexei laughed a lot. At or with him. The laugh stayed the same over the years, apparently.
“Since you’re the only Russian here, and the only person I know not counting my drift-partner, but she’s not here yet.”
Illya opens the door and gives Alexei an unimpressed frown.
“I guess Oleg could count,” Alexei says thoughtfully. “But everytime I look at him, I feel like I’m this close to being assassinated. I’d rather avoid him for the time being.”
“He’s like that,” Illya agrees. “And he will.”
“Reassuring,” Alexei says.
Illya crosses his arms and leans against the doorway. “Why are you here, Alexei?”
“I’m here to give you the tour de Shatterdome,” Alexei says. “Waverley and Gaby showed me around this morning when I arrived, but they’re too busy to do it again. So I volunteered.”
Illya narrows his eyes. “Why?”
Alexei shrugs. “Why not? We’re going to have to work together, like it or not, and I’d rather have a positive start. Besides, it means I get a second round of breakfast.”
Illya hums. That sounds more like him.
Alexei steps forward and tries to pat him on the shoulder.
Illya avoids him, and lets the awkward pause rest.
Alexei sighs. “Come on, man. We’re in the same boat here.”
Illya blinks in confusion.

Alexei raises an eyebrow. “Vincenzo? Napoleon?”

“What has that got to do with you?” Illya grits his teeth.

Alexei takes a step back, almost offended. “Look, I know you two were closer than any of the other guys, but having a friend, a squad mate, just betray us like that. We all got hurt. I’d never rather see his face again either.”

Illya feels surprised, to say the least. He’d never thought about them, the B-Squad, after Napoleon destroyed everything. Maybe he should have.

“You’re not the only one who was betrayed, Illya. You’re not alone.”

Illya takes a deep breath, and leans against the doorframe heavily. He nods.

“I’ll take you to the cafeteria, they’ve got actual coffee here. Good coffee,” Alexei says.

Illya nods again. “I’ll follow you. Have to put on some shoes first.”

“Oh, yeah,” Alexei laughs. “I’ll wait up here.”

Illya walks back into his room, leaving the door ajar. His thoughts mull over the new perspective he just got handed by Alexei. After a rough night’s sleep, it hits him harder than it might have otherwise.

_You’re not alone._ Illya doesn’t feel like that’s true. He knows that no one had experienced the kind of undescrivable hurt. No one had been ruined time and time again by the consequences of trusting Napoleon too much.

But, apparently, there were people that had felt _something_, and one of them is standing right outside his door, waiting so that they can have breakfast together.

You’re not alone.

Maybe, maybe not.

Illya sighs.

“Alexei?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

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Alexei was right. The coffee _is_ good. The dark and bitter taste wakes Illya up in a way he hasn’t felt like for a while. The constant commentary Alexei provides might also be a factor. Illya can’t remember the last time he spoke with someone at length.

Excluding Oleg, although Illya doesn’t know if any of their conversations can be qualified as ‘lengthy’.

After breakfast, Alexei shows him around, both with a to-go cup of coffee in their hands. When
Illya walks through the Jaeger Dome, he feels a familiar thrill trail through his body. Even after years of piloting one up close, the human brain can’t comprehend such enormity. It can’t keep the sensation of seeing something that tall memorized at all times.

The Navo’s Peacemaker and the Chinese Starshooter are both in perfect working order, according to their pilots. Sarah and Sanne, twins that pilot the Peacemaker, explain eagerly that the JIE has promised them new updates to their systems. Illya tries to react adequately impressed.

“Where is the Red Peril?” Illya asks when they’re standing in front of the Starshooter. It’s a harsher red than his Jaeger is, almost neon.

He can’t stand not knowing anymore. He has to see it.

“She’s coming up,” a stranger’s voice answers from behind them. A young woman in a blue jumpsuit rolls herself from under Starshooter’s right foot. Her brown hair is tied up in a bun and her hands are covered in dark, sticky oil.

She stands up, and shakes Illya’s hand briskly. “I’m Gaby Teller. I run the technical department around here. And you’re the guy that gave me triple my workload for the coming next, let’s say… forever?”

“I’m sorry?” Illya says slowly.

Gaby rolls her eyes. “You’d better thank me. I accept coffee and donuts.”

Illya nods. “I will remember.”

Gaby holds his gaze for a long moment and then nods, seemingly satisfied. “Good. As for your Red Peril, there she is.”

Illya looks where she’s gesturing to, and with a loud roar the great doors of the dome open. All commotion around them stills, and all technicians, staff, and pilots alike stop what they’re doing and watch as a big red, mostly intact, Jaeger looms nearer and the sound of helicopters fill the dome.

Slowly, the Jaeger becomes clear to see, damaged and ridden with scars. It’s being lowered into a big plato, people all around it securing it into latches and chains.

Gaby is speaking rapid fire German into her earpiece. Alexei is cursing in astonishment.

And Illya is–

A big truck rides past them, carrying a torn off Jaeger arm. The shoulder piece is being dragged after it several smaller cars. That’s where Illya had seen his mother for the last time.

He’d avoided thinking about seeing his Jaeger again for so long. The damage a manifestation to what he’d lost–

A scream. Red sea.

Deep breaths.

Deep breaths, Peril.

“Peril? Peril, breath with me. Please.”
A warm hand on his shoulder, dragging him back.

Illya is choking. Drowning in a sea of red.

“Breathe. 1 2 3 4.”

“Hold, now. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7.”

“Release. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8. “

“Good, love. You’re doing great, again. For me, Illya. Again.”

Counted breaths slowly make away to reality. Piercing eyes wake him up.

“Illya?”

Illya groans. His head hurts. Lights dance in his vision.

“Oh, thank god. He’s back. Can someone help me? He needs medical, now.”

Illya knows that voice. “Napoleon?”

His hands are being held. “Yeah, I’m here, Peril. I’m here. I’ll always be here.”

Illya closes his eyes. “No.” Shakes his head. “No!”

“Please, Illya, let me help you.”

“No.” Illya needs to get away. From Napoleon, from everything, from the pain and hurt.

“Go away,” Alexei snaps.

“He needs me,” Napoleon protests, but he lets go of Illya’s hands.

Illya feels like he can breathe again.

“He needs you to leave, now.” Alexei’s voice is firm, strong. “I’m taking over.”


“Illya, I have some water for you here,” Alexei says to Illya, softer now. “I would like for you to drink it.”

Illya complies, but keeps his eyes closed.

“Good. Now we’ll just sit here until you’ve calmed down a bit. You can lean against me if you feel tired.”

Illya does. He finds Alexei’s shoulder blindly. The heat is reassuring in a way it wasn’t before.

“Good, Illya. There is no rush. Just keep breathing, and drink some more water.”

Illya doesn’t know how long he sits there, eyes closed, not quite understanding what Alexei is saying but the cadence of the Russian language soothes him nonetheless. Alexei leads him to the Medic area afterwards. Gaby trails after them, trying and failing not to look concerned.

Illya waits for the shame to come while he’s waiting on the doctor to come back with his results.
He waits for the constricting sense of failure that envelops him every time his brain disintegrates somewhere where other people can see the weakness of his mind.

But there is nothing. It doesn’t come.

Illya feels a little embarrassed, somewhere at the edges of his consciousness, but nothing like he’s used too. Maybe because Alexei is still here, still talking to him, despite what just happened. He says he’s proud of the way Illya got back to them so quickly, and it sounds like he means it. It sounds like he understands.

Maybe it’s because Gaby decided to stick around, despite her busy schedule. Trading sarcastic snarks with the nurse she clearly knows, and tells them about Waverly and the team they set up here.

Maybe it’s because every time Illya closes his eyes, he hears that honey voice speaking to him in low tones, with the utmost care and calm. Illya can still hear how his voice broke when Illya told Napoleon to go, how he spoke in glass shards after Alexei send him away.

It’s dangerous, the way Illya feels sickly sweet upon discovering a facet of Napoleon’s pain. Illya can’t know it’s genuine, can’t know what is real. But after being torn apart inside your own mind, even the most unlikely pieces of hope are blinding in their brightness.

When your mind is as dark as a drowning sea, little light is needed to burn the sky.

--

Illya stays the night in the Medbay. Illya doesn’t protest, they have good pudding here.

Alexei sits with him until late in the evening, after which Gaby bullies him to go sleep.

“I know for a fact that you haven’t slept in 24 hours,” she says, pushing him out of the room.

“How do you know that?” Alexei splutters.

Gaby narrows her eyes at him, and taps on her earpiece. “I know everything around here.”

After Alexei left, grumbling, Gaby goes to sit in his abandoned chair, cross-legged, and bites her lip.

Illya sighs. “What?”

“I didn’t anticipate such an emotional response,” she says.

Illya shrugs.

“I mean, of course, it’s a traumatic experience and there is no shame in having these kinds of reactions,” Gaby says. “But, to repair the Jaeger, I need to know exactly what happened.”

“Can’t we do this another time?” Illya says, and lets his head drop against the mattress.

Gaby is silent for a second, and then nods. “Yes, I’m sorry.”

She stands up and walks to the door, where she pauses, tapping her fingers against the doorpost. “It has to happen soon, though. The records are too bare, and I really want to fix her for you. I know she means a lot to you. I can’t be sure I’m doing the right thing if I don’t know what she went through.”
She walks away before Illya can respond.

Illya stares out of the window. It’s stopped raining but it’s still wet and windy. Between the harsh waves crashing into the harbor and the sand of the beach lifted up in the air, cutting against the window, Illya wonders if Hong Kong will ever bring him peace.

A soft knock sounds on his door. It’s one of the nurses, ginger and freckled. She walks in carefully, as if she’s afraid to frighten Illya. Illya wonders if she can.

“Someone left this in front of the door,” she says, and hands Illya his ‘screen, earbuds wrapped around. The old thing’s barely working, but Illya never could get himself to throw it away and replace it.

There is music coming out of the earbuds, skratchy instruments, a piano melody in the distance.

Illya waits for the nurse to leave until he puts them in.

*Che vuole questa musica, stasera,*

*Che mi riporta un poco del passato,*

Illya closes his eyes.

*La luna ci teneva compagnia,*

*Io ti sentivo mia,*

Scheme or truth, Napoleon?

*Soltanto mia,*

*Soltanto mia.*

He falls asleep before the last note hits.

The next day it’s raining again, but the sun is shining.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

*Who wants this music tonight?*

*It'll remind me a bit of the past,*

*I'd have the moon to keep me company,*

*It'd make me think of you,*

*as only mine,*

*as only mine.*
February 2015

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February 2015

Things change gradually, but Illya notices nonetheless.

He keeps his solitary table but every once in awhile Vincenzo is already sitting there with a cup of atrocious coffee and a smile on his face. The B-squad doesn’t really seem to know what to think of it, but they tolerate Vincenzo’s little pet projects and suddenly there are less taunts, less stares. In mixed lessons, Illya always has a partner now, even if Alexei and Vincenzo are paired together more often than not. There is always a seat saved at the front for lectures, and Nadya shares her notes with him during Spanish class.

Illya doesn’t feel as though they’re suddenly all friends, but Vincenzo’s approval of him influences his day to day life to such an extent that when the free weekend arrives, Illya isn’t overcome with choking dread.

Free time means less oversight. It means more fights and anger. Free time is a small war for Illya to survive.

Illya wakes on the morning of Free Saturday, and feels fine. Breakfast is in the lounge, because so many recruits left to visit family the night before, and it’s an hour later; no one wakes early on free days– including the cooks.

The B-Squad remained mostly intact, Illya notices as he walks into the lounge. There are a few faces missing, but Vincenzo, Alexei, Nadya and the twins Illya never remembers the names of, have claimed two sofas and are draped all over each other, laughing at something Vincenzo is saying.

Illya walks off to the side to grab a bowl of cereal, and scans the room for a solitary place to sit. But before he can, Vincenzo slides up to him and grins.

“No being unsociable during break, Illya,” he says, dragging Illya with him to the sofas. Illya allows him to, fully aware that he could break Vincenzo’s wrist and escape, but glares at him when he sits down.

Vincenzo, of course, immediately leans against him to make more space for Alexei, who has a box of donuts in his hands, guarding it as if it contains the life of the universe.

“Everyone gets one donut,” Alexei warns. “The person who tries to eat two is going to be target practice for Illya’s fists.”

Illya frowns. “I’ve not been informed of this rule.”

The group laughs, and after a second Illya realises they’re not laughing at him but with him. They thought he’d made a good joke. Illya’s lips twitch and he looks at his feet when he notices Vincenzo smiling at him.

Alexei passes them all a donut. Vincenzo tries to grab a second one half way through Illya’s cereal, so he puts it away and cracks his knuckles as if preparing for a fight. The gesture sends the group
back in hysterics again, and Illya feels something warm in his chest.

“Help! I’m in mortal peril! Don’t hurt me!” Vincenzo pleads dramatically, trying to hide behind Alexei. “I’m innocent.”

“We all know you never are, Cowboy,” Illya says with narrowed eyes, but he grabs his bowl again and resumes eating.

“Illya knows what’s up,” Nadya comments. “Remember, we’re talking about the guy that replaced the rector’s cigarettes with ones laced with pot. He was slightly high for more than a week. He’d never been so nice before.”

Illya shakes his head at Vincenzo in deep disapproval, and Vincenzo is almost crying from laughing so hard.

“My proudest accomplishment,” Vincenzo heaves, wiping his eyes.

“You are the worst recruit,” Illya says decisively. “Bad pilot.”

“Hear, hear,” Alexei calls out, and the rest make a toast with their cold coffee and shitty tea.

“I’m being bullied,” Vincenzo complains, loudly, but he’s smiling behind it all and bumps against Illya’s shoulder in a companionable gesture. Or at least, that’s what Illya thinks it is. It might not be what he hopes it is.

Nadya organizes a poker game with mints as poker chips, but Illya gives it a pass. He walks to his room instead, and takes his ‘screen and his sketchbook with him before coming back.

“You didn’t leave!” is the first thing that comes out of Vincenzo’s mouth when he rejoins them in the lounge. Illya shrugs and sits down in his spot next to Vincenzo again.


Illya follows the game with a lazy eye, sometimes peeking at Vincenzo’s hand and seeing what he does. He almost always bluffs, and wins the pot anyway.

Between the laughter and peaceful murmurings, Illya lets himself relax and draw mindlessly. He fills page after page, reveling in a rush of quiet focus he hasn’t experienced since he’d been a kid. He starts with drawing landscapes he remembers, or locations of the base from memory, but slowly he’s drawing more and more people, using the squad around him as living references. The way Nadya’s head is shaved at one side, giving her chin a very pointed line, or Alexei’s short brown curls, dancing on the top of his head when he laughs.

And Vincenzo. Illya draws Vincenzo.

His hands first, holding the cards, twirling and playing with the mints, tapping against his thigh. Then Illya draws his smile; sharp teeth and lush lips, parted. His jaw angled and strong, glossy strands of raven hair tucked behind his ear. Illya tries to get his eyes right, the way they pop into view, pierce with light and clever brightness, but every single attempt feels inadequate.

So he gives up and tries to draw big movements, gestures. Vincenzo tilts his head just so when he’s listening, and he bites his lip softly when he gets a good hand. He straightens his back and puffs out his chest when he wins a round, flashing a quick grin Illya never is fast enough to capture.

It’s quiet when Illya’s hand begins to cramp, so he looks up and stretches his fingers gingerly and
realises that most people have gone.

“There you are, Peril,” Vincenzo teases. “You’re back?”

Illya huffs and ignores him.

“Can I see?” Vincenzo asks, watching the sketchbook like magpie spotting a shimmering object.

Illya looks down and is confronted with a page full of Vincenzo and shakes his head decisively.

Vincenzo hums. “I hope you’ll be comfortable to share some with me, in time. I love art and artistry.”

“Do you draw?” Illya asks, curious. Vincenzo has artist’s hands and creativity, Illya knows this.

Vincenzo smiles softly. “No, never had the patience. I’m more of a collector than anything else. If the world hadn’t been ruined, I would’ve started my own museum.”

Illya can see that; Vincenzo surrounded by beautiful art and smooching rich people at cocktail parties for donations both economical and in frames.

“I’ve never been to a museum,” Illya says without intending too. Vincenzo tilts his head and raises an eyebrow as if to ask why?

Illya shrugs. “My parents had no interest in art, and after my father—” Illya takes a breath. “There was no money and no time. I didn’t want to ask my mother for things that were not necessary to provide.”

“I sneaked into museums when I was young. Everyday after school,” Vincenzo says. “There always was a group of school children around, and the overworked teachers only watched for having too few children, not too many.”

Illya laughs at the mental picture.

“We should go,” Vincenzo says, “Once upon a time, we should go together. I could show you Galleria dell’Accademia in Florence and—”

Vincenzo stops suddenly, all energy slipping out of him at once. Illya touches his hand in question before thinking better of it.

Vincenzo stares at the place where their hands brushed.

“Cowboy?” Illya asks carefully.

“Oh, nothing.” And there it is, the charming smile. The mask. “I just remembered that we’re not going to have a long break for another two years. Defender’s sacrifice.”

Illya nods, not sure if he should let this go or press further. But Vincenzo’s shoulders are tense and he’s tapping with his fingers against his thigh so Illya decides not to.

“There is a little shop, in a village nearby,” Illya says instead, “There are paintings displayed in the window. I’ve only walked past and it’s not a museum but—”

Vincenzo relaxes at once, and the smile he throws Illya looks more genuine, a hint of gratitude in it’s edges. “We could go tomorrow, the weather should be better.”
They both gaze outside, where a storm is raging over the campus, a few people are running for cover.

“If it is,” Illya starts, “I’ll take you.”

Vincenzo’s smile widens. “It’s a date.”

And Illya knows that that is a tease, another of Vincenzo’s jests, but Illya’s heart can’t help but throb at the idea. “I’m going to work out,” Illya says, trying to distract himself and find a way to escape before Vincenzo notices his burning cheeks.

“On a free day?” Vincenzo asks.

Illya stands up and shrugs with one shoulder.

“You know what,” Vincenzo says, “I’m in, let me get my stuff.”

“I’m not waiting if you’re slow, Cowboy.”

“Wanna bet?”

“No.”

--

Despite Vincenzo’s promises, the weather doesn’t lighten up much.

“It is cold, Cowboy,” Illya grumbles, wrapping his arms around himself to shield from the icy winds.

Vincenzo laughs, a puff of condensation curling from his mouth. “You’re the born and bred Russian, here, Peril. You should be immune to this.”

Vincenzo stole Alexei’s winter coat, and he looks ridiculous in it. They’re equally as broad, but Alexei is taller and has longer limbs, so Vincenzo’s flapping the long sleeves around like a penguin after a car crash.

Illya thinks he looks adorable, and then has the urge to bash his head against a wall.

“Where to?” Vincenzo asks, blissfully unaware to Illya’s inner turmoil.

Illya walks towards the storage building, Vincenzo following him curiously. He opens up one of the garages that line the jogging track. “I’m not going to walk in this weather,” Illya says as he searches around in his pocket for a key. Vincenzo gasps softly behind him, but Illya ignores him for now.

“I can’t drive motorcycles, Peril.”

Illya shrugs and takes the first motor in line. It’s a dark, shining thing. He drives it out of the garage, closes the door and then hops on, kicking it into gear.

“Peril?”

“Go sit,” Illya says, gruffly. “Arms around my waist. Don’t want you falling off.”

Illya waits but Vincenzo doesn’t move. He frowns at him. “What?”
Vincenzo is watching the bike with wide eyes, but flicks his gaze to Illya every so often. It makes Illya want to hide. “Cowboy?”

Vincenzo shakes himself out of it. “Nothing, it’s nothing.” He bites his lip and wipes his hands against his trousers. “It’s just a damn beautiful bike, that’s all.”

Illya scoffs and tries to distract himself from feeling how Vincenzo slides behind him, chest to back. His arms warm along his waist. “This thing isn’t pretty. Military issue bike, no grace.”

Vincenzo hums, Illya can almost feel the vibration in his chest. “If you say so, Peril.”

Illya takes a short, cold, breath, ignores the heat and tingling that flows through his body, and drives.

--

They find the little shop in a back alley on the edge of the village. It’s not an art store, as Illya had hoped, but an antiques store instead.

Vincenzo is happy either way. “Shops like these are treasure troves,” he says excitedly, jumping off the bike in an instant. “Let’s go hunt for treasure, Illya.”

“You are a child, Cowboy.” Illya walks after him after him, pretending to be more annoyed by Vincenzo’s exuberance than he actually is.

The shop is badly lit and dusty, but that’s what makes it charming. The paintings are still in the display like Illya’d promised, and there are a few others hanging on the walls. Only a few pieces of furniture littered around, but the space is limited so it feels crowded anyway. Despite the occasional pieces of classical Russian artmanship, the true star of the store is a hefty records collection that fills about half the room.

“This is amazing,” Vincenzo says reverently, flicking through the records and taking ones out seemingly at random.

Illya agrees, silently. “Most of them will be Russian.”

“Not all of them,” Vincenzo shoots back. “Besides, not all Russian music is drunken opera or classical pieces with canon’s as instruments.”

“Tchaikovsky is a special case,” Illya grumbles.

Vincenzo laughs. “A genius, you mean.”

They spend some time looking through the records, trading jibes and teases, comparing music taste and, laughing at idiotic or unusual covers.

“Cowboy,” Illya calls out from across the shop, drawing Vincenzo near. “I found your song.”

“Che vuole questa musica stasera,” Vincenzo reads out loud when Illya shows the cover to him. The title written in big, lush letters on a picture of a dark, moonlit sky.

Illya pushes it into his hands and watches as Vincenzo reads the back. “An Italian song in a Russian shop. I’m the best treasure hunter, what do I win?”
Vincenzo hums distractedly, tracing the lyrics with his finger. “You don’t speak Italian, right?”
“No, only Russian, English, French, Balkan, Czech, Polish and I’m learning Chinese and Spanish.”

Vincenzo nods, taking the record. “That’s a lot of languages.”

Illya shrugs. “The more you can speak, the more chance for becoming a Section One Pilot, I have more chance to find a Drift Partner if I can speak their language.”

Vincenzo nods and grins. “I could try and teach you some Italian, if you want.”

Illya doesn’t know if he means that or if he’s just teasing, so he shrugs.

“The physical tests are in two weeks, aren’t they?” Vincenzo asks, as he places the record on a side table. “B-Squad is making bets on who will make it.”

“Is that so?” Illya asks.

Vincenzo hums, flicking through a stack of English records. “You and Artur are tied.”

Illya blinks, a little surprised he’s being held in such high regard. He knows he’s capable of becoming a S.O.P but people never root for traitor’s sons. Illya toys with a single in his hands, Jimmy, Renda se. “Who’re you betting on?”

“I put a fortune down on you,” Vincenzo laughs. “Don’t disappoint me.”

Illya tsks. “Gambling is bad, Cowboy. It isn’t allowed.”

Vincenzo grins. “It’s my American blood, I can’t help it.”

Illya shakes his head but feels his lips twitch. “You’ll never become a good pilot.”

“We’ll see,” Vincenzo shoots back. “Look what I found here. I love this guy.”

“Oh,” Illya says, taking the record gently. It’s a Django Reinhardt collection. Illya recognizes only one song in the title list, Body and Soul, but he’s immediately sent back to warm summer Sundays with sweet tea and his mother baking fresh bread for dinner that night.

Vincenzo smiles up at him, proud of his find, and Illya can’t wait to listen to the whole thing together–

Illya lets his shoulder sag in disappointment and pouts.

“What’s wrong, Peril?” Vincenzo asks frowning, sounding concerned, and that twists Illya’s heart.

“How can we listen to this without a record player?” Illya asks softly.

Vincenzo pauses for a second in surprise and then laughs, loud and carefree. “I’ve never seen you that heartbroken. I didn’t even know your face could be that way;” Vincenzo says, breathless between peals of laughter. “And it’s for music, of course it is.”

“Music is important,” Illya protests, trying to sound annoyed, but he feels his cheeks warm and Vincenzo is staring at him with ill-hidden mirth, which only makes it worse.

Vincenzo nods seriously, his mood flipped like the flick of a switch. “I agree, Peril. This is very important, and we’ll find a way to fix it.”
Illya frowns at him, keeping the record close to his chest in caution.

“This is our new mission, Illya,” Vincenzo gushes. “We need to—” he looks around the shop until he spies the little old lady knitting in the corner.

“Ma’am, do you sell record players here?” Vincenzo asks, perfectly polite and charming. “It’s my friends birthday soon, you see, and we’re training on base to protect the world from Kaiju attacks, so some good music will boost morale and make a good birthday present.”

It is Illya’s birthday soon, but knowing Vincenzo, this is just a scheme to make the woman more eager to give them what they need. Illya never told him his birthday, and Vincenzo never asked.

But Vincenzo’s powers of persuasion must have taken a hit somewhere between the walk from base to here, because the old woman shakes her head in a definite and grumpy, Njet.

Vincenzo maintains his charming smile on his face, but Illya can see the surprise in the twitch of his eye and the frustration in the turn of his hand. Illya wonders distractedly when he learned to read Vincenzo’s treacherous face and body.

“Do you know where we could maybe find one?” Vincenzo asks instead. “You’d be doing us a great favor.”

The woman shakes head again, and continues her knitting. “No players, only records.”

Vincenzo sighs, barely audible, before smiling again. “Well, thank you so much anyway.”

“There is a record player in the back,” Illya interjects. “How much?”

The woman stops knitting and abruptly looks up, holding Illya’s gaze with strong, icy, eyes. Illya doesn’t look away. She reminds him of his own grandmother, and has to repress a tiny smile.

After a long second, the woman nods, as if decided, and looks back at her knitting again, continuing as if nothing happened. “Player is broken. Gift from my husband, useless and bad. Froze to death in forest after drinking too much vodka and losing way home. Good day in my life.”

Behind her, Vincenzo pulls a face of amused shock. Illya shrugs. Russian grandma’s are always like this.

“You take it,” she continues without looking up. “Too heavy to throw into ice river. Son is lazy, useless and bad.”

“For free?” Vincenzo asks, and Illya stomps down on his foot.

But the woman nods. “Buy records, come visit in spring. I make good tea.”

“We will,” Illya promises, and then pulls Vincenzo away before he can say anything to induce the wrath of a Russian grandma. They’re liable with knitting needles.

Vincenzo doesn’t protest, instead walking to the record player in a quick pace. Oh so eager.

“How are we going to take that thing on the bike?” Illya says, when they’re standing before it.

The record player is vintage, objectively beautiful due to an abundance of decorations, but most of all, it’s large.
Vincenzo doesn’t seem to notice the problem. “It’s beautiful Illya, look at the engravings here- this genius carved flowers into the wood. It’s almost Art Nouveau, the way it’s styled.” He walks around it like a collector judging a classical painting. “Oh, the needle arm is painted with real gold flakes, I think, and this here is true silver.”


“I will walk this thing home if I have to,” Vincenzo murmurs, and Illya has no doubt he means that.

“People die in the forest with this weather,” Illya says. “You’ve just been told.”

Vincenzo sighs dramatically. “Okay, look. We need to fix it anyway, so we can take this off.” He gestures to the horn. “And take it apart. Can you ask her for a bag?”

When Illya comes back with a tightly knitted purple sack, Vincenzo had prepared all the big pieces for travel, and carefully stacks them to fit. “I’ll ask Nadya for help to fix it, she knows more about this stuff then I do and she owes me.”

Illya hums. “You think it will work?”

“Yes.” There is an excited glint in Vincenzo’s eye. “I won’t give up before we can play records with this thing.”

While Vincenzo fiddles with the last pieces and puts all the little screws in his pockets, Illya doubles back to the record section. Now, knowing they will most probably be used at some point, Illya thinks using his allowance to buy a few records is worth it. He takes a few he’d had his eyes on, from Solomon Burke to Jimmy, Renda se. He can’t find the Reinhardt record, though, and spares a moment to feel grumpy about that.

Just before he leaves to pay, he spies the Italian record on a little table. Without thinking about it, he takes it with him, before walking to the counter to pay.

By the time he’s done, Vincenzo’s already waiting for him at the door with a pleased grin on his face, holding his ridiculous purple sack in his ridiculously long arm sleeves and Illya has to take a breath and pray he isn’t blushing before he joins him to walk outside.

They ride back in silence, Vincenzo’s close presence even harder to handle than it was before, despite the bag separating them now.

Vincenzo hops off the motorcycle and helps him put the thing back. They walk back into the building, closer than is necessary, bumping elbows and shoulders. They go towards the lounge almost automatically, neither of them needing to voice the idea. But before Illya can walk into the room, Vincenzo holds him back with a hand on his arm and a smile on his face.

Illya waits, watching as Vincenzo takes something out of his sack. Something that doesn’t seem like it’s a piece of a record player.

“Happy early birthday,” Vincenzo says, and holds it out.

It’s the Reinhardt record. Vincenzo had bought the record for him. As a gift. Illya takes it with shaking hands.

“Thank you,” Illya says softly, despite knowing those words will never be enough for what he feels right now.
Vincenzo smiles and shrugs. “Glad you like it.”

“Cowboy,” Illya says quickly, before Vincenzo can walk away. “Wait.” Illya takes his own bag, and flicks through the records in it, until he finds what he wants.

_Che Vuole Questa Musica, Stasera._

“Here, for you,” Illya says, and pushes it in Vincenzo’s hands.

Vincenzo blinks and says, “Oh.”

There is a pause, and Illya thinks he might have just made a mistake. But then Vincenzo smiles and shakes his head ruefully. “Thank you, Peril.”

Relief floods through him and Illya smiles back. “Let’s go.”

Vincenzo takes the record and his bag, and walking into the lounge with his usual boisterous mannerisms. “We have a new project, my friends!”

“It hasn’t got anything to do with explosives, right?” Alexei asks with a groan. “Kuryakin, I’d hoped you’d be a moderating influence on this menace.”

Illya shrugs. He thinks he hasn’t got any influence on Vincenzo at all. It’s more the other way around.

“No,” Vincenzo says, and then shows the squad the contents of his treasure. “We are going to fix this record player.”

It’s silent for a second, but then Nadya says, deadpan, “That was not what I expected, but I’m in.”

The rest agree, loudly. The twins jump up to get a toolbox and Nadya leans over the disassembled record player and already is in a deep conversation with Vincenzo.

Illya watches the scene, reluctantly amused, and decides they need coffee for all of this to succeed.

He walks toward the coffee machine, and sets to work with the merry noise of the B-Squad behind him.

Illya takes a sip of the shitty coffee, and can’t help but think this was one of the best weekends he’s ever experienced in his life.

Vincenzo smiles at him when Illya passes him his coffee, and Illya wonders if any of the days coming after this one will be able to be better, top this in some way. If he’ll feel ever more peaceful and happy than he feels now.

Illya hopes so, and Vincenzo smiles wider as Illya sits on the sofa next to him.

Illya hopes.

Chapter End Notes

For people who might only know me for only this work this chapter might not be as special, but damn. I'm not known for my ability to write fluff, (more infamous for
writing angst in the inception fandom) and this sure as hell isn't tooth rotting fluff like some awesome writers are able to produce. But for me it's fluffy as hell and I'm really happy with the vibes in this chapter. Bittersweet fluff. That's my jam now.

Just thought I'd share this positive note before we go back to my angsty self next chapter ;)
December 2020

“Gaby, let’s go.” Napoleon’s voice is gruff in Illya’s ear.

Even after days of this, Illya can’t help but shiver at the sound, the familiarity.

“Why, what, where?” Gaby asks, quick and confused.

Illya can hear her flutter with her blueprints and notebooks. Despite the abundance of tech in the Shatterdome, their little chop-shop girl has a preference for the analogue above the digital. It’s no surprising sight to see her run around with a stack of paper in her arms. Illya doesn’t know if she’d been trained in combat, but with all the kilos she’s carrying on a daily basis, no one should underestimate her in a fight.

“You’ve been in here for twelve hours,” Napoleon says. “Don’t deny it, Alexei saw you here this morning and Peter told me you didn’t leave the night before.”

Gaby huffs and mumbles something under her breath, but Illya can hear the words ‘hypocrite’ and ‘traitor’ nonetheless. The bugs are better than the ones he’d had years ago. Technological progress.

“Did you sleep here?” Napoleon asks.

“A few hours on the sofa,” Gaby says. “It’s enough. I’ve got coffee and Peter gave me gross energy drinks.”

“Gaby,” Napoleon sighs with a long suffering air. “You can’t live like this.”

There is a concerned note in his voice that makes Illya’s hands tremble. There is nothing to break here, so he digs his nails into his skin. The sharp sting eases the rush of red in his mind.

“Do you think I have a choice?” Gaby almost yells. “They’re hounding me for progress, Solo. I need to fix that fucking Jaeger and I don’t even know what’s wrong with it. I’d better be off trying to find out what isn’t because everything seems to be.”

“I know,” Napoleon says. “Come on, let’s go. I know a good place to eat right on the edge of the beach. You need some good food in you.”

“But–”

“No. No fighting this, take the blueprints with you if you have to but you’ll come with me.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll get Alexei and Illya in here to drag you to the Medbay and bribe the nurses into drugging you and feeding you through a tube.”

Illya’s chest hurts at hearing his name in Napoleon’s voice, but he’s glad that despite their situation, he knows that Illya would come for Gaby.
The threat seems to work, because accompanied by a string of German curses there is the rustle of paper being moved, and after a few minutes Napoleon and Gaby are walking outside.

Illya doesn’t have to hurry. The range is fairly big, which helps with his determination to not have Napoleon find out this time. He grabs his coat and listens to Napoleon’s chattering about the weather and the sea and a dog they pass by as they walk. Gaby doesn’t participate in the conversation, just let’s Napoleon do the talking, too much in her own head trying to fix a ruined machine.

Illya follows them after grabbing a cup of coffee, something warm for his hands in the Autumn weather. It’s almost sunny, but the temperatures are low and the sea winds have little mercy. Illya’s glad when Napoleon and Gaby walk into the second café lining boulevard, allowing him to seek refuge in the one next to it without losing their voices on his ‘screen.

Napoleon orders a hefty brunch for Gaby and him, while Illya only orders a cup of tea; too tense to eat anything.

“You’re allowed to talk about work after you’ve finished at least one plate,” Napoleon warns Gaby. “Until then, only small talk and chit chat.”

There is a silence, and Napoleon laughs. “You don’t know what to talk about that isn’t work, don’t you?”

“I have priorities, Solo,” Gaby says.

“Fuck priorities, or better yet, prioritize yourself. You’re no use to any of us passed out from exhaustion.” He says it pleasantly, but there is a serious note in his voice Illya reluctantly approves of. “Let me help... How did you end up working here?”

Gaby sighs. “Long version or the short version?”

“The food will be here soon, so the short version will suffice.”

“Okay then,” Gaby says, and takes a breath. “Waverly needed a Jaeger mechanic for the JIE, so he found me.”

“That’s very short,” Napoleon interjects.

“I’m not done yet, idiot. If you keep quiet and listen we’ll get somewhere.”

Napoleon laughs. “I’m sorry. Where were you when he found you?”

“Berlin, working in a car shop while studying Jaeger Mechanics in the University. Waverley wasn’t there for me, no one in their right mind would set out to hire a student. He was there for my father.”

“Your father?”

“He helped build the first generation of Jaegers before he disappeared, no one knew where he was. I didn’t mind, I’d never known him well.”

Napoleon hums. “So why did Waverley come to you?”

“Because he hoped I’d know where my uncle was,” Gaby says with a bitter tone. “I didn’t, of course, he’d disappeared even before my father did, he was just better at leaving the right traces
here and there to make people think he wasn’t in the wind for years.”

“You knew he was on the run then?” Napoleon asks.

“No,” Gaby says. “We found that out together after being dragged all over the Continent for a year. Luckily by then I’d proven to be knowledgeable in the subject of Jaegers and I was allowed to rush my degree and come work here.”

There is some commotion, the clatter of plates and the soft polite tones of waitresses. The food must have arrived. Illya takes a sip of his cooling tea and waits.

“How did you end up as the lead so quickly?” Napoleon asks, finally.

“I just was that good,” Gaby replies, mouth full. Illya can imagine her smug little smile from here. “And now shush. I’ll eat and after that it’s back to work.”

“Your wish is my command,” Napoleon quips.

Illya orders another tea.

They eat in silence, and Illya spends the time reflecting. He can’t find something Napoleon could get out of this, there is no reason to interrogate Gaby because he could get all of this information through Sanders or Waverley. From every angle, it looks like Napoleon is just being nice, gentlemanly. A friend. But Illya has a hard time believing that.

“Okay, tell me where you’re stuck,” Napoleon says.

Gaby scoffs. “I have a whole team in my workshop. If you think you’ll help me more than any of them your ego is even bigger than I thought it was.”

“I’ve been a pilot for long enough to know the basics,” Napoleon says. “And I’m not stupid. But this isn’t about me. Just run me through it, and maybe being in a new context will give you a new perspective. It definitely won’t hurt.”

Gaby sighs. “Fine.”

There is some shuffling, and by the sound of it Gaby rolls out a big piece of paper on the table. Illya’s seen them once before, stretched out before her as she distractedly eats her cereal— the Red Peril’s blueprints.

“So the damage to the shoulder and the right arm is obvious, but they’ve salvaged it surprisingly well, so if that was the only problem I’d have the attachments replaced, the skeleton changed, rebuild majority of the shoulder and vóila, we’re ready to assemble. A paint job and we’re done.”

“But the arm isn’t the only problem?” Napoleon asks.

“The detached arm isn’t even the biggest problem,” Gaby scoffs. “I could attach it now and pretend everything is fixed, but it wouldn’t be. The Jaeger would only deteriorate, maybe even become dangerous. But it seems like that’s what the despicable twins want me to do either way.”

“Despicable twins? I thought you were friends with Sanne and Sarah.”

Gaby laughs. “I meant Oleg and Sanders. Waverley is pushing me too, but more politely. I don’t think either of them even know what ‘polite’ means.”

“Touché,” Napoleon says.
“I don’t even know where to begin,” Gaby sighs, exhaustion in her voice. “I don’t know if it will ever will be able to handle a neural load again. The whole system is burned through. I don’t know how long Illya solo-piloted, but it has to be at least five minutes. The right side is damaged everywhere and the left stays overloaded no matter what I do. I can’t even connect it to power for longer than an hour without risking the implosion of more connectors. Do you know what a Nuclear Processor is? The Russians invented it–”

“I know what it is,” Napoleon interrupts.

“Okay good, so you know what happens when it's activated while unstable?”

Napoleon laughs bitterly, once. “Yes.”

The bell of the café door dingles and Illya jumps in his seat, so tense and focused on the conversation.

Gaby hums and says, “Then you see my problem.”

“There is a fucking unstable Nuclear Processor in the Shatterdome?” Napoleon exclaims.

Illya curses and clenches his fist; what is Waverly thinking? Illya can’t believe–

His thought is interrupted by a hand on his shoulder, and Illya grabs it and almost breaks in half before Alexei yells, “Oh shit man! It’s me!”

“It shouldn’t be dangerous at the moment,” Gaby says in Illya’s ear.

“I’m uncomfortable with the use of ‘shouldn’t’ in that sentence,” Napoleon says.

Alexei is staring at him in shock and opens his mouth to say something but Illya shushes him.

“Yes, which is why I’m like this,” Gaby says pointedly.

There is a pause.

“Fuck,” Napoleon says. “I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“It seems like no one did,” Gaby says. “But we have no choice. I have no choice.”

“What is going on?” Alexei asks, sitting down.

“I’m trying to listen,” Illya says through his teeth and turns the volume up.

“Do you think you can fix it?” Napoleon asks.

“Listen to what?” Alexei asks, almost talking over Gaby’s response.

“Maybe, if I know what happened. If Illya talks to me.”

“I don’t know if he will,” Napoleon says. “I don’t know if he can.”

Illya feels sick, listening to them talk about him. Alexei is still staring at him like he’s going insane.

“What if I bring Vodka?” Gaby asks deadpan.

Napoleon laughs. “You can try.”
Illya knows that Napoleon meant that as a joke, but Gaby must’ve taken it seriously because a second later he gets a message on his ‘screen.

*Is talking about trauma better with Vodka? If so, can we talk tonight?*

Illya shakes his head to himself and sighs.

“Okay, what the fuck is going on,” Alexei says. “I know something is going on because you’ve been following Napoleon for days but you still don’t talk to him. You think he’s planning something?”

“I don’t know.” Illya says and takes out his earbuds; Gaby and Napoleon preparing to leave the café. “But I want to know.”

“You’re listening to him?” Alexei asks, eyes wide. “You bugged Napoleon?”

Illya nods. He doesn’t trust Napoleon walking around like this, it makes him tense and nervous, certainly with the friendship Napoleon and Gaby are developing. Illya knows that Napoleon probably isn’t going to do anything. Napoleon has been a good pilot for years after the CIA snatched him up and made him choose between Defending and jail, and Napoleon wouldn’t ruin something for himself when he’s good at it.

But the nagging stays, a tremble in his fists and a snake slithering through his thoughts. *What if, what if*. To bug him was the only thing Illya could think of that would quiet his mind just a little. It’d worked before.

Illya also knows that he’s lying to himself if he thinks that mistrust is the only reason he decided to do this.

It’s the torture of being so near Napoleon and not being able to be with him. To see him, but not have him anymore, not being able to be near him without feeling a wave of self-loathing and pain. Because he should’ve known it wasn’t real, he should’ve seen it coming and protected his country. He should have been better.

When Napoleon was in America, Illya could pretend he was gone. He could pretend he was unaffected, compartmentalize and concentrate on the next fight. He could pretend he didn’t feel like his heart had been cut out of his chest and left on a stake to burn.

Pretending isn’t an option anymore; every second he longs for him, misses him, and the sensation drowns him everytime he sees Napoleon, walking past or sitting in the cafeteria.

Napoleon doesn’t stare at him, doesn’t talk to him or walk to him. Ever since Illya’s panic attack, Napoleon has been avoiding him, the closest thing to contact was the ‘screen left in front of a door.

Illya tries to be relieved for the reprieve, for the space Napoleon gives him, but he only feels empty. With the bugs, he has Napoleon’s voice again. Something sweet to soften the hunger.

He can hear him. It has to be enough.

“I support it, don’t worry.” Alexei pulls him out of his thoughts and pats him on the back.

Illya has think a second on what they were talking about and then nods. He hadn’t fully expected Alexei to be okay with bugging Napoleon, but he maybe should have.

“Can we trust him with Gaby?” Alexei asks.
“Gaby can handle herself,” Illya says. “As far as I know, Napoleon has no bad intentions for her. He got her to eat lunch today.”

Alexei whistles, impressed. “Still though, he seemed to have no bad intentions with you either.”

Illya closes his eyes. “I know.”

“Good,” Alexei nods. “Look, I don’t know what you guys had, but whatever it was, remember what he did, what he’s capable of doing. If you want work with the JIE and decide to work through it for the Drift, I’ll respect your choice and try to help you. But know that that’s not the only option, you have the right to protect yourself. Be careful.”

Illya nods and watches Alexei and takes a moment to notice the changes. He looks grim and rugged; the scar adds years to his face. The curls are still there, but they’re shorter, trimmed to fit the helmet. Alexei is still Alexei, but he’s grown and went through his own trials and tribulations, found his own ways into pain. But he survived and is here now, supporting Illya in a way he never expected him to.

Illya nods again; it’s good advice. “I will.”

Alexei scrutinizes him for a second and then smiles, broadly, and suddenly he’s the recruit Illya's known for years.

Illya wonders if he has times like that, moments he can shed the hurt from the past for a second and just be happy like he was, like he had been. Thinking back angers him, makes him feel pain and grieve for the times he’d felt like that. But it’s also a source of hope, because he knows he went through betrayal and loneliness when he was a child, he went through isolation and suffering but he came out happy, even if it was only a little while.

His mother had known that despite the gaping wound Illya carried with him everyday, he had the potential to be okay again. She’d believed in his happiness fiercely. Illya isn’t sure he does, isn’t sure that he can take all the broken pieces and put himself back together into someone who smiles. But he might, maybe, given a sea of time. So he’s not giving up, he’s not drowning.

Not permanently anyway.

So, when Alexei stands up to get them drinks, Illya grabs his ‘screen and taps a response to Gaby’s message.

Okay. I’ll talk. Don’t like Vodka, bring whiskey. After dinner. 61A.

A second later the ‘screen beeps.

You got it Boss! And Illya, thank you for this.

Chapter End Notes

Yesterday I woke up to such lovely comments and just was so inspired to write right away that I ended up with a new chapter the same day :D I'm still on a roll with this, but I don't think the next chapter will be as fast lol. But one can hope and all that.

I kind of made a global timeline for future chapters to keep track over everything, and
according to that timeline there are at least 10+ chapters to be written, and that's not counting a happy epilogue thing. But this can change at any second. I could choose to make chapters in the future longer, for example, so that would cut down the number a little. Anyway! We're not done yet :)

Chapter Notes

The music for the first scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Now listen all you people, to what I have to say.

Vincenzo is dancing on Illya’s bed. It’s not even an unusual sight anymore. Illya wonders how this became his new normal. Illya remembers how it almost blew up on their faces, figuratively. They had been almost done when Nadya had dropped the bomb on them.

“Where’s the record player gonna go?” she’d asked while screwing the needle handle back. “We can’t leave it in Hall or in the lounge, I don’t trust other people.”

One loud argument later, Vincenzio convinced the group that it belonged in Illya’s room. They agreed with the compromise that on free days it would be moved to the lounge.

This tradition developed ever since; Vincenzo spends most nights listening to music with Illya. Though this time he’s drinking too.

Illya is not.

Banana freak out, baby

“Banana, banana,” Vincenzo sings badly. “I wanna get high.”

“You’re already drunk, Cowboy,” Illya comments.

Vincenzo laughs and drops on the bed, stretching out casually while holding up his bottle. “Do you want some, Peril?”

Illya frowns at him and does not look at the spot where Vincenzo’s shirt has ridden up. “No.”

“A little won’t hurt, you have another three hours until the test anyway,” Vincenzo pleads, pouting. “Get you a little loose, bit more fun. You’re always so serious and… and… stony. Like hard rock.”

Illya shakes his head and looks away. “I don’t like Vodka.”

“Why?” The question is honest. Which is also a thing they’re doing now. Talking. Illya knows about Vincenzo’s father more than anyone else. Vincenzo told about how he found him once only to find out that he had a new family he loved and cherished, unlike Vincenzo decades ago. “I just wasn’t good enough,” Vincenzo had said and laughed. It’d sounded fake.


Vincenzo knows about Illya’s mother too. Illya doesn’t have to say more. It’s a relief.

“Oh,” Vincenzo says, and puts the bottle on the ground. He motions Illya closer with a floppy
wave of his hand and Illya goes.

Vincenzo wraps an awkward arm around Illya’s waist, pressing his head against his abdomen in something slightly resembling a hug. This is something new too. The touching. There is so much touching. Illya hadn’t known a person could touch someone so much. From fingers brushing when passing over objects to shoulders bumping while walking, there is little time Vincenzo isn’t in his orbit and Illya in his. No collision. Just contact.

“I’m sorry, Illya,” Vincenzo murmurs, his words drunkenly earnest. Illya bites his lip.

He could try and gently lift Vincenzo’s jaw up with his hand and then lean forward a little bit. Bearly touching, breaths mixing. Just to see what Vincenzo would do. Illya doesn’t know if all this, the touching and the talking, the dancing, are hints, nudges. Vincenzo saying I know what you want and I want it too, but I want to see you making the first step. But at the same time, if Vincenzo wanted, why wouldn’t he just take it?

So Illya steps away, carefully, and gives himself a second to collect himself. Vincenzo flops back on the bed, laughing at nothing in particular and Illya’s glad he didn’t try anything. Vincenzo is pretty drunk.

Illya walks to his closet to look for his workout gear. While he shrugs off his sweater, he can hear Vincenzo take a tiny gasp. Illya ignores it. He should be able to dress around Vincenzo, that’s what they have to do in locker rooms. It’s important that they don’t act differently. No one should see them change, even if they do. Illya shimmies out of his pants and doesn’t look around for Vincenzo’s reaction. He just takes his sweatpants and dresses quickly.

“Ilya, why are you in such a hurry?” It sounds like Vincenzo is trying to tease, trying to find a beat of normality, but his voice betrays him. Illya swallows.

“I want to do a warm-up.” Illya pulls on his shirt and finally he feels like he can breathe a little, like the tension in the air has been tamed. It’s safe to look at Vincenzo again.

Illya is mistaken.

Vincenzo isn’t even looking at him anymore, but Illya can see a blush that wasn’t there before and a little dent in his lower lip. But that isn’t even the most pressing problem. Vincenzo is flicking through his sketchbook, smiling widely as he scans the pages.

A rush of warmth fills Illya, but it isn’t the hot, overwhelming sense of anger or rage. Embarrassment maybe, but without the sharp cut of shame. Illya wants to know what Vincenzo thinks of the sketches. He wants to know.

“This is lovely, Peril,” Vincenzo says, softly. “This is beautiful.”

Oh. It can get worse. Illya wonders how his knees are still functioning and theorizes that he’ll never remember how to breathe again. Vincenzo doesn’t seem to be aware of the torture he’s inflicting on Illya and just continues to smile and look.

Illya formulates an escape plan. “I’m going to jog.”

It doesn’t work.

Vincenzo hums. “I’ll join you.”

“You’re drunk, Cowboy,” Illya protests, half heartedly at best.
“And?” Vincenzo asks, grinning.
Illya sighs. “You always follow me around, Cowboy.”

“Maybe I like the view,” Vincenzo leers, and hops of the bed.
Illya shakes his head, but waits on Vincenzo before locking the door.
Vincenzo takes the Vodka with him and takes another swig.

“Cowboy,” Illya says, as they make their way to the jogging track. “Why are you drinking?”
Vincenzo laughs. “Why not, Peril? I am a free man.”

“You are a pilot in training and it’s a Monday afternoon,” Illya says.
Vincenzo slouches down on a bank next to the track and sighs dramatically. “It’s rude to ask people who drink to drown their sorrows what their sorrows are, Peril.”
Illya presses his lips in a thin line and crosses his arms, staring Vincenzo down until he answers.

“It’s my Uncle,” Vincenzo says. “He’s being, impatient to say the least.”
Illya frowns. “Why?”

“He expected better results in less time,” Vincenzo says. “He’s the one paying for all this, so I suppose I owe him.”

“You’re the best in your Squad, practically taken over the Sergeant position. You already skipped a year. You broke the stick fight record in your first week and now are only fighting yourself for a better score,” Illya grunts out, his fists already prepared to hit this Uncle on the jaw.

Vincenzo laughs bitterly. “Yeah, I told him. He isn’t happy with me, hence the—” he waves the Vodka in the air before taking another swallow and winces at the taste. “Never knew how anyone can like this stuff.”

“Your Uncle is an asshole,” Illya says.

“I’ll drink to that,” Vincenzo says, laughing genuinely now. “Go do your rounds, Illya. I’m good here. Don’t worry about me.”

“I never do, Cowboy,” Illya huffs, and makes a run for it. Literally.
He came here to work out after all.

There is someone standing in the middle of the track.
Under the darkening sky, Illya can’t see who it is, their tall silhouette looming in the distance. It isn’t Vincenzo, who’s still in the vicinity of his bench, singing something Italian. It isn’t Alexei or someone from the B-Squad either, their build doesn’t match. Illya feels a sense of foreboding, liquid dread curling in his stomach.

“Cowboy!” Illya calls out as the figure comes nearer. Backup is important, even if Illya doesn’t know how much help he’d be in his state.
“Peril?” Vincenzo calls back. “What’s wrong?”

There is a crash behind him and Illya looks back quickly to see if Vincenzo is okay, who’s apparently fallen off the bench, to the ground.

When Illya turns back, another person has joined the first and they’re approaching fast. Illya doesn’t think. He runs. Catches Vincenzo by the shoulders and hoists him of the ground. They walk - Vincenzo more stumbles - off the jogging track, take a quick corner between two buildings and Illya presses Vincenzo against the wall in the shadows. Holding a hand over Vincenzo’s mouth when he tries to make a sound.

Footsteps near the entrance of the alleyway, a bright light flies past and then blinks away.

“Did you see where he went?” A low voice Illya vaguely recognizes asks. Illya shivers.

“No,” another voice answers. “Let’s split up, and call the others. We don’t have much time.”

Illya knows that voice all too well. He closes his eyes and focusses on his breathing. Not again. Fuck. Not again.

Slowly, their footsteps recede until Illya can’t hear them anymore. Only then does he remove his hand from Vincenzo. Illya holds a finger to his lips and Vincenzo nods. They can’t draw them back. They got lucky. The alley they choose is a dead-end so they inch back to the corner and make sure the coast is clear. Illya motions Vincenzo to follow him and together they run, quickly, back to the dorms.

Illya’s suddenly jerked back and pressed against a wall himself, the harsh stone wall cuts in his back. He grabs his attacker's wrist to defend himself but stops the moment he realises it’s Vincenzo whispering lowly in his ear.

“Calm down, Peril,” he says. “There is someone standing guard in front of the door. Look.”

Vincenzo’s voice is calm but intense, serious, and his breath still reeks of alcohol but he sounds sober and Illya lets the tone soothe his erratic heart. He opens his eyes and looks over Vincenzo's shoulder. They're hidden by a half wall and the dark shadow of the roof, but there is someone sitting on the steps in front of the door, smoking a cigarette and letting his flashlight scan the perimeter.


Vincenzo nods and pulls him back into another little street. They find a backdoor hidden behind a dumpster but when Illya tries to open it, it doesn’t move an inch. Illya clenches his fist. He can’t kick it open; that would attract attention.

“Move away,” Vincenzo says suddenly, and grabs something out of his coat pocket.

Illya steps aside, bemused and, trying to see what Vincenzo’s doing in the dark.

Vincenzo sighs and whispers, “Do you have a light with you? Your ‘screen or a lighter?”

Illya shakes his head. “Left it in my bag.”

“Fuck,” Vincenzo whispers. “I should be able to do this blindly, it just takes longer.”

“Do what?” Illya asks as Vincenzo falls to his knees in front of the door.
Vincenzo doesn’t respond, fiddling with the lock until it clicks and he lets out a breath. “I’m getting us out of here.”

Vincenzo opens the door but doesn’t let Illya go first. He slowly walks in himself instead, holding his fists out as if prepared for combat. He looks like he wishes he had a gun. Illya follows him, searching the wall for a light switch, but there is none.

*Click.*

They both jump at the sound, and then the lights suddenly flicker on, bathing the small room in painfully bright light. They both blink frantically before adjusting, and Illya rushes to close the door behind them, as to not tip the look out off.

“One of these days motion detectors are going to give me a heart attack,” Vincenzo says bitterly when it’s clear there is no one else in the room. Now that Illya’s used to the light, he can finally recognize the room. It’s one of the storage rooms of the dorms filled with coffee, toilet paper, and pillowcases, and more mundane objects Illya doesn’t have time to catalogue.

“You can lockpick?” Illya asks, trying to avoid thinking about anything else that might have happened, or might be still happening outside.

“That is the priority right now?” Vincenzo says, wide-eyed. “I feel like we’ve just run for our fucking lives and that’s what you want to talk about, Peril? What the fuck is going on?”

Illya sighs and closes his eyes. Suddenly, he’s exhausted. He walks to the nearest wall to slide down against it, sitting on the floor with his arms wrapped around his knees. As if that could protect him, Illya thinks darkly, as if running made any difference at all. If he’s smart, he would send Vincenzo away and accept his fate.

He should’ve know this was coming.

“Peril?” Vincenzo asks again, softer now. He sounds concerned, uncertain, and almost a little scared. Vincenzo’s never been scared of Illya.

Illya feels a warm hand on his arm and he doesn’t even flinch. This is what Vincenzo’s done to him. All his iron walls, all his survival instincts, gone. He thought he could be normal, that he could have a nice time here, maybe have a group of friends for a change. Maybe even have–

But no. How could he? When they’ll never let him forget?

He’s a traitor’s son. He always will be.

Vincenzo is sitting down across from him now, Illya can hear the scuffle of his feet and legs, can feel a body getting closer until he’s being wrapped in warmth and trust. Vinenzo pressing him against his chest, and Illya goes willingly. He’ll never be able to refuse this.

If he’s smart, he’ll send Vincenzo away now. But Illya isn’t a smart man. He’s scared.

“Illya,” Vincenzo says. “Let me help.”

Illya takes a deep breath. “You can’t, Cowboy.”

Vincenzo leans back a little. A hand caresses Illya’s jaw and he shivers. He’s so gentle, so careful. No one’s ever been.
“Tell me,” Vincenzo says. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

“I am not welcome here,” Illya says, his voice barely a whisper. “I’ve never been welcome here.” There is a harsh lump in his throat that cuts him with every breath. A sudden frantic thought echo’s through Illya’s mind. What if Vincenzo will leave too, if Illya tells him this?

“You’re welcome, you’re wanted. You deserve to be here.” Vincenzo’s voice is steel, hard.

Illya wants to bury his face in Vincenzo’s shoulder and never face the real world again. Live in a world where Vincenzo is right, speaks the truth, instead of a sweet but naive conviction that no one holds except for him.

“You know how they treat me, treated me,” Illya says. “You’ve seen some when you first got here, but that was nothing. You stopped the watching, the teasing, the little threats. But that wasn’t how it was the first year. Before I learned that I was good at breaking things, hurting people. That I had a rage in me I could use to destroy. Before I learned could be a monster, when I needed to be.

“The first week, they locked me in the freezer. I almost froze to death.” Vincenzo’s hold tightens but Illya can’t feel his warmth, only feels the ice cold he’d felt then. The choking fear. “I was saved by Victor. It would’ve looked bad to lose someone in the first week.”

“Peril,” Vincenzo breathes. Illya opens his eyes to watch how Vincenzo’s face pales and his hands shake.

“There was a sergeant, from the A-Squad that year,” Illya blurs, suddenly. He’d never talked about this, but now that’s someone’s listening, finally, he can’t stop. “He offered protection but in turn I had to– I…” Illya takes a deep ragged breath and closes his eyes again. “I refused. That’s when the beatings started. Weekly, sometimes daily. No one ever got charged.”

Vincenzo is shaking. Illya is too. Illya removes his arms from his knees and Vincenzo lets him, only to gather him up more closely.

“I don’t know how I survived,” Illya confesses, quietly. “I don’t know if I’ll ever stop hating who I had to become in order to survive.”

“Fuck, Peril,” Vincenzo says.

Illya nods, heart beating fast, his eyes burn, and he’s seconds away from collapsing within himself. But Vincenzo’s solid around him, still here despite the things Illya just told him, and he’s shaking in anger for Illya. “I could’ve killed them,” he spits. “If I’d been there.”

Illya just breathes, a wave of gratitude flows through him but he doesn’t know what to do with it. He doesn’t know what to say.

“Who are these guys then? Those fuckers are long gone, who are we hiding from?” Vincenzo asks finally.

“The current S.O.P,” Illya says. “They don’t want me to join their little club. They’re here to finish the job.”

Vincenzo curses again, Illya can feel his fists clench in Illya’s sweater. It’s weird, how he feels so safe and so thoroughly terrified at the same time.

“Okay,” Vincenzo says, “here’s what we’re going to do.”
Vincenzo faces him and Illya almost doesn’t recognize him anymore. Gone are the charming smiles and perfect masks. His eyes are red around the edges but within them is a quiet anger Illya’s never seen. It’s the type of anger he wishes he had, fully controlled and so lethal. Illya doesn’t doubt that anyone who stands in Vincenzo’s way is in very real danger.

This is for him.

“You’re going to stay here,” Vincenzo says firmly. “It’s not safe and you can’t fight.”

“I can–” Illya starts, but Vincenzo interrupts him with a squeeze in his hand.

“No, Illya, listen,” he says, “if you fight, they win. They’ll get you suspended. You going to do your test tonight, get the score you need and prove to them that despite what they think in their rotten minds, you belong here and you’re the best of all of them.”

Vincenzo holds his gaze until Illya nods.

“Okay, good,” Vincenzo says, sounding relieved. “I’m going to sneak out of here and get Alexei, Nadya and the rest. We need more people. If we run into a fight, you have to let us handle it and go to the gym yourself. If not, we’ll escort you and make sure you’ll get there. You heard me?”

Illya’s head is throbbing and he can’t wrap his mind around anything, but Vincenzo is watching him closely so he nods again. “You think they’ll want to help me?”

Vincenzo sighs and squeezes his hand again. “Of course they will, you’re one of us.”

Illya takes another deep breath and says, “Okay.”

Vincenzo stands up and pulls Ilya with him. “You’re not going to sit here and freeze your ass off,” he says and looks around for something to use. He grabs a big box and shoves it to Illya. “Here, sit tight, Peril. I’m going to get us out of this.”

Illya sits down, and watches Vincenzo slowly open the door and look outside.

“The coast is clear,” Vincenzo says. “I’m going.” He hesitates for second and Illya waits on what he’s trying to say, but then Vincenzo shakes his head and leaves.

Illya doesn’t remember the freezer well.

He remembers the cold biting and the terror drowning him in the lifeless air. He remembers almost giving up, closing his eyes and letting the dark chase him to somewhere warmer, somewhere where breathing wasn’t necessary. Every breath more painful than the next.

This storage room isn’t as cold as the freezer was, but Illya shivers nonetheless. The flicker of and on again when he forgets to move on time. Vincenzo is outside, in danger for him, and Illya is locked in a space too small for breathing again. The only difference with \textit{then} is that Illya hadn’t known about Victor, awaiting his chance to get him out. He knows now what Vincenzo’s planning to do. He knows that he’s not alone, not abandoned in theory.

The question is if they’ll succeed. Vincenzo can’t get hurt. He’s not allowed–

“Kuryakin!”

“Kuryakin, we’ll find you!”

“Hey, did anyone search the storage area’s yet?”
Footsteps come closer. Illya throws himself against the door, blocking it with his body.

Someone bangs on the door, loudly. “Kuryakin? You’re in there?”

“You can’t hide from us forever,” someone else says in a sing song tone. “Come out, come out little traitor.”

Illya breathes and pushes back. Someone is trying to throw the door open, Illya feels a shoulder being banged against it with brute force. The door is thin and Illya is alone.

“Guys! He’s in here!”

More people near. Illya can’t breathe. Where is Vincenzo, where is Cowboy?

They countdown and kick against the door.

“Again! 3 2 1 Go!”

Illya’s losing ground. His arms hurt, his legs ache. It’s freezing, suddenly, and Illya can’t find his anger. The strength he could use to protect himself. He’s weak and numb and maybe he deserves this. Needs this. The door breaks open and Illya falls to the ground. The light flickers on again. He hadn’t even noticed it was dark.

Illya closes his eyes. He’s a coward, in the end.

There is a scuffle and someone groans but there is no first connecting to his jaw, no feet kicked in his abdomen. There is a stream of Italian curses and Illya blinks.

Vincenzo has his hands wrapped around a guy's throat, pressing him against the wall and smiling as he claws at his hands, desperate for breath. Illya recognizes him when his eyes roll back in his head. Vincenzo lets Losev sag to the ground. The sergeant of the S.O.P lies there, unresponsive, eyes unseeing. He’s still breathing. Illya swallows.

Nadya is struggling on the ground with someone else. She’s got his arms behind his back and her knee holding him down. “Anyone got a rope for me?”

One of the twins jumps through the doorway and helps her bind the guy’s arms. The other twin appears behind them and says, “We’ve got another two outside. Do you think there are more?”

The question is directed at Illya, but Illya’s lost his words. He looks at Vincenzo, who’s wiping his face. He’s covered in blood.

Vincenzo’s hurt.

That’s what shakes Illya out of it and he rises at once. “Cowboy.” His voice sounds a thousand years old, a rotten whisper. Vincenzo looks at him, slowly wincing. “Cowboy, you’re hurt.”

“I’m okay, Peril. It’s just a cut.” Blood drips in Vincenzo’s eye and he sighs. “Annoying, but nothing life threatening.”

Illya searches around for something to steep the blood with and finds a towel. He pushes Vincenzo on the box and presses the cloth to his face, wiping blood away until he finds the source of the bleeding. It’s a shallow cut right under his hairline. It isn’t as horrible as Illya had feared, but the clear evidence of Vincenzo being hurt almost chokes him nonetheless. Suddenly, his anger is back again, full force, a hot slow wave of red, darker and harsher than Vincenzo’s blood. The cloth is
shaking in his hands, and his eyes flicker to Losev, still passed out on the floor. It would be so easy to kick him in the face, ruin him for daring to touch Vincenzo.

“Calm down, Illya.” A gentle hand wraps around his wrist. “I’m okay, calm down.”

Illya bites his cheek until he tastes blood. The sharp sting of iron distracts him. The steady pulse of Vincenzo’s heartbeat calms him down. Illya looks up and sees Vincenzo watching him and drowns in his piercing blue eyes. It’s not a blue Illya’s used to, not the Russian sky or the light of ice. Illya breathes. Vincenzo breathes with him. There is something here. The way Vincenzo starts and blinks rapidly. Illya holds his gaze, suddenly no rage burns through him but electricity does. A spark catches on Vincenzo’s soft sigh and it would be so easy to lean forward and feel it run through Illya’s lips. It would be so–

“Hate to interrupt, but if Kuryakin wants to make his test, we need to go now.” Alexei’s voice shatters the moment.

Illya’s fire burns to ashes and it feels like he has caught up to his shadow, his fears. Time works again. Seconds tick away. It’s time. “Yes,” Illya says. “We need to go.”

Vincenzo isn’t there yet, still stuck in their moment and he pulls back into reality slowly, blinking, a slight blush on his face. He clears his throat. The last spark springs away.

Nadya, meanwhile, doesn’t seem to notice the emotional turmoil and gives the bound man a well placed kick in the nuts. “Tell me where the others are or you get another one.”

Illya can’t even bring himself to wince as the man groans and collapses into himself. “I don’t know! There might be others watching the gym. More I don’t know!”

Nadya kicks him again, then shrugs when they stare at her. “He’s an asshole.”

Illya can’t argue with that.

“How long do we have?” Vincenzo asks finally.

“Ten minutes,” Alexei answers gruffly. “We need to go.”

Vincenzo nods and takes the bloody cloth from Illya. “We’ll go together. Illya, you’re ready?”

Illya takes a breath, watches Vincenzo, Alexei and Nadya watching him, listens to the twins bickering outside. They look ready for battle, ready for war, and for the first time in his life, Illya isn’t fighting alone.

“I’m ready.”

Afterwards, the rush to the gym is a blur. Illya was scheduled as the last recruit and the streets are deserted this close to the curvey. They stay in the shadows just to be sure, but make it to the gym unscathed. The look-outs at the gym must have given up, because there is no one there.

They’re too obvious as a big group, so everyone but Alexei and Vincenzo wishes him luck and leave to go back to the dorms.

Alexei claps him on the shoulder. “You’re going to show them,” he says, before moving around the corner to take a smoke.

Vincenzo watches Illya warily, concerned mixed with something else, something Illya almost
doesn’t recognize. Something changed between them, between bloodsoaked fabric and blue piercing eyes. Something revealed itself. Illya can feel it. But now isn’t the time, and Vincenzo looks like a deer in headlights, stuck in surprise and terror. He wasn’t prepared for this. Illya had known from the start.

But now isn’t the time. “Will I see you, after?” Illya asks, prays, don’t run away from this now Vincenzo. We can’t talk now, but give me a chance.

“Yes,” Vincenzo says, while shaking his head. “I don’t know.”


Vincenzo closes his eyes. He looks pale, almost tortured, and shakes his head again. “Good luck, Illya.” He walks away but just before the rounds the corner he turns back, Illya can barely the sad smile on his face in the badly lit street. “I know you can show em, Peril. Show them what you’re worth.”

And then he’s gone.

Illya can’t even think about responding, because it’s time. Vincenzo’s time will be later, Illya promises himself. They have to figure it out. They’ll need to.

But for now.

It’s time show them what he’s made of.

Chapter End Notes

Hello y’all. It's been a while... apologies. RL appeared with it's devilish horns and I had to use some writing time for a gift for the winner of my inception comment contest. (It was supposed to be a 1k ficlet but then it became a 8k fluff monster. Sigh.)

Anyway! The next chapter shouldn't be as slow and I hoped you enjoyed this one despite delay!

Next up: the Gaby and Illya convo, a new person joins the team and also did I mention angst?
After Gaby and Napoleon left to walk back to base, Illya starts to pack. There is not much for him to do until it’s night, but he’d rather spend it holed up in his room than in a room full of strangers—and Alexei.

Alexei does not agree with this assessment, and does so vocally.

“Aw man, don’t leave now,” he pleads when he returns with a beer and another cup of tea and intercepts Illya trying to make a run for it. He sits down with his beer and pushes the tea toward Illya. There is a chocolate cookie on the saucer that has a piece bitten out of it. Alexei grins innocently.

Illya refrains from commenting on the beer this early in the day or the assaulted cookie and just shrugs. “I don’t see a reason to stay.”

“My amazing presence not doing it for you?” Alexei says, and laughs when Illya shakes his head decisively. “Okay then, how about this: I’m meeting my partner here in...” He looks at his watch and frowns. “Five minutes ago—she’s late. Anyway, doesn’t matter, she’ll be here soon. I can introduce you to her and vice versa.”

Illya huffs but sits back down, ignoring Alexei’s triumphant grin. “Eat the whole cookie, while you’re at it,” Illya says and lobs it in his direction. With a nice little arch, it lands directly in Alexei’s beer.

“Come on,” Alexei groans, desperately trying to fish the cookie out his beer before it disintegrates. First trying with fingers. When that is unsuccessful, he changes tactics and steals Illya’s teaspoon. Illya doesn’t even mind the theft as he watches Alexei’s frustration while trying not to laugh.

By the time Alexei’s won his war against karma and chocolate cookies, the cafe door opens to reveal a tall woman clad in a long, dark raincoat, carrying an orange umbrella and a grumpy expression.

“It is raining,” she proclaims as she marches inside and shakes out the wet umbrella. “Why is it always raining?”

“Because the universe secretly hates you, dear,” Alexei says. “You still look beautiful as a drowned cat so count your blessings.”

The woman huffs at that and shakes her head. “Whatever you say, charmer.” She moves her gaze from Alexei to Illya, her dark brown eyes calculating and lips pursed. “Alexei, introduce me to your friend.”

“Alexei is not my friend,” Illya interjects. “He followed me here to bother me. He’s more like an annoyance.”

The woman raises her eyebrows, but Illya sees a spark of amusement twitch her lips.
“I didn’t!” Alexei protests. “I’d promised to meet Ekko here. It’s not my fault you were playing spy games at my usual table.”

“You can’t have a table when you’ve only been here for a week,” Illya says, glaring at Alexei for bringing up the spying. Things like that are supposed to stay secret.

The woman – presumably named Ekko – watches them and laughs, shaking her head. She shrugs out of her wet coat, drapes it over a chair, and steps forward, holding out a hand for Illya to shake. “Ekko Ajala Odoemene, Jaeger Pilot, Drift partner of Alexei’s, and resident smart person. Call me Ekko, please.”


“–and local soap opera,” Alexei interjects before taking a sip of his cookie crumble beer. Illya hopes dearly that it tastes disgusting.

After a firm but quick handshake, Ekko takes the chair next to Alexei and slaps him on the head. “Be nice to our teammates,” she says, “and did you order anything for me?”

“No, fuck,” Alexei says with wide eyes and jumps up. “Be right back.”

Illya watches Alexei hurry back to the bar before turning to Ekko, who’s watching him with cool curiosity. “We have more smart people in the Shatterdome,” he says, naming no names.

“I have no doubt,” Ekko responds jovially. “I met one, maybe two of them on the way. She loaned me her umbrella.”

Illya’d thought he recognized it from somewhere. “You’ve met Gaby?”

Ekko smiles a lovely wide smile. “Oh, yes. Only for a little while, but she made quite the impression.”

Illya nods and smiles back just a little. “That she does.”

They fall silent, and Illya tries not to think about that. Chit–chat never comes easily to him, and he doesn’t have the energy to get to know a new person. It’s never really worth it. It implodes in the end anyway.

Ekko doesn’t seem to mind the silence, instead opts to watch the rain outside. She doesn’t comment on it, or ask Illya questions or enquiries. The awkwardness seems to only exist in Illya’s mind, disintegrating between them by the way she acts. She doesn’t demand anything.

It’s a comfort. Illya might come to like her in the end.

Alexei comes back with an iced tea and a flurry of noise. “How was the conference, E?” he asks while sitting down on his chair, scraping the hardwood floor with a painful sound.

Ekko takes a sip of her drink, and answers calmly, “It was enervating and terrifying at the same time. There is so much we don’t know about them.”

“They?” Illya asks, glad Alexei started up a conversation.


“She’s an expert,” Alexei says proudly.
“No one is an expert in this field,” Ekko says, “to put it mildly. We’re all running in circles trying to understand something that seems to be impossible to ever comprehend. Or at least, within the time we have. We’re no use dead, scientifically speaking.”

Illya snorts despite himself and says, “A scientist in a Jaeger?”

“Field research,” Ekko says deadpan.

“Touché,” Illya says.

“You’ve won Kuryakin’s respect within ten minutes,” Alexei says to Ekko. “Why are you good at everything?”

Ekko shrugs and smiles. There is a little mischief behind her almost serious demeanor. It reminds Illya of Gaby, or at least how Gaby might be without the incredible amount of stress she’s under.

Conversation flows more fluently now that Ekko and Alexei take the chance to catch up with each other. Illya mostly just listens despite not understanding most of the science they ramble through. Alexei’s never been one for studying, as far as Illya knew, but he clearly learned something in the meantime, able to ask Ekko in depth questions on subjects Illya never knew existed. It makes Illya think about his time as a Pilot, trained and shaped to fight them without thinking, take orders, make decisions; try to survive the fight and everything that comes with it. But he isn’t the only one fighting.

There is an entire subset of people who might not be directly fighting the Kaiju but still do everything in their power to make sure it’s a fight with a possibility of success. Without the technicians and scientists, soldiers like Illya would have no chance of survival, as would the rest of the world.

Ekko’s decided fight with intelligence and knowledge both. Potentially sacrificing her life on the front lines, despite having more than ample reason to stay behind on shore.

Alexei might have been joking, but Illya definitely respects her and it might have taken even less time than ten minutes. Illya makes a mental note to thank her for her service, sometime, when he can find the words.

An hour in, Illya finds a pause where he can slip away relatively smoothly. Pretending he’s not exhausted from the interaction. He walks outside in the drizzly weather and just takes a moment to stand on the beach and let the wind quiet his mind and body.

It’s not like he doesn’t like to be social, like he doesn’t miss people around him after months and months of staying either in his room, alone, or in the training halls, alone. People can be nice, Illya knows that despite not always believing it, but more than that people are tiring. While he can push himself for hours on end during workouts – probably more than he should – interactions like this affect him in multiple, negative, ways.

They always have, but it got worse after Napoleon, and worse again after losing his mother.

Isolation is protection, as damaging as it can be. But it’s becoming increasingly clear that this self inflicted solitary confinement is not an option here, just like he can’t avoid Napoleon forever, as much as he might want to.

Though, if he wants to, Illya isn’t quite sure anymore.

It went well, Illya decides as he walks back to the Shatterdome. It went okay. He didn’t fuck up.
Ekko seemed to like him, or most likely not to dislike him.

Alexei is Alexei, so Illya doesn’t stress much about his perspective.

But despite the relative positive encounter, his head hurts, his shoulder aches, and his spine feels like it’s on fire. Illya knows that there is nothing medically wrong with him, or at least not much. It’s probably the stress, another way his mental state makes itself known.

Of course, there is damage. There is always damage with Pilots. Illya noticed Napoleon’s tendency to avoid using his left hand for heavy carrying, and Alexei’s scars are obvious for everyone to see. Even Gaby has burns on her legs from some kind of technical incident. No one in the Shatterdome is unscathed.

Illya reaches his room and flicks on the light. He kicks off his boots and replaces his jeans and shirt with something more comfortable. He groans as he throws himself into his bed, landing a little too hard on his back. After a little while of breathing, it’s worth it. His muscles relax slowly, adjusting to the warmth of the room and the quiet around him. There is no reason to be on alert now, no danger to fear. His headache dampens a little too after downing a bottle of water.

Recovery. The magic word. The word the doctors threw around every five minutes after he’d woken from his coma. “There might be some lasting nerve damage, but we need to focus on your recovery.” “You’re traumatized. Try meditation and medication to speed up your recovery.”

They made Illya feel like he lived and breathed for recovery. As if nothing else mattered besides trying to work his body back into functionality, trick his mind into stability.

They were not wrong. Illya knows that now. Staying in the dark, wallowing in grief or hurt or righteous anger doesn’t help and it never will. But they’d treated recovery as a goal to be reached, a victory with an uncertain deadline, but with a timeframe nonetheless.

This was one of the biggest lies someone ever told Illya, and that says something with his history.

It was hard, realising his recovery has no end in sight.

It’s a constant process. One with ups and downs. Sometimes, it feels like is time buffering, going forward only to fall back again. It’s a rollercoaster powered by persistence and controlled by the uncontrollable. Illya is not the master of his recovery, despite how much he likes to think he is. But he can live and keep on living and take care of himself when he needs to.

It’s lonely, but it’s the best he can do.

Illya sighs and stares at the ceiling, running through lists of things that are necessary, but he feels no motivation for. Persistence and recovery. The constant battle, never ending war.

Illya closes his eyes, and counts to ten.

One. Water. His bottle is lying empty on the floor. It needs to be filled.

Two. Food. His stomach rumbles despite the fact that the idea of eating disgusts him. Dinner should be done soon. He will force himself to the cafeteria when it’s time.

Three. His shoulder hasn’t stopped aching. The pain a knife cutting through his desperate attempt to remain in control. There is a bottle of painkillers under the counter. He will take one when he gets water.
Four. Energy. It’s too early to sleep, but he might take a nap after dinner, before Gaby comes here.

Five. Can he handle that now? Talking about his mother – screaming, drowning, a red sea – and what he went through in detail? Maybe by the time she comes, he can. Otherwise, he’s allowed to do it another day.

Six. Breathe in.

Seven.

Eight. There is nothing to be afraid of. Not now. Not now.

Nine.

Ten. Breathe out. It will be okay, he will be okay.

Illya opens his eyes, and sets to work.

By the time Illya marches himself to the cafeteria, he feels marginally better. Which, in this case, is something he’s thankful for. Sometimes that little bit of relief can make the scales tip, quickly grasping enough control so he feels less like he’s shaking out of his own skin.

The noise of the people around him and the smell of freshly baked fish helps too; pulling him out of the confines of his own mind. Senses are overwhelming, yes, but they force Illya to remember that the world continues with or without him. He’ll always have a place to fall back into. Time does not stop when you do. People do not cease to exist when existence doesn’t come easy for you.

Instead of a few long tables, the cafeteria is a mix between a restaurant and a living room. Round tables with different kinds of chairs or low tables with cosy chairs.

Illya orders one of the menu’s of the day and the chef prepares his plate while he’s waiting by the bar. It’s the good service combined with nicely decorated surroundings that it makes it almost easy to forget that they’re fighting a war against creatures far greater than they’ll ever be. Everyone laughing, talking and eating around him is a soldier one way or another, standing to lose their homes and lives if people like Illya don’t succeed.

Illya looks around and sees a big wooden table in the middle, a big chandelier hanging over it. It’s clearly a table for important people, so it’s no surprise Ekko, Gaby, Alexei and Napoleon are all already seated. Alexei spies him first and motions his head for Illya to join them, but Illya shakes his own. He’s not ready yet.

He finds a cosy chair big enough for him in a corner and eats with his plate in his lap, occasionally moving a chess piece on the board next to him.

From a distance, he can see how everyone has formed bonds already. There are people a table removed from him playing some kind of drinking game, another group of people are calmly reading books side by side. There is a group of technicians Illya vaguely recognizes arguing loudly over a set of blueprints, food forgotten at the edges of their table. Illya notices Gaby at looking at them intermittently, only held back by a gentle hand on her arm. Napoleon clearly takes monitoring Gaby’s workaholic tendencies seriously.

It’s not only Napoleon that seems to keep Gaby there. Ekko draws her into conversation quickly, and Illya regrets forgetting his ‘screen in his room due to his chaotic mental state. He’d like to listen to them now, talking jovially and joking with each other. Something he can’t join them in, but wants to, if he’s being honest with himself.
Illya rakes his eyes over Napoleon, slouched in a chair in a perfectly tailored charcoal grey Italian suit. Illya’s getting used to it, Napoleon suited and dressed to impress. It’s so him that he almost can’t imagine him without anymore. Beautiful, untouchable, dangerous. That doesn’t fit in a pair of sweatpants and old t-shirts. Looking at him now still hurts, still makes Illya’s stomach churn, but it’s different from what it was on the airplane, hot sharp anger and fear. It’s more a sense of foreboding, a recognition of the way Illya’s constantly fighting the automatic magnation Napoleon possesses, still.

It wouldn’t be easy, falling back into his orbit, but it would be possible, certainly, if Illya compartmentalizes all that what happened between them and only focuses on the longing that tears him apart from the inside.

Napoleon laughs, and it strikes Illya how much he misses him. Misses his smile. Misses his happiness. How hard it is to be angry at him for ruining it, when Illya wants nothing more than to forget it all and let go. Fall into him, for as long as it lasts this time.

He’d might have done it, if he didn’t know how it would end.

Illya doesn’t know if he could survive another ending. Not with Napoleon.

This is why he has to hold on to the anger, the pride, the revenge. To see Napoleon and think only of the pain he’s caused Illya and forget the best months of Illya’s life. Illya’s only hope is to keep his belief strong. Everything was fake. Every kiss and every smile and every voicing of adoration was a part of a big plan, a long con.

Because if any of it was genuine, Illya would break down and beg for more. If any of it was genuine, it wouldn’t change the fact that Napoleon still left, still hurt him in the worst way imaginable, still broke him while knowing Illya doesn’t know how to put himself back together.

He could do it again. It could happen all over again.

And Illya isn’t one for making the same mistake twice.

But there is a difference now. Illya hadn’t known about Napoleon’s potential to do harm back then. Now, he’s going in with his eyes open. He can learn from his past and treat Napoleon as needed. Protecting not only himself, but anyone else who might be harmed by his ways.

There is a responsibility, a duty, to the people here. Living their lives, forming relationships and trying to work hard enough to save the world. Illya’s not ready to trust Napoleon with anything, the Drift is so far out of reach it's almost comedic. But that doesn’t mean there is nothing else he can be useful for.

Illya finishes his plate and checks himself. His headache is gone, his shoulder ache less, and he feels quiet, determined.

Gaby looks up and raises an eyebrow. Illya nods.

It’s time to do his duty and do something that is needed for the people, despite all his instincts telling him to run away and hide. He has to talk about this. Gaby asked, and she has to know.

I can do this, Illya thinks.

A repeating mantra as Gaby joins him silently to walk to his room.

I can do this.
Gaby is true to her word.

She’s magically summoned a number of alcoholic beverages, many of which Illya’s never seen before. There are four flashy bottles with Chinese lettering; a set of tiny bottles all named “Skåne Akavit”; two beers with a bull logo drawn on the label and a half full flask of what looks like sickly fluid but according to Gaby is “Vanilla Cream Whiskey.”

She sets all of the bottles in a row on the floor and looks at them in appreciation, hands on her hips. Illya shakes his head and huffs, sitting down on the edge of his bed.

“What,” Gaby says, “I had to crowdsource.”

Illya hums and shrugs. “I’m going to try with only water.” He sighs, stomach churning. “I don’t know how long that will last.”

“Whatever you need.” Gaby scans the room with a pinched expression until Illya pats the bed next to him. She quirks a small smile and climbs on, fitting herself in the corner of the bed, her back against the wall and legs crossed. She has a paper notepad on her lap and four pens in the breast pocket of her work jacket – forgot to change into casual clothing again. Illya makes a note to pester her about that later.

A silence falls, and Illya takes a sip of his water, pretending not to notice his trembling hands. He swallows. “How is this going to work?”

Gaby takes a breath and her expression wars between stubborn determination and pity. “I’d thought I’d ask you questions, you answer them to the best of your ability, and if I need more details out of you, there is enough alcohol around.” She shrugs, quasi–casual.

Illya snorts. “You should never become a therapist.”

Gaby frowns and shakes her head. “No, definitely not. But it’s the best we got at the moment.”

“Okay.” Illya nods, sighs and takes a deep, calming breath. “Ask.”

“I thought we’d start with the Kaiju first. There are some reports but they contradict each other and – well, it would help.”

Let’s start with the Kaiju that killed his mother and ripped apart that little piece of Illya that was still whole.

_I can do this._


It had been a blue green monster, indistinguishable from the sea when it swam in circles around them. They had to use heat sensors to see it, but it swam so fast they couldn’t fire missiles at it until it came closer. They’d had to wait, wade into the deeper ocean, until it decided to attack.

“Acid sacks, fast swimmer, long and strong limbs” Illya sums up in a monotone voice. “It had a speed we weren’t prepared for. It could hit us before we had the time to reload. The skin seemed virtually impenetrable. Nothing we tried worked.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Illya can see Gaby taking fervent notes, but Illya can’t hear the scratching of pen on paper over the roar in his ears. He can see the Kaiju under him, through his visors, continuously attacking the Red Peril’s legs.
“It attacked us underwater, but it didn’t try to do much damage.” Illya remembers his sense of foreboding and bile comes up his throat. “It was testing us. Figuring out how much power we possessed and what kind of weapons we had before it took risks.”

His mother realised it first, and she was the one to come up with the plan, a change of tactics they’d never done before, something the Kaiju couldn’t expect. Illya had yelled at her, that it was too dangerous, that they’d never make it out alive.

“It’s our duty, Illya,” she’d replied, face earnest and sad and Illya didn’t have to think twice before nodding his assent.

“It avoided our shots, and covered us with acid if we stood in the same place for longer than six seconds.”

The slime had been slipping through the cracks and Illya almost hears the hiss of it burning into the Red Peril.

“Where did it hit?” Gaby asks suddenly.

Illya blinks, forgotten that she was there. “What?”

“The acid, where did it hit?”

Illya shakes his head, and shrugs. ’I don’t know. Everywhere.”

Gaby purses her lips. “We’ll get back to that later. Continue.”

Illya stands and grabs a neon green bottle with red liquid in it. It’s already open and he takes gulp. He shivers at the dry and painfully sour taste, but the burn in his throat is enough to start talking again.

“We were fighting close to the mainland,” Illya starts, “around 400 feet from the coast.

No beach, only cliffs and ridges. We drove the Kaiju into an inlet, using the rocky reef to break up his circling. When we reached slightly shallower water, it stopped swimming and stood instead.

Illya takes another long swig— still disgustingly sour, but it does the job. He can feel his shoulders relax a little and the room tilts around him slightly.

“It towered over us, standing on it’s hind legs. It’s back was covered in acid sacks and it had claws that were half our arms. We started shooting at it’s back until we’d cornered it against a large cliff. Then my mother dropped our long distance shooting system into the sea to extend her right arm so that we could reach it without being in the range of it’s claws.”

“With our long blade, we cut through a big part of it’s neck and chest. We must’ve hit something, because he stopped spitting acid, only fighting with it’s claws instead. It changed tactics too, aiming for the Jaeger’s head and arms, pushing us back into the reefs.”

Illya chokes, suddenly, because he can see the moment in his mind's eye.

The mistake that ruined everything.

He coughs and tries again. “I moved us back, trying to avoid being hit, but I stepped on a ridge instead and the Kaiju hit us square in the chest. We fell back and hit a spiked reef on the way down. It pierced through the right shoulder. We were stuck. The Kaiju jumped on us, splitting the
Jaeger down on the spike and my mother felt the pain as if it was her own arm.”

Her eyes had been red and bulging, jaw clenched so tight Illya had thought she would break her own teeth. There was blood coming out of her ears and nose and all alarms were screaming at Illya, telling him that his mother was dying, that he needed to do something.

“She was frozen. I couldn’t reach her through the Drift. So I overruled all alarm systems and fought one handed. When the Kaiju leaned down I cut in its neck wound and kicked it back. I could push the Jaeger off the spike with my arm, but the tear let in water. We were flooded to our knees.”

“So the arm was still attached?” Gaby asks.

Illya nods. “Yes, but it wasn’t responding to my input. My mother was unresponsive. It was like she was drowning in her own mind. The rabbit hole, but instead of memories there was only pain.”

“There must have been something wrong with the neural connection system,” Gaby mumbles to herself, taking some more notes. Illya sees how she hugs her notebook closer to herself and she’s trembling slightly. There is some comfort in that. Despite her technical interest, she also feels his pain in her own way.

“It knew,” Illya blurs. After keeping silent for so long it’s suddenly impossible to keep the words in his mouth, they spill out of him like rotten flesh. “It knew how badly we were damaged. It only attacked the right side, focusing its strength on my Mother’s side.

“I tried—” Illya breathes heavily, eyes suddenly spilling over. Gaby passes him a tissue and, after a second of hesitation, the bottle of Chinese alcohol that Illya’d dropped to the ground. Illya drinks gratefully, cherishing the god–awful taste as the distraction that it is. “I tried to protect her,” Illya says. “I tried to fend it off but I wasn’t strong enough. I wasn’t good enough. I—”

Illya stands and his fists tremble and there are no iron clad walls but the desk will suffice. He gives it a kick, and then another. It doesn’t help but he can’t stop, ripping it into pieces as his mind disintegrates. He should’ve been stronger. He should’ve saved her.

“He should’ve.”

“Illya,” Gaby’s plea drags him out of his storm and he twists around immediately. He’s confronted with Gaby, watching him wide–eyed, her face painted in shock and a sliver of something he belatedly realises is fear.

“I’m sorry,” Illya says quickly, ashamed and terrified. Gaby is afraid of him now. How could he—

“İ’d never hurt you, I’m sorry.”

Gaby stands and walks to him slowly. Illya steps aside to make room, to make sure she doesn’t feel like he’s blocking her path of escape. But she doesn’t slip away through the door. Instead, takes his hand carefully, as if handling a scared wild animal, and slips her fingers through his. “I know, Illya,” she says. “I know you’d never hurt me. Come sit down.”

Illya listens. It’s easier to.

She passes him a glass of water and waits silently with her hands on her lap, biting her lip.

“Can you continue?” she asks after Illya’d emptied the glass gratefully. For the first time, there is hesitance in her voice, a tension in the question that hadn’t been there in any other. Illya recognizes it’s not fear that drives it but empathy, care. She’d rather stop the conversation and not get her information than force Illya into more pain.
Illya watches her from the corner of his eye and sees a young woman with a gentle heart beneath all the stubborn professionalism and snark. He suddenly recognizes his mother in her, in some abstract way. He breathes. She breathes with him, silently but surely. Illya bows his head.

*I can do this.*

“I tried, but I didn’t succeed,” Illya says, voice barely a whisper but Gaby doesn’t comment. “The Kaiju got two of it’s claws in the right arm’s elbow joint and it pulled. I tried to reach it, but the system was overloaded and didn’t respond to my commands. The water was streaming everywhere and I couldn’t prevent the Kaiju from ripping the arm off, and my mother with it.”

“Oh, Illya,” Gaby gasps softly, but Illya ignores her.

“She screamed,” Illya says. “I almost didn’t hear it. She was gone. Pulled out of the Drift. My mind was *nothing*.”

Illya takes a shivering breath and shakes his head, trying to banish the feeling of having his mind sucked empty. A hollow shell of white.

“You don’t know what nothing feels like,” he rasps. “You don’t know. Your mind isn’t supposed to be nothing. It can’t function—”

Gaby puts a hand on his knee and squeezes. It’s not nothing. It’s warmth and compassion and it helps Illya count his breath until he feels slightly whole again. He clears his throat. “I took over the full neural load. I didn’t decide to. The Red Peril did it for me.”

Gaby twitches, her hand taps against his knee, and despite everything Illya can find a small twitch of his lips from somewhere lighter than his mind. “Go take notes, I know you want too.”

Gaby gives him a grateful smile and leans back to grab her notebook and pen. To Illya’s surprise, she stays close, leaning into his side as she quickly writes everything down in a short hand Illya can’t read.

“Continue, sorry,” she says, and this sounds softer too, more like an encouragement than a command.

Illya nods. “If I dream of what happened after my mother– I’m always outside of my body, watching the Jaeger act on its own while I float above it, unable to fix my mistakes. I can’t remember the decisions I made. My mind was still blank, but there was enough anger in my body to fuel my revenge on the Kaiju. I wasn’t supposed to make it. I planned to die. But I found our rifle stranded on a sandbank, still operational, and shot the Kaiju in it’s neck wound until it collapsed.

“I remember feeling shocked that I was still alive, and then angry, and then disappointed, until I saw the arm sinking slowly. I pushed the Red Peril until I’d found her.”

The sea was red around her. She had her eyes closed but there was no semblance of sleep. Her suit was broken into pieces and she was only held above water by a plate of the Jaeger’s shoulder.

“I knew she was dead, but I carried her to shore anyway,” Illya says. “I couldn’t leave her there.”

Gaby grabs his hand and squeezes.

Illya breaks.
“I miss her so much, Gaby,” Illya says, ragged. “She was all I had left.”

Gaby lets go of her notebook and leans with her head on Illya’s tense shoulder. “Not anymore,” she says. “You survived a terrible loss, but Illya, you’re not alone anymore. I know that won’t fix this, but I hope it will help.”

Illya hesitates, but then wraps an arm around her, holding her as if he isn’t the one that needs holding, as if he isn’t the one shaking apart inside. Gaby allows him and Illya’s grateful.

Illya doesn’t know how long they sit like that, just breathing, both only a thought away from crying. And it does help, the feeling of someone caring, Gaby just letting him be broken in silence. Illya feels raw and hurt and his head is a red thick haze, but it’s farther away than it’s ever been. He can view it; see the rage and pain, but it doesn’t control him for now.

Gaby is right, this will not fix everything, but he can enjoy a moment of relative calm. The eye of the storm. He’ll fall into the winds again but this might be the first step in getting them to lessen, just a little. That tiny difference could cause something Illya hadn’t ever dared to hope for.

Peace.

There is no sensation of time, but their quiet comfort is interrupted with a rapid sequence of knocks against Illya’s door, shocking them both.

Gaby looks up in question, and after Illya’s shrug she slips out of his arms and opens the door.

Illya’s stomach drops.

Napoleon is leaning against the doorway, his expression furious and pinched in a cruel smile.

He’s playing with something in his hand, throwing it up in the air and catching it again.

Something that looks like a bug.

Chapter End Notes

Some housekeeping: the void of time summer usually comes with is officially over, so now I actually have things to do besides writing and eating ice cream. Consequently there is a new schedule I’m going to try to keep too.

I’m planning to post every Sunday. Sometimes it might be a little later and sometimes (if we’re lucky) a little earlier.

I want to reiterate that I am very much still on board with this story and will continue to write it, I just can’t let it impede my studies (too much). Besides, we’re getting into some meaty plot parts so chapters will be generally longer, which also takes more time. We’re far from done yet!

I really hope y’all like this chapter, and I’ll leave you with the knowledge that comments trick my brain into thinking writing this is more important that studying French... Do with that what you will ;)

Edit a hour after posting because I’m not good at remembering things: I would like to
ask you for your favorite poems/prosey short stories! Stuff like that really helps me stay inspired and keep up the quality for the next however many chapters :D
March 2015

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 2015

The holes in the road make the van shake roughly and Illya groans, leaning against his window in an effort to sit comfortably. There are no actual seats on this van –Illya suspects surviving the trip is the first unofficial assignment – only benches that are planks spanning the width of the vehicle. Illya claimed a place at the back, trying to get some sleep along the way. The B-Squad might have laughed when he arrived with two blankets and a pillow, but he remembers how he had prayed for the things the year before.

Illya’d never expected to do this hellish fieldweek all over again.

In the front of the van, the B-Squad are singing joyous songs and laughing, completely naive to the trials and tribulations their the future. Not everyone is cheery. Illya can’t help but notice Vincenzo sitting at the front and staring into nothing. Illya looks away and suppresses the urge to go to him, lean into him, and force him out of whatever strop he’s in.

Vincenzo made clear that it wouldn’t be appreciated.

Alexei bellows the last note of the squad’s ego song - it’s two verses of who is the best squad? B squad! - and Illya contemplates bribing the driver into opening up the back door so he can throw himself out of the van.

“Some people want to sleep,” Illya says into the miniscule silence that follows after the end of a song, getting the words in just before they start up a new one. “You should all sleep. We need the energy.”

“Don’t worry, Illya,” one of the twins responds with a grin. “Haven’t you heard? A S.O.P recruit volunteers to go with us! There is no chance we’ll fail with that kind of experience in our midst.”

Illya tries to look disapproving but can’t help but snort. “I’d never volunteer to go with you idiots. This was a setup.”

They all laugh and continue on singing, albeit a little less loud than before.

Illya really hadn’t volunteered to join the B-Squad for their fieldweek, but his compatibility with the group clearly hadn’t gone unnoticed, so when there weren’t enough recruits that passed, Illya got called in. Orders to volunteer aren’t choices you can ignore. So Illya had agreed and the B-Squad had reacted surprisingly enthusiastic, despite the fact that Vincenzo hadn’t seemed thrilled. Illya pretended not to be hurt by that.

It isn’t really working.

Illya looks outside the window and sighs. He doesn’t know how to feel, both about Vincenzo acting distant ever since the physical test, and even more so when it was announced Illya had been chosen for the S.O.P team next semester. Illya tried to convince himself it was jealousy, and that Vincenzo would come back around eventually, but logically that didn’t make sense. Everyone knows Vincenzo will become S.O.P next year, there is nothing to be envious about.
There is something else wrong, and Illya thinks it might be just him. Vincenzo lost interest the moment they came too close. It’s okay. It happens. Maybe he’d told him too much, that night. Anyone with a hint of survival instinct would run from the mess Illya carries with him.

The purring of the motor and the ruckus of the excited B-Squad melt into a low hum of noise and Illya closes his eyes.

Illya doesn’t know how long he’s slept until sound at his side rouses him. For a split second he thinks it’s Vincenzo, but after blinking his sleep away he recognizes one of the twins in the dark and chastises himself for his useless hope.

“Oh, I’m sorry I woke you,” the twin whispers, Illya valiantly tries to remember his name but comes up with nothing. “It’s just... I’m tired, and the rest won’t shut the fuck up.”

He looks a little embarrassed and unsure, so Illya just shrugs and slides to the side of his bench. “Go sit, be quiet.”

“Thank you,” the twin says quietly, sounding grateful enough to make Illya vaguely uncomfortable.

Illya wonders if asking his name now is too awkward, but decides he’s too tired to care about politeness. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Fenenko. Vitaly is one of the loud ones up front.” Fenenko says. “You can call me Fen, if you want.”

Illya hums tiredly and says, “Goodnight, Fen.”

Fen laughs softly. “Goodnight.”

Illya doesn’t expect to fall asleep again with someone so close, but Fen keeps his promise and after a while Illya hears his breathing even out. Illya follows not long after.

When Illya wakes again he’s feeling warm and something heavy is leaning against him. He opens his eyes to be confronted with Fen sleeping on his shoulder, snoring softly. His short blond hair tickles Illya’s cheek and when he buries closer Illya instinctively tries to move away.

Illya freezes. There are many things he’s not equipped to deal with, and apparently someone sleeping on his shoulder is one of them. But he also knows that throwing Fen off could be seen as rude, and he needs allies to survive this week.

It’s quiet in the van, most are asleep and don’t notice Illya’s crisis. Except for Nadya, who’s watching them with a sly grin. Illya silently pleads for her to do something but she just smiles and shakes her head. A movement in the corner of Illya’s eye catches his attention and he can only just see Vincenzo turning away. Illya wonders if he’d been watching them, and what he was thinking.

Fen huffs softly in his sleep and suddenly Illya’s imagining Vincenzo sleeping on his shoulder, tired and close. Illya’d be equally as frightened then, but instead of fearing the unknown he’d be fearing the known. The fantasy. The what if. Illya has no frame of reference for a friend - or something close to a potential friend - sleeping on his shoulder. But he has archives, libraries, filled of Vincenzo. Both true and false. Illya doesn’t know if he’s remembering a memory or a wish, when he pictures Vincenzo sleeping on his shoulder, but he pushes the thought away, either way. It will never happen anyway.

The van suddenly brakes hard, and everyone is jostled forward roughly.
Including Fen, who wakes up and then jumps away. “Fuck, Illya. Sorry,” he says, wide-eyed. He slinks back to his side of the bench, looking small and embarrassed and Illya is horrified to realise that he’s blushing. “Uhm. I’m sorry. Thank you for not waking me?”

Illya looks away and shrugs, trying to be as casual as he can. “You looked like you needed it.”

Fen is quiet for a second and then breaks into laughter. “Thanks, man. Yeah, I did.”

Illya breathes, relieved, and doesn’t even flinch when Fen claps him on the shoulder as any recruit does when they feel thankful but too awkward to express it.

Soft conversations start back up in the front, as everyone slowly faces the reality of waking up to headaches and painful backs. Illya tries to stretch, but the small confines of the van make it almost impossible.

“How long?” someone asks, despair clear in their voice.

“We’ve been driving for seven hours now, so we should be there soon,” Alexei answers while yawning.

Illya snorts to himself. It could take another three hours at least, judging from the amount of snow that’s covering the forest outside. The higher-up’s might want to test their ability as a team to survive extreme circumstances, but they don’t actually want them to freeze to death. It’s been a cold winter, so finding a place where the weather is less harsh will take them a while.

“I need to piss,” Nadya protests, and others agree with her. Illya, silently, does too.

“I’ll ask the driver for a short break,” Alexei says consolingly, and opens up the window between the back and the cab.

Thirty minutes later, Illya’s leaning against the van with a cup of bad, but hot, coffee in his hands, trying to keep his hands from freezing off. There are many things to be said about the van, but at least it keeps them away from the cold.

Illya watches as Alexei passes out the coffee and warns everyone that in five minutes they’ll be on the road again so, “If you need to go, go now.”

Vincenzo is talking with Nadya and generally keeping himself away from the group. Alexei’s clearly seizing his opportunity to take the lead of the group back, and Illya wonders if that division of charge is going to stay throughout the week, or if Vincenzo will charm his way back into leadership and leave the group with a conflict at the top. Illya catches himself almost wanting Alexei and Vincenzo to fight, because in some illogical way that might result in getting Vincenzo back.

Illya decides he’s making no sense and downs his coffee, ignoring the way it burns his lips. He needs to wake up and stop being a stupid schoolboy with a crush.

Vincenzo catches him staring and Illya looks away, crumbling his paper coffee cup in his palm and throwing it in the snow. He climbs back into the van and is joined by the rest soon after. Despite promising himself not to, Illya still feels disappointed when Vincenzo avoids him again and sits in front next to Nadya.

Illya tries to be nice to Fen when he sits next to him, but can’t bring himself to talk long. They fall silent, though in a relatively comfortable one. Illya distracts himself by listening to the rest of the squad.
“We’ll do great,” Vitaly says. “Do we know what the high score is? I bet we can break it.”

“There is no high score in a survival test,” Vincenzo says dully. “It’s about cooperation and trust.”

“We’ll get our assignments when we’ve set up camp,” Alexei adds. “Vincenzo’s right that there is no score to strive for, but that we’ll be graded on individual performance and team performance separately.”

“Do you decide the grades?” Nadya asks.

Alexei shakes his head. “No, we grade each other. We’ll be interviewed when we get back.”

Fen perks up next to Illya and frowns. “Then why don’t we just give everyone high grades and be done with it?”

“You trust everyone to do that?” Vincenzo laughs. “If they lie and give you low grades while you give them high ones, they’ll be better off and you’ll be screwed.”

Fen crosses his arms defensively. “Yes, I do trust my squad-mates to do that for each other. Although, now I’m not sure about you.”

For a second it seems like Vincenzo’s going to snap back sharply and everyone holds their breath at the coming onslaught, but then Vincenzo sags a little and sighs. “Sorry, I’m tired. Didn’t mean anything by it.”

Fen relaxes too and quirks a quick smile. “You’re good, bro. We’re all a little on edge.”

Vincenzo’s gaze flickers over Illya and then he’s gone again. Illya closes his eyes.

“It wouldn’t work anyway,” Alexei says. “They have a system to combat fraud, so let’s do ourselves a favor and work hard enough that high grades won’t be lies, please?”

They all chorus a general sense of agreement, and Illya nods too. He doesn’t need the grade anymore, but it’s nice to know that it won’t be a competitive week full of sabotage and competition. His fieldweek had been, and it was hell. For the first time Illya’s glad that he’s here instead of wherever the A-squad has been sent off too. A week with this group might even be something close to fun.

Despite knowing it would most probably get lost, Illya regrets not taking his ‘screen with him. He’s had enough sleep to not be able to fall back into unconsciousness again, and without Vincenzo’s easy conversation he actually doesn’t know how to occupy his time within the group. Illya wishes he had some music with him to stave off the worst of the boredom.

Fen seems to be thinking the same, because he’s tapping nervously against his knee in a pattern that’s either a song or the sound of someone panicking. Illya hopes it’s the former, but judging from his stricken face it’s the latter.

Illya digs through his brain to find something reassuring to say and finally comes up with, “Your brother is right, we don’t have anything to worry about.”

Fen jumps in surprise and stops tapping. “Yeah, I know,” he says after a moment, not sounding sure at all. “It’s just, I gotta worry. It’s kinda my job.” He smiles as if it’s a joke, but something about his tone makes Illya think it isn’t.

Illya sits up straight, curious despite himself and asks, “Why?”
Fen blinks. “Why, what?”

“Why do you need to worry?”

“Because my brother doesn’t,” Fen answers. “Like I said, it’s my job.”

Illya hums, and they both watch Vitaly for a second. He’s talking animatedly with Nadya, pacing around in the small space. It’s a miracle he doesn’t hit his head every time the van jolts up and down. Illya suddenly can’t understand how he ever thought the twins were interchangeable. The way Vitaly moves is nothing like the more reserved and controlled way Fen holds himself. They contrast, fit together as two trees grown too close, over and through each other; almost a breath away from suffocating, but strong enough to hold the other up.

“You take care of him,” Illya comments. It isn’t really a question, but Fen answers anyway.

“Well, yeah, I’m the oldest,” he says, laughing softly.

Illya snorts. “I never had any siblings, but I did have a cousin that would visit most summers.” That was before his father was arrested. After that, all family on his father’s side disappeared out of the country. Illya hoped they left voluntarily and out of shame, not out of fear for their lives.

“He’d be up in a tree before I could blink,” Illya says, wondering why he’s telling a relative stranger any of this, but feeling no real urge to stop. “My mother would always scold me for the new scrapes and bruises he’d got when we got back.”

Fen laughs freely now and shakes his head. “Welcome to my entire life, man. You don’t want the know the shit he got into. Sometimes it was literal shit.”

“No, I don’t want to know,” Illya says, but softens the bite with a small smile. “You really don’t have to worry too much. If anything goes wrong, Alexei has numbers to call. It’s a practice run, not a real emergency.”

Fen nods and takes a deep breath. “Yeah, I know.”

Illya waits until Fen looks him before continuing. “I’ll keep an eye on him too.”

“Thank you,” Fen says at once, and finally sounds like he’s stopped silently panicking. Illya’s glad. “That means a lot, thank you.”

Illya leans back and shrugs. “That’s what squad-mates do for each other, right?”

Fen laughs again and nods. “Guess you’re right.”

Time falls away in the following silence and Illya doesn’t find his way back into presence until the van finally stands still and Alexei announces they’ve arrived. Everyone eagerly jumps out of the van and Illya follows suit, stretching his back into place and yawning loudly.

They’re not in the same area Illya’d been a year ago. Instead, they’re on a flat grassy plain, with an river running through it in the middle. The forest edges the other side of the river, and although there is no snow on the ground here, it still looks like it’s freezing. The ground is barren and bare trees are scattered between the green-needled forestry.

“Okay guys,” Alexei says, “The driver wants to get back as soon as possible so we need to load out all the supplies. If we don’t, we’re stuck here with nothing, no food, no tents, no anything.”
The threat works and they scramble to delegate tasks and carry everything to a patch of land not too far off from the river, with the least amount of rocks littering the ground.

Illya walks back to the van for what he presumes to be the last trip when Alexei catches up with him, cheeks red from exertion and the cold.

“Hey, Kuryakin?”

Illya keeps walking but lets Alexei fall into pace, and waits.

“I wanted to talk about the leadership, in this assignment,” Alexei says.

They reach the van and Illya opens up the back to check if they got everything. Alexei leans against it with crossed arms and stays silent, frowning. There is uncertainty in the lines of his face, but determination in the set of his mouth. Conflicted.

“What is there to talk about?” Illya asks, getting impatient of Alexei’s silent staring.

Alexei looks surprised. “I’m the sergeant of this squad, but you’re S.O.P... “ He trails off for a second before squaring his shoulders and stepping forward, almost threateningly. “I’m the sergeant of this squad, so I take the lead despite your superiority. Is that clear?”

Alexei’s never been an imposing figure, with his tall and lanky body and light brown curls he’d always looked like more of a trickster, the sidekick, than a leader. But he’s trying hard enough that Illya suppresses his snort at the posturing. So Illya shrugs and nods.

Alexei almost sags in relief, but a second later he’s narrowing his eyes suspiciously, trying to figure out why anyone would give up their superiority.

Illya grabs the last box still in the van, and sighs before explaining, “This is an assignment to test the B-Squad, it’s also a sergeant's test. They want to know if you’re fit to lead in extreme situations. I’m not a sergeant and I already have reached the highest position a recruit could have. Like you said, I’m S.O.P, what benefit do I have from taking over?”

Illya starts to walk half-way through, and Alexei follows him thoughtfully.

“I suppose... not much,” Alexei decides finally, and grins looking more like himself.

They reach the campsite and find Nadya and the twins throwing rocks into the river, and Vincenzo staring out in the distance, stony as ever.

“Besides, who’d want to lead them?” Illya asks, deadpan.

Alexei laughs.

Illya sets the box down and notices that it’s a camping table. Alexei and Illya wordlessly work together to set it up. Nadya notices them working and bullies the twins into helping her setting up tents. After Alexei calls out, Vincenzo stands up too and wrings his hands, fake smile in place. Illya looks away.

“What shall I do, oh fearless leader?” Vincenzo asks sarcastically.

Alexei snorts. “Take your annoying ass to the forest and try to find some dry wood for the fire. Take Fen with you, I don’t want anyone to get lost.”

“And how do you imagine we go over this rather large river?” Vincenzo asks, and adds, “You’re
still too interested in the location of my ass, by the way.”

“Use your brain and figure it out,” Alexei says. “Now go, it will be dark in a few hours. Get back before that.”

Vincenzo salutes smartly before marching away, having ignored Illya the entire conversation. Illya would be impressed if he wasn’t too busy to ignore the pain in his chest and the way his hands tremble around the last table leg yet attached.

When Vincenzo’s gone and the table stands relatively stable, Alexei turns to Illya almost hesitantly. “Do you know what’s up with Vince? He’s not been himself lately.”

Illya wishes he knew, and equally as much never wants to know and wants to escape this conversation right about now. “Why do you ask me?”

Alexei huffs. “Because you two were virtually inseparable and now you’re both sulking around like you’ve kicked each other’s puppy?” He pauses, and then asks more carefully. “What’s going on?”

“Why don’t you ask Vincenzo? You’re his friend,” Illya snaps, and curses internally for losing control.

“Honestly? Because you looked like the least likely to punch me in the face for asking,” Alexei answers. “No one is more surprised about that than me.”

“Vincenzo’s not my responsibility,” Illya says.

“Yeah but this team is mine, so having two grumpy polar bears roaming around isn’t going to help team spirit, Illya.” Alexei sounds way too serious when he adds, “I need you to fix it.”

Illya walks away. He doesn’t know what to think, or do. Even if he’d had the courage to confront Vincenzo, he doesn’t even know where to start.

It was going so well. Illya remembers that day in the record shop. He remembers Vincenzo’s grateful smile at the gift he’d gotten him. Illya remembers Vincenzo’s hand in his, the spark between them and knowing that Vincenzo could feel it too. The way their darkened, silent sky opened up in possibility, alight in hope.

Illya remembers being excited after the test, hoping that despite Vincenzo's clear shock, he’d be in his room and they could’ve talked through it. Maybe took the first step into being–

But something changed Vincenzo’s mind about being with Illya, and as much Illya needs to know why, he also just want to shrink away from the biting impossibility of it. The quiet rejection. It makes him long for a frozen room and detached loneliness. There is more grief in shattered hope than he ever expected there to be.

Illya knows he’s missed his chance. He’s lucky he’d ever got one. He’s stupid to ever expect he would be smart enough to take it.

By the time Vincenzo and Fen make it back to camp, they’ve succeeded in setting up the three tents they were supplied with with. Alexei is making a tally of their other supplies and Nadya and Vincenzo are trading snappish remarks while they try to get a fire going.

The sky is turning dark red and the last tendrils of warmth are disappearing behind the horizon. Luckily, there is little wind, but Illya’s grateful for his wooly socks anyway, the cold beginning to
cut through his clothing.

The general mood shifts for the better when the fire is lit and the food is cooking. Even the measly sausages seem appealing after a rough ride and a long evening of physical work.

Vitaly miraculously magics his guitar from somewhere, and starts to strum on it, leaving Alexei sputtering.

“This is an emergency test, not a children’s camp!” he exclaims, trying to make a grab for the thing. Vitaly dodges him expertly and laughs.

“Where is your sense of fun?” Nadya asks. “We’re surviving, we’ve done our tasks of the day. Maintaining good morale could be classified as a task too, Sarge.”

Alexei huffs, but sits back down on the makeshift bench near the fire. “I just want you guys to take it seriously.”

Fen reaches over to pat him on the knee. “We do.”

Vitaly starts to sing, something Illya recognizes as one of his records, and it doesn’t take long before most of the group is murmuring along.

Guta me look mi look love me

Tac sutaque destaque tac she

Illya watches the scene, partly bemused. He’s used to the B-Squad’s easy temperament with each other, the friendly environment where everyone works to keep up a good vibe. But he cannot help but be pleasantly surprised that this attitude carries over literally in the middle of nowhere, freezing their asses off in a forest. Even Vincenzo can’t help but tap along, and Illya notices with a jolt that it’s the first time he’s seen Vincenzo truly smile since that night.

Suddenly Illya longs to walk around the fire and bask in Vincenzo’s now rare happiness, but he knows he’d ruin it, poison it by being a physical reminder of the consequences of getting too close, letting someone get too attached. He forces himself to stay put.

Luckily, Nadya decides to sit next to Illya right at that moment and passes him one of the baked sausages so Illya is sufficiently distracted before he can do anything he might regret.

“Sorry that you’re stuck with us,” Nadya says apropos to nothing, mouth still half-full. “Bet you didn’t think you’d have to do this all over again.”

Illya snorts in surprise and laughs despite himself. “No, I didn’t.” He shrugs and continues honestly, “Don’t mind, though.”

“No?” Nadya asks. “What are you missing with your squad? They off to warmer places?”

“I’m not missing anything,” Illya says, a little harshly.

“Oh, yeah,” Nadya says, “They’re jerks to you, aren’t they?”

Illya doesn’t respond, just continues eating, staring into the fire.

“Hope we’re better, then,” Nadya says, as if that wasn’t already apparent by the fact she’s even speaking to him. “You’re a good guy, you deserve friends.”
Illya bites his lip to prevent himself from saying something pathetic like, *you’re the first person who’s ever said that to me*, or, *this is the first time I might actually believe that*.

Instead he just shrugs, and when Nadya falls silent, says, “I didn’t expect to make friends when I signed up. This…” Illya motions toward the group, “is a surprise.”

Nadya hums thoughtfully. “I suppose I did sign up for friends,” she says, “to belong to something. Why did you?”

“Duty,” Illya says. “The Kaiju are destroying our world, our future. I signed up because I have a responsibility to save it.”

Nadya laughs. “You sound like the guy in those recruitment ads. ‘Be a defender of the earth! Choose freedom! Choose duty!’” With a low voice she impersonates the slogan almost perfectly, but ruins it at the end by falling into laughter.

“You signed up for a Defender’s program to make friends,” Illya says deadpan. “Your reason is worse.”

“Touché. Although, it’s not the only reason.” There is less mirth in her voice now, and Illya regrets trying to make a joke. But she continues, bravely, like sharing is something she wants to do with him. “The belonging is a part of it. But mainly I want to fight because The Kaiju took my mother away from me.”

Nadya’s looking away, her hands clenched, but her expression is strong, one that signifies old grief, pain she’s lived with for a long time. Not any less debilitating, but more a part of you than new loss. Illya knows the difference between an aching scar you don’t remember living without, and the fresh cut of a newly healed wound; still suppressing the urge to itch the red skin surrounding it.

“I’m sorry,” Illya says, despite knowing it doesn’t mean anything at all. A pointless platitude voiced by many and understood by none. Illya can’t imagine how it would be if his mother died, if he’d had to live on without knowing she was thriving somewhere on this earth. She is his motivation to keep going, to keep fighting, to trust in his ability to prevail. Without her—Illya can’t imagine it.

“Thank you,” Nadya says with a soft smile. “It was a long time ago, one of the first attacks that made it to shore. She was a police officer, trying to evacuate people to safety.”

“A brave woman,” Illya says, nodding his head in respect for a stranger that deserved a longer life.

Nadya smiles wider now. “That she was. So I suppose it’s about duty for me too, other than connection or revenge. Continuing my mother’s legacy, protecting people. Saving the earth.”

“I believe you’ll contribute greatly,” Illya says honestly.

Nadya laughs and wraps her arms around her knees to stave off the cold. “You’re good at this.”

“At what?”

“Talking to people, empathising,” Nadya says. “I don’t even know why I told you my story, I haven’t really told anyone else. It’s not a secret or anything.” She shrugs and looks Illya in the eye. “I suppose something about you made me feel safe.”

Illya, trying very hard not to fall off his seat, coughs. Denial is hot on his tongue but he bites it down, gratitude is better expressed in silence sometimes.
“Aww, did I make you blush?” Nadya asks, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

“You’ll never speak of this again,” Illya mock threatens, and Nadya mimes locking her lips shut. Illya nods in approval. “Good.”

A comfortable silence falls, and belatedly Illya notices Vincenzo watching them, glaring. He looks away when Nadya notices him too. Illya sighs.

“Something’s off with Vincenzo,” Nadya says, sounding concerned. “I’ve beaten him during sparring over three times this week. A few weeks ago, I’d never stood a chance.”

“Maybe you’re just getting better?” Illya offers, but Nadya shakes her head.

“No, something’s bothering him. Maybe you should talk to him, too.”

Illya just shrugs, and Nadya lets it slide.

“Okay, folks.” Alexei stands and cuts through the conversations easily with his raised voice. “It’s only going to get colder, and we need enough sleep for tomorrow. So, sleeping assignments. The twins have the first watch, and share the tent closest to the river. Nadya and I will take the next watch, and we have the middle tent…”

Illya wants to laugh and throw Alexei in the freezing water, simultaneously. Have him experience the sick wash of ice cold fear and sensation of longing for long forgotten warmth himself. It wouldn’t be a fair comparison, but it would be a start.

“Vincenzo and Illya, last tent, and hold the last watch. You two have breakfast duty tomorrow too, so make sure you start a fire before the rest of us wake up. Clear?”

They nod, all except for Vincenzo, who looks like he’s contemplating jumping into what remains of their fire. Illya wants to think it’s funny, but knowing that the idea of being in his proximity is what is angers Vincenzo, cuts rather deeply.

Illya glares at Alexei, who’s purposefully ignoring him. The bastard.

“Good,” Alexei says. “Bedtime, let’s go.”

Illya can’t sleep.

Maybe it’s the wind that’s hitting the tents wall, sounding too close to his thoughts howling restlessly, incomprehensible in their complexity.

Maybe it’s Vincenzo breathing softly next to him. Near, but separated with a carefully maintained space between them. It’s only a hand's width, but it feels like a towering wall, a physical manifestation of a broken piece of hope. Left carelessly on the tent floor. Vincenzo hadn’t spoken to him the entire time they’d prepared for sleep and gotten into the tent, and Illya had warred between feeling hurt and a hot wave of anger. A sickly mix of it pulsing through his body until he became too exhausted to feel it anymore.

Vincenzo was supposed to better than this. Illya’d never thought that the first person that showed him kindness would turn out to be the one that would hurt him the most. Maybe this is his punishment for falling in–

Illya’s breath hitches. He can’t even think it now.
Vincenzo twists in his sleep, facing Illya. Even dreaming, he looks haunted, tense. Illya barely recognizes his expression. Vincenzo’s always looked like he was gliding, fluttering around life’s problems. Seeing him stressed even in slumber reminds Illya that he’s human, and that Illya can’t ever know for sure what he’s thinking.

Illya sighs, and wishes, not for the first time, his physical had been a few minutes later. That they’d had more time.

Maybe, if Illya’d just kissed him then, right before the doubts took over, it would’ve convinced him to stay. To try. Illya knows how it is to run, he’s been doing it for his whole life. He ran from his family’s shame. He ran from his squad’s animosity, finding a better place here.

Vincenzo is running from something, and Illya doesn’t know what to do about it. He doesn’t know if he can.

Vincenzo twists away again, and his breathing turns shallower, almost inaudible over the howling of the wind. And Illya can’t remember ever feeling this lonely, while being so close to someone who two weeks earlier, had made him feel like he’d found a home.

The next day, some cheer has finally deflated. Too thin mattresses and flimsy tent walls do nothing for a good night’s rest, and Illya’s secretly glad he’s not the only one who’s already tethered on the edge of annoyance, leaning towards frustration.

“We’re training to become Jaeger Pilots, not Rangers,” Nadya complains, her hands latched around her steel tea cup as if she’s afraid someone wants to take it from her. “Why do we need to prove we can live in tents? We will fight in big robots. Why is this a thing?”

“Teamwork is important,” Alexei says yawning. “And they just like to torture recruits.”

The yawn takes over, infectious and silly, a chorus of tired human empathy.

“What are we going to do today?” Fen asks, after his own yawn, the last one yet to climb out of his tent.

“Two things,” Alexei says. “One, our first assignment is to fix this radio system. The sooner we do, the sooner we get new instructions and can be extracted.” Alexei kicks a box that’s standing next to the table. “Two, we need to set up a perimeter to protect our base.”

“Can I do the perimeter?” Vitaly asks eagerly, and Alexei just shrugs.

“Sure,” he says. “Vitaly, Vincenzo and Illya will set up the perimeter and Nadya, Fen and me will stay behind and work on the radio. We have two walkie-talkies, one for the base and one for you guys. Make sure you stay together, I don’t want anyone to get lost.”

A few minutes later, Illya’s walking next to Vincenzo, surrounded by trees, and Vitaly following behind them whistling. Despite not speaking, Illya and Vincenzo work almost in sync, systematically working their way between the low hanging branches, keeping to a nice circle by keeping track of the sun and leaving clear signs of their path as they walk. After a while, Vincenzo pushes forward, and Vitaly joins Illya’s side.

“Hey, I wanted to thank you for being nice to Fen yesterday. He doesn’t really feel like he belongs here, and talking to you really helped,” Vitaly smiles. “He respects you.”

Illya tries to think of something to respond, but Vincenzo undercuts him. “Less chatting, more walking. I want to get back before I can’t feel my fingers anymore.”
“Aye,” Vitaly says easily, and picks up his pace.

The second evening, an ice cold storm hits, and Illya and Vincenzo suffer in silence as they puff out clouds of condensation in the air until Illya finally loses his patience.

“Body warmth,” Illya says gruffly, tugging on Vincenzo’s sleeping bag.

Vincenzo shakes his head. “No.”

Illya sits up and glares at Vincenzo, the tiredness and the cold suddenly taking away his filter. Words spill out of him, burning into the freezing air. “Why are you being so difficult? What did I do to make you be like this, to me?”

Vincenzo doesn’t respond for long enough to make Illya regret speaking all together, until Vincenzo says, “Nothing,” so softly Illya almost can’t hear it over the wind.

“What?”

“Just… leave it, Peril.”

The nickname hurts. “I can’t.”

Vincenzo sighs. “I’m sorry.” There is a tremble in Vincenzo’s voice, one that betrays either emotion or the cold. Maybe both.

The wind picks up, and where Illya first was annoyed by Vincenzo’s bullheadedness, he’s now getting worried. “Cowboy. It’s getting too cold. I promise,” Illya sucks in a breath. “I promise I won’t do anything to make you feel uncomfortable, if that’s what is bothering you.”

“It isn’t that,” Vincenzo says, but he finally moves toward him. Illya moves them around until they’re under two layers of blankets and wrapped together so they can share the warmth they need.

“Okay?” Illya asks, heart racing in his throat.

Vincenzo just sighs and buries in closer, and Illya tries hard not to fall apart. His hope is pieces cutting into his skin, and Vincenzo carries the knife.

“I’m sorry,” Vincenzo says softly, and falls asleep with his fist clenched in Illya’s sweater.

Illya drops his chin on Vincenzo’s head. He doesn’t know what is going on, but it hurts, and it might be hurting them both.

The third day Vincenzo is different. He stops avoiding Illya, instead following him around like he used too, but he’s always an inch too far away, just out of reach. Illya notices more now that he’s near. The way his fists clench when Illya talks about the S.O.P classes he’s had after being chosen. One time he interrupts Illya explaining a new technology, the Nuclear Processor, to Nadya, briskly reminding Illya that it’s classified information and then refusing to speak when Illya tries to explain that Nadya will get the class next year anyway, so it wouldn’t matter.

The fourth day they have a breakthrough with the radio, and new assignments come in. They have to pack up camp and relocate to a location south from base, something that looks like a very small village on the maps they have. It should be a day’s walk, if they’re lucky with the weather, so they decide to go early the next day. That evening, Illya tentatively twines his fingers through Vincenzo’s, and Vincenzo doesn’t pull his hand away. Illya falls asleep with Vincenzo’s head pillowed on his chest, and feels for the first time a hope that doesn’t cut. Maybe Vincenzo just
needed some time, to get used to the idea of them together. Maybe they’ll be okay.

But the next day, as they pack up the last of the camp, Vincenzo avoids him again, and Illya breathes through his heart falling into pieces. Hope bleeds away. There is no blood this time. Only poison.

It becomes something of a trend.

They reach the village. It’s abandoned, so they set up their tents again. In tacit unspoken agreement the sleeping arrangements stay the same, and the days and nights cycle through, blurred together in exhaustion. The days are filled with assignments and avoidance, with hurt and pain. The nights are close. Legs tangled and lips on necks. They don’t kiss, or do anything more than wrap up in each other’s warmth, but it’s easy to pretend they’re getting closer, making progress, in the darkness of the night.

It’s torture. It’s the best Illya can hope for.

By the time the last day comes around, Illya’s almost numb to the cut of Vincenzo’s squeeze, just before he lets Illya’s hand go. A last goodbye before disappearing out of the tent. Illya remembers that with their extraction, they’ll sleep separately again.

Vincenzo won’t have to be forced into comforting Illya. Illya knows what’s happening by now, of course. It’s pity. It’s always been pity. From the moment Vincenzo spied a too lonely and angry recruit, and subsequently introduced him to a group of friends. Vincenzo knows how Illya feels about him, and when giving Illya space didn’t work, he’s now just being nice. Not wanting to reject him fully, maybe waiting until the safety of the base. It wouldn’t be hard there, avoiding Illya all together.

Illya will stop hanging out with the B-Squad out of respect. Vincenzo didn’t make Illya fall in love with him. Love. His heart betraying himself. It’s the truth and it pains him to think it, but he can’t hide from it anymore. He has to get over it.

Illya knows it’s going to hurt, cutting himself out of it, but the pity almost hurts more.

Vincenzo being near him, but not wanting him the same way.

Illya knows it’s not going to be easy, but whenever he’s near Vincenzo, a what if follows him around. It flames through him every time they touch. Hope, is a form of denial, and Illya’s done living in a fantasy he doesn’t deserve to have.

The drive back is shorter; they’d covered a stretch by walking already. Emotionally exhausted, Illya falls asleep almost easily, despite the fact that his side feels cold, and it feels alien sleeping without Vincenzo’s soft breathing next to him.

When they arrive back, they are ravenous, and the B-Squad rushes to the Hall to catch the last seconds of dinner. Illya doesn’t join them, he feels hollow and sick and doesn’t think eating something will help that. Instead, he walks to the nearest bathroom, a small chamber adjacent to one of the workout rooms. There is no one using it, so Illya flicks on the light and drops his clothing on a bench of the locker room, and chooses one of the many shower heads lining the wall. He punches the button and waits until the water rushes over him, almost too hot, burning his skin. The steam almost chokes him, and he leans against the wall, taking long breaths while beads of water drip into his mouth. He watches the water pool onto the floor and wishes his emotions could drown with it, down the drain, never to be felt again. Instead he has to lock them up in his chest, right underneath his heart. It hurts. Tonight, he won’t succeed.
Tonight, he lets the longing wave over him, heavier than the steam, burning his skin harder than the hot stream. Tomorrow, his time will be over, but tonight he’ll live in it for a little while longer.

It isn’t hard then, to press his head against the wall and take himself in hand. He moans, trembles and imagines for just a second that everything will be alright. That Vincenzo will become his. He huffs a hitching breath and warmth pools in his stomach, until he spills into his own fist.

The wave of release is so disorientating it takes a long time before Illya realises the water’s stopped streaming. He pushes the button again, and washes his body clean. After, he carefully pieces himself back together so that he can make it back to his room. He turns around and–

Vincenzo’s standing on the other side of the room, eyes wide, fists clenched around the band of his workout bag.

Illya wants to run, hide. There is no mistaking that Vincenzo’s seen it all, his eyes–

Pupils dark and deep. Illya finally realises what he sees. His storm of hope and shame shatters in the face of Vincenzo’s unabashed desire. His face is cut open in a sweet kind of sadness and a determined kind of fear.

Illya recognizes it. He knows it. He feels it with every breath he takes. “Cowboy.” His voice is broken and breathless but it gives it back, holds that feeling up in the air and Illya knows that Vincenzo hears it.

Vincenzo’s breath hitches, and his expression flickers between pain. “I can’t,” he says, desperate, the words bleeding out of his mouth “I can’t.”

Vincenzo turns away and walks out.


The question haunts him, punctuates every move as he hurries to dry and dress.


Vincenzo wants him. Vincenzo feels the same. Illya knows this so certainly, a new crystal truth. They have something– they’re so close to having something. Why?

Illya pulls on his sweater and everything he’s seen and noticed about Vincenzo’s behaviour fits itself into another perspective. As if someone’s explained to him that he’s seen the world in wrong colours for his entire life, and in one unguarded moment everything is right again, bright again, suddenly finding a beauty he didn’t know he had been searching desperately for.

No pity. It was all want and fear. Vincenzo’s been dancing around him because he longs to be near. Why not take the final step? Why let their possibility hang between them when it hurts them both?

Illya stalks through the locker room, trying to think of places where Vincenzo would go. He’s not going to let this chance slip through his fingers again. Not now he knows. The door to the workout room is ajar, and Illya’s heart jumps.

Vincenzo’s standing in the corner, his back against the window and his hands in his hair, dragging them over his face. He looks like he’ll sink to the ground any second so Illya rushes forward. Vincenzo doesn’t even look up, he doesn’t move away. The hunch of his shoulders looks defeated, like a man dragged to the frontlines of battle, knowing he won’t come back. Illya doesn’t know
Why there is a war between them when he only sees the edge of a future, one of legs tangled and smiles and drifting together.

“Cowboy,” Illya says, softly, gently, and takes Vincenzo’s hands away from his face and his stomach drops. There is no mask, only fear.

Maybe, he doesn’t know about the depth of what Illya feels. Doesn’t comprehend how much Illya wants him to feel safe, together.

“Vincenzo do you feel this?” Illya says, pulling one of Vincenzo’s hands unto his chest, right where his heart is beating too fast. “Do you feel what I feel for you?” Illya swallows and continues softly, “I know you feel this too. I know you.”

Vincenzo looks away, almost in shame and shudders a breath. “Yes.”

Illya exhales in relief and sags into Vincenzo. He is right. Why. why. why.


Old sadness almost drowns Illya when Vincenzo looks up. There is fear and guilt in his eyes. “We can’t,” Vincenzo says, but he leans in closer and clutches his hand in Illya’s sweater as if he wants to pull him in and never leave. “My Uncle, Illya. I can’t.”

It’s not him. The thought rings like a clear bell through his mind and Illya feels like he’s floating. Vincenzo is not keeping away because he’s scared of him, of Illya, of his dark sides and harsh past. A heavy weight to shoulder even when desired. Something Vincenzo’s all the rights to run from. It’s not him.

Illya almost smiles, but doesn’t, because Vincenzo is afraid and Illya never wanted that. “Since when do you care about what others think, Cowboy?” It’s an honest question. Vincenzo never used to. His Uncle shouldn’t be able to take this away from him. “You take and take, worm your way into everyone’s mind and make them adore you.” Illya smiles now, softly, because he can’t help it. He leans in closer and frames Vincenzo’s jaw with one hand, gently caressing. “You did it to me too. I adore you. Why not take it too?”

Vincenzo’s breathing quickly and heavily but he leans into Illya’s hand. Illya’s chest almost explodes. Illya leans his forehead against Vincenzo’s and whispers, “Take me, Cowboy. I want you to.”

“Fuck, Peril.”

Vincenzo’s eyes fall closed. Illya feels his heart race. Vincenzo’s hand is still on his chest. They breathe together. Illya waits. He sees Vincenzo waver and hesitate but when Vincenzo opens his eyes again, all those doubts fall away. Illya doesn’t know what he’s seeing in his expression, but it’s enough.

Vincenzo swallows, and nods and says, “Okay, okay. Peril, okay.”

Illya smiles, traces Vincenzo’s lips with his finger. “Only okay?”

Vincenzo laughs, a soft rumble in his chest, and shakes his head. “No. More. Infinitely more.”

“I’m glad,” Illya says. “Can I kiss you now?”
Vincenzo’s breath hitches. “Please.”

Illya does. He captures Vincenzo’s quiet pleading in a chaste press of lips and then another, and another, until Vincenzo relaxes in his arms and kisses back, a parched man drinking him in, deepening the kiss with every push. Illya follows his pace, presses in closer, sliding his hands in Vincenzo’s nape, threading his fingers through his hair and tugging until Vincenzo moans hotly into his mouth.

“You don’t know how long I’ve wanted this,” Vincenzo murmurs, pulling back to catch his breath. Illya can’t find words to express what he’s feeling so he catches Vincenzo’s lips again, pouring every inch of emotion, every longing thought and excited thrill he’d felt these last few months. Vincenzo trembles and sighs into it, taking the assault of desire and matching it.

“I know,” Illya breathes, finally, when their haste recedes a little and the kiss turns sweet, happy, as if they’re both surprised that it’s real. “Cowboy, I know.”

Vincenzo sags against him, his forehead pressed into Illya’s shoulder. Illya wraps his arms against his waist and squeezes him tight.

“I don’t care what people think,” Vincenzo says. “But no one can know. We’ll have to be careful. I’m sorry. If you don’t want—”

Illya interrupts him by dropping a kiss to his head, and slides his hands up and down Vincenzo’s waist. “I don’t care. You’re worth it. This is ours.” Illya smiles then, finally free of the hurt. Nothing can ruin this. They won’t let it. “I’d play spy games for the rest of my life if it meant I can be with you.”

Vincenzo freezes, but Illya isn’t worried about having said too much. Words are only words, everything between them is already said through actions. Vincenzo seems to realise this too because he relaxes again and tips his head back in a smile. “Undercover mission, highly classified.”

Illya leans down and kisses him, because he can now. “Exactly.”

Vincenzo shakes his head. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You’re the luckiest Cowboy in the world,” Illya says, and smiles wider when Vincenzo nods seriously.

“I really am.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, I'm clearly not used to taking more time to write. So instead of using my extra time for rest and/or homework, I wrote this enormous outline for what became a 8k chapter that could've been 2 chapters in my old 'schedule' and ran myself almost ragged over the damn stress of it. Thank you Brooke for helping me through it, this chapter would never have been finished if it wasn't for you.

This is an trial and error process, clearly, so please forgive me if there are any errors in the coming week. I'm going to try to keep to this schedule and post a reasonably
chapter instead of a monster of words. But first I need to catch up on French, and like sleep for two days.

I hope you guys liked the update tho, and don't worry about me, writing is crazy, always. Thank you for all the lovely comments the previous chapter, they really really supported me this week. <33
December 2020

Chapter Notes

The music for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 2020

“Have you been listening to us?”

It’s the first thing Illya blurts out. The idea of Napoleon having heard his breakdown makes the roaring start all over again. He’s not supposed to show weakness like this. Not after Shatterdome. It’s enough.

Napoleon has the gall to laugh. “Kind of hypocritical, isn’t it Peril.” He lobs the bug at Illya in a casual arch, “I believe these are yours. I thought we were making progress, I’m sad to be disappointed.”

Gaby steps back to Illya and touches his arm gently. “Illya?”

“It’s fine, Gaby,” Illya says, “You can go.”

Gaby frowns. “Napoleon, if you can, don’t do this now. Illya’s been through–”

“Gaby,” Illya says softly, to gentle the warning. “Just,” he sighs and trails off.

“Fine,” Gaby says. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. You’re exhausted this is not a good time for whatever this is.”

Napoleon is still standing in the doorway, playing with another bug, pretending not to listen. Illya stays quiet, and with a squeeze of his hand she leaves them to it, looking troubled as she goes.

Napoleon steps aside to let her through, and then steps into Illya’s room as though he owns the place, closing the door behind him. His face is all smiles, and Illya’s repressing the urge to punch it or push him up against a wall. He feels trapped, here with Napoleon, who’s radiating anger in his own right.

“You know,” Napoleon begins pleasantly, “I came here, hoping to start fresh, maybe I don’t know… save the world in the process. But you’ve left me no chance to even talk to you.”

Napoleon digs around in his pocket, and shows Illya his collection of bugs. “But I started to see that you’ve been through a lot, like Gaby said, and that you’ve maintained a healthy hatred for me. Which hurts, I must say, but it’s something I can understand.”

Napoleon walks around the room, circling, as if he’s stalking prey. He stops by the row of alcohol and laughs, taking one of them and drinking several large gulps before continuing. “So, I gave you some space, some time, and hoped that if you got used to having me around we could finally take steps to fix…” he motions between them with a slanted wave, “whatever this is, between us.”
There is a slight tilt to Napoleon’s step, and Illya realises that there is a pretty big chance Napoleon is drunk, or he’s at least pretending to be.

“And then! I found these little things!” Napoleon exclaims, holding the bugs in his fist, before throwing them on the ground. “In every single pair of shoes I owned, and you know what I remember from our golden days as recruits? Finding bugs in my shoes within the first week. I thought I’d blown my cover already.” Napoleon laughs. “I almost left right then, imagine the heartbreak we would’ve avoided, the unimaginable mess—”

Illya stares as Napoleon sits down on the edge of his bed, taking another long swallow from his bottle before wiping his mouth. “But it was you all along, wasn’t it?”

It’s a rhetorical question. Illya doesn’t answer.

Napoleon laughs bitterly. “I never realised you had trust issues that great before me. I mean, after what I did, sure. I can see how that would maybe unbalance a few things for a year or so. But you’re still—”

“Solo,” Illya says in a low tone, trying to put a stop to this, Napoleon stripping him down with only words, again. He knows he’s pathetic. He knows he shouldn’t have let Napoleon destroy him. It’s a weakness he has to bear. But that doesn’t mean he wants to hear it from the man himself.

Napoleon sighs. “Look, Illya. I’m sorry for the things I did, and you have every right to hate me for it. But I came here because I thought we could maybe start over, and do something good with our lives.”

“Speak for yourself,” Illya huffs. “You have things to atone for, not me. I’ve done my duty, with my mother alongside me.”

“I don’t mean—” Napoleon says. “I know you’ve been, not good, for the last year… Don’t you think fighting again, being useful again, wouldn’t help that? I think it would help you.”

Napoleon’s words sound too close to his own inner thoughts, and a surge of anger lights up at that. Napoleon can’t, after all this time, be the one who knows him best. He can’t.

“No.”

“Peril—”

“Don’t call me that,” Illya growls, his rage suddenly taking over.

Napoleon stands up, eyes flashing, and meets Illya with his own anger, “I’m fucking trying here, Illya!”

Illya shakes his head. “I can’t believe that. I can’t believe a word that comes out of your mouth. The only reason you came is because your CIA boss tugged at your leash. We’re not here by choice.”

Napoleon glares, but Illya doesn’t budge.

“You tell this pretty story about wanting to help me, but how do I know? How do I know what you say is truth? I don’t owe it to anyone to trust you. You had your chance and you betrayed me.” Illya stills, and waits until Napoleon is looking him in the eye before saying. “I can’t stand to be around you. I can’t be near you without feeling anger, Solo. This is never going to work. You’re living a lie if you think I’ll ever trust you again. I hate you.”
And it’s cruel; feeling satisfaction when Napoleon pales and flinches back. Illya knows he’s lying through his teeth. Hating Napoleon is supposed to be easy, but Illya’s always been weak.

That doesn’t mean he has to show that to someone who doesn’t deserve his loyalty.

There is a silence, and Napoleon presses his hands over his face, sighing deeply.

Illya was prepared for a fight, for anger, for yelling and screaming and finally pouring out that senseless frustration that’s been following him around ever since he came here. But Napoleon surprises him by deflating all at once, flicking away his anger as if flipping a switch.

As if he’s too tired to pretend anymore, too exhausted to play the game.

“I hope that that isn’t true,” Napoleon says. His eyes are empty.

Despite everything, Illya’s heart breaks.

“I hope that you’re living the lie, holding onto anger because it’s easier than working through the fear,” Napoleon continues. “I’m scared too, Illya. I’m scared of what I was capable of—am capable of. I’m so fucking afraid I’ll hurt you again without intending too. But I want to try.”

Napoleon looks up and pleads, “Give me a chance to prove that I’m trying. Peril- fuck no, I’m sorry. Illya, I just want to fix us. I still care about you, and you’re hurting. Tell me how I can fix this. Please.”

And suddenly Illya recognizes him.

Vincenzo.

The man he’d fallen in love with.

He’s standing right before him and he’s lying, stealing and hurting, because Napoleon is a man of deception and his soft pleading expression is Vincenzo’s, his honest piercing blue eye’s are Vincenzo’s, his broken voice is Vincenzo’s. Illya knows this man, hiding his emotions beneath a mask that eventually breaks until it spills over. He knows the way his back hunches and shoulders tense when he’s stressed and desperate, and Illya knows exactly where to push and press until they relax. Illya knows this, he knows him, and he can never trust him again.

Vincenzo is not here, and Napoleon does not deserve to use his face.

Illya steps forward, clenches a fist in Napoleon’s shirt. Napoleon blinks, but doesn’t flinch.

Vincenzo’s never been afraid of him.

“You ruined me,” Illya says, softer than he intended to. “I can’t do this.”

It’s an echo of a night long past, but now the sides are turned, twisted and broken. He pushes Napoleon towards the door, and he goes almost willingly; not trying to stay, but not wanting to leave either.

“I can’t do this again,” Illya says, letting go of Napoleon’s shirt.

Napoleon’s breath hitches as Illya steps back.

“I can’t,” Illya says, and closes the door on him.
Illya steps back, shaken, and the blood in his ears roars.

A piercing headache engulfs him and suddenly he’s sitting on his bed with his hands in his hair. He feels like he’s drowning, deep under water while the currents try to drag him every contradicting way. The heavy pressure of the water atop him chokes him and holds him in place, and he can’t do anything but stare into the harsh blue and scream into the silence. He doesn’t know what to do.

Many, many impulses fight for dominance. There are the ones that try to push him into anger again, punch his confusion away by etching it into the wall, or ripping apart his bed. There is another voice that pleads him to go after Napoleon. That it doesn’t matter. That what’s there is enough. That he needs his hands on his hips and his lips on his own. The pulsing warmth of his body close and closer. It’s been years and Illya’s still yearning, still desperate to jump off into that dangerous abyss despite the cruel landing. He almost convinces himself it would be worth it, that it would be enough.

But then he hears his own voice again, repeating, repeating. *I can’t do this. You ruined me. I can’t do this.* What he’d said to Napoleon is true. He can’t survive another fall, another drowning, another end. He’s still piecing himself back together and he can’t let himself step into ruination again.

Despite the temptation.

Napoleon wants him in some way. Illya doesn’t know what way, but there is longing there. He can see it and hear it and it would be so sickly easy to give in to that, to feign ignorance of the history between them and and capture it. Pretending Napoleon is a ghost of the past, one that did not hurt him and never would.

But he can’t.

Illya doesn’t know what to do.

Nothing, Illya decides after an endless time. He breathes, deeply.

Tonight, he has to do nothing but sleep. Tomorrow will be another day. A day where his exhausted mind isn’t inhibited with drink and heavy conversations.

Illya shakes himself from his frozen position. He only kicks off his boots before burying himself under the covers. He closes his eyes. The exertion of the night catches up to him, and within two breaths, he bathes in deep dark space.

After a dreamless sleep Illya, wakes too early with a restless mind, thoughts coursing, but he’s too tired to work through them. He pushes the previous night away - for the time being - and drags himself out of bed. From experience, he knows that trying to fall back asleep when he feels like this is like forcing himself into a cozy but treacherous prison of thought spirals and self-loathing. He needs action now; structure, a warm cup of coffee, to bridge the divide between the present, the reality, and his experience of it.

A cold shower wakes him up a little, but his hands stay jittery. After drying and dressing, Illya digs his ‘screen from between the mattress and the wall and unlocks it. With clenched teeth, he deletes the surveillance app. It leaves a bad taste in his mouth, but he knows it’s necessary to put an end to it. He puts up some music, letting it playing on tiny speakers to fill the empty space of his room.

*Love the lie and lie the love*

*Hangin’ on, with a push and shove*
He sets it on his pillow and makes his bed with military precision. Then, he scans around his space and grimaces. The floor is covered with pieces of the desk, leaving a mahogany trail of his rage and grief. Alcohol bottles are lain all over, and for a second Illya thinks about taking one and downing it, escaping his responsibilities and chaotic thoughts a crude but effective way. He pushes the thought away, shaking the urge out of him with a definite jerk.

*Looks like we always end up in a rut*

*Tryin’ to make it real - compared to what?*

The lyrics follow him out as he walks through the doorway, into the wall. There is a dent in the thin plaster right beside Illya’s door, just big enough for a fist. It wasn’t there yesterday.

Illya walks on.

Despite the early hour, there are people already working. Illya can smell the first batch of breakfast being prepared already, and there are little groups of technicians and sanitation workers walking quietly around the premises, careful not to wake up the still sleeping population.

Illya finds a friendly cleaner with a sunshine smile who gives him a couple of trashbags eagerly.

“You’re the first who wants to clean up a mess yourself,” she says, winking. “Usually they just command me to do it.”

Illya takes the bags with a quiet and automatic thank you, and then frowns when his tired mind registers what she said. “They shouldn’t do that.”

“It’s my job, honey,” she replies with an airy chuckle. “Don’t you worry about it.”

“They still shouldn’t do that,” Illya says. “You deserve respect, too.”

She laughs “You’re a sweet one.” She twists her cart around and starts to walk away. “Good luck with your mess, hun. I’m going to get back to mine. Cheers!”

“Thank you,” Illya says back, but is sure she’s too far to hear it. “You too.”

Illya walks back to his room and turns the light on. The ‘screen is still playing, stuck on a loop. Illya leaves it be and goes to work.

*Tryin’ to make it real*

*but compared to what?*

He starts with the alcohol, feeling momentarily guilty he’s throwing them away instead of giving them back to their rightful owners. But he doesn’t have the energy to do that, and it needs to go now. If they’re angry about it; he has enough credits to pass on. They can buy new beverages.

*Love the lie and lie the love*

*Tryin’ to make it real, yeah*

Next is the desk, and it’s everywhere. Illya’s glad for his sturdy shoes, because the floor is covered in tiny splinters out to sting. It’s surreal, seeing the consequences of a momentary loss of control; touching all the broken pieces one by one to put them in the bag. Away from sight, cleaned up and away. Back in Russia, his walls had been covered in dents, and his fists had always ached, there was no escape from the anger, no way to take it away. Illya’d thought that it helped, that seeing his
ruination in his surroundings would make it more real, more tangible. But as he picks up the last pieces of his ruined desk and sets away the second bag of trash in the hall, he notices he feels lighter, more ordered, now his room is slowly starting to show. It’s like a blank slate, a chance to start over again. He cleaned up this mess, fixed this by himself, and his space is his own again, not a manifestation of his failures.

Illya opens his tiny window and breathes in the fresh air, and is surprised to find that he’s smiling. The situation with Napoleon weighs heavy on him still, but even after their confrontation the effects of his conversation with Gaby did not lessen. He feels freed of a tension deep in his chest and shoulders, residual stress slowly seeping out of him. Talking about it, it turns out, helped.

Who would have thought.

Illya’s pulled out of his own musings by a hesitant knock on his door, despite it being open. Illya turns around, ignoring the small spark of something that expects Napoleon to have come, to see a yawning Ekko standing off to the side, peeking inside.

“Oh, good you’re awake,” she bites her lips, eyes flicking over him. “We’re having a bit of a conundrum.”

“What is the problem?” Illya grabs the last bag and ties it, setting it off to the side.

“Gaby’s worked herself to death. She hasn’t slept or eaten since yesterday evening, and is still busy in the workshop.” There is an undercurrent of worry in Ekko’s fond tone that makes Illya’s hairs stand up straight. “Peter’s never been good with getting her out, and I’ve just been called up by Waverley, same with Alexei, and I can’t find Napoleon. I know you had a rough night yesterday but could you…?”

“Yes,” Illya says.

Ekko smiles gratefully, and lets him pass so he can close the door behind him.

“If you’ll just pick her up and carry her to the cafeteria, it would be much obliged,” Ekko says. “I’ve got to run. Thank you.”

Illya smiles back. “Of course.”

With the trash bags in either hand, Illya makes his way to the workshop, with a small detour by the dumpsters.

The workshop is less of a room and more a whole floor; an open plan space only broken up with glass walls and various machines and computers. Through the windows on the south side, you can look over the Jaeger Dome. The Red Peril is the first in sight, the machine staring down at them, immobile but present. Illya almost believes Gaby put it that way on purpose, to force herself to work harder, be better, and fix the damage.

Illya looks at the ripped off shoulder, and he breathes through the first waves of panic until he calms down. He’s proud at himself for not collapsing, and turns away from the Jaeger in search of Gaby.

He finds her in a dark corner, only lit by various computer screens on the wall, running indecipherable statistics in harsh neon. She’s sat on the floor, papers and blueprints pooled around her. Her hair is up in a messy bun, and Illya counts nine empty coffee cups and four cans of energy drinks in her proximity. By the way she’s frantically murmuring to herself, Illya guesses she’s had a new batch not long before.
“The Nuclear Processor is not the main problem, although it does block everything if I want to fix—” Illya clears his throat, but she doesn’t seem to notice him.

“It’s the neural pathways, both sides are fried and I can’t fix it because the whole thing will explode if I try! It’s like she needs to reject her own core for me even to be able to begin, but she’ll never do that because everything is on datalock and refuses to comply to external commands, nevermind internal communication.”

“Gaby,” Illya says, approaching her gently when she starts in surprise, looking at him as if he had appeared out of nowhere. “Gaby, you need to eat.”

She laughs low in her throat. “I don’t need food, I need a new Jaeger. One without,” she waves her hand, encompassing all damage into a frantic handwave. “That.”

“I think food is the more attainable solution here,” Illya huffs, and catches her hand to pull her up. “Come on, I heard there were waffles.”

She rolls her eyes at him but goes willingly, only looking back at her notes once. “You’re bribing me.”

“Of course I am,” Illya says. “Ekko ordered me to carry you, so I think you’re getting off easy.”

That seems to interest Gaby, and a little tension falls away from her eyes. “Really? She asked you to?”

“Yes,” Illya says. “She’ll hunt me down if I don’t get you to eat.”

“Well, can’t have that can we,” Gaby says. “Okay, I’ll come with you.”

“Like you ever had a choice,” Illya says, teasing.

Gaby flips him off. “Let me pretend I have some agency in my life still, Illya.”

“Sure,” Illya says, and leads her out of the workshop. “You can even choose what you’ll drink with your breakfast—

“Coffee—”

—except coffee,” Illya interjects quickly, “or anything else with caffeine.”

“You’re mean,” Gaby complains.

“I’m just trying to keep you alive,” Illya says. “We all are.”

They walk into the cafeteria and are met with a reasonably sized morning crowd, looking more awake than expected.

A small man with big black glasses and even bigger hair comes up to them with a grateful smile. “Oh, thank god. You got her out of there.” He points his fork at Gaby sternly. “You almost passed out twice, don’t think I haven’t seen it.” He moves his gaze back to Illya again and holds out a hand.

Illya takes it, engulfing it in his own, and almost startles at the strong grip.

“I’m Peter,” the man says. “You might have seen me around. Don’t think we’ve met yet, but I could be totally wrong. I’m not good at remembering faces…” He trails off and lets go of Illya’s
Illya snorts. “I need no thanks.”

“Can we get the waffles now we’re here?” Gaby says impatiently, and drags Illya off before he can say goodbye. Peter only smiles after them and doesn’t seem to mind.

After filling as many plates as they can carry with copious amounts of food, they settle at the central table. Without preamble, Gaby digs in, and Illya has to suppress a chuckle at the sight. He chooses to pace himself a little more, but they eat in comfortable silence as the cafeteria fills around them.

Napoleon walks in when Gaby has finished off her last plate. He doesn’t join them, instead sits where Illya had been sitting yesterday, shoulders hunched and looking down at the floor.

Illya aches, and looks away.

“I think you should sleep,” Illya says, noticing the dark bruises below Gaby’s eyes.

Gaby shakes her head fervently, opening her mouth to presumably argue about something technical, but then she sees something behind Illya’s shoulder and snaps shut, glaring.

Illya twists around to see Oleg and Sanders nearing, Waverly trailing behind them with Alexei and Ekko in tow. Illya suddenly feels like he’s been trapped in an ambush. Automatically, his gaze flickers to Napoleon, who’s watching the entourage with the same foreboding Illya’s feeling.

“Gentleman and woman,” Sanders says when he comes up to their table. “We have a discussion to be had, some orders to hash out, etcetera. Miss Teller, you’ll join me and Oleg to the conference room, and Illya, Waverley has need of you and your partner.”

Illya’s teeth clench. “What is going on?”

“We’ve decided there is not enough progress,” Oleg says with a thin smile. “There is a new attack expected in two weeks and we want our full capacity on standby.”

“What means everything needs to be in tip top shape,” Waverly expands. “So if you and Mister Solo will join me to the combat arena, that would be much obliged. Wear clothing fitting for training.” When he’s said his part, he walks away before Illya can protest.

Alexei lays a comforting hand on his shoulder, expression serious. “It’s a compatibility test, stick fighting. I’m sorry.”

“Even if they’re compatible. The Red Peril isn’t ready,” Gaby snaps, directing her sharp words at Oleg and Sanders who don’t seem impressed.

“So we’ve heard,” Oleg says serenely. “If you would come with us, Miss Teller. We’ll have this riveting discussion in a more appropriate setting.”

“I need more coffee for this shit,” Gaby huffs under her breath, but she stands, sighing tiredly. Ekko at by her side at once. “I’ll make some for you and I’m coming with.”

Sanders only shrugs and walks off, Oleg joining him. Ekko and Alexei have some wordless conversation before Ekko and Gaby walk away too.
Illya buries his hands in his hair. Everything is going too fast suddenly. It isn’t as if he’s forgotten about the fact that doing his duty would include having to work with Napoleon. But everything still feels raw and harsh, and the idea still cuts right through him.

“You have the right to say no,” Alexei says. “They can’t force you to do anything. You can quit.”

“I’ll run away and become a what? A wall builder?” Illya asks. “I can’t be anything besides a Pilot, Alexei, it’s who I am. Would you leave?”

Alexei sighs. “No. But your situation is different.”

“You can look for a new partner,” Napoleon says suddenly, and Illya jumps, not having noticed him coming closer. “There is no reason to force yourself—”

His voice is monotone and sad and Illya cuts through to it, desperate for it to stop.

“Believe me, Napoleon. I’ve tried.”

Napoleon flinches back, and Illya registers how that might have sounded as an attack. “No- It’s not.” He drops his shoulders down and sighs deeply. “There is no one else,” he says softly, painfully aware Alexei is standing next to him, listening.

Napoleon hovers closer, but steps back when Alexei straightens and steps between them.


Alexei grimances. “I just...”

“Yeah,” Illya says. “It’s alright.” He directs his gaze to Napoleon, who’s watching them wearily. “We’ll just try.”

“I’m coming with you,” Alexei says.

Illya doesn’t protest and leaves to change.

A few breathing exercises later, Illya marches into the arena with determined steps. It’s just a test. Only a test that will determine his ability to ever Pilot again. Illya doesn’t know if he’s more afraid of discovering his mind is too ruined to be compatible with anyone, or terrified of opening himself up to Napoleon again. Because if they are successful, the next step with be the Drift, which comes with another onslaught of shadows of terror that make Illya clench his fists.

Illya knows he wants back into the field. He feels the call of the fight, the siren song of adrenaline and desperation. The conversation with Gaby set that in stone. He wants to do his country proud, knowing his mother is looking over him, smiling from somewhere far away.

Napoleon is the last piece of that puzzle. Illya needs him to ever be able to fight again. A cruel twist of fate.

How can he trust a man with his mind, when Illya still is recovering from trusting him his heart, only to get it back broken and crushed?

Illya sighs to himself. He needs to take this one step at the time. Thinking about the entirety will only overwhelm.

Illya doesn’t even know if there is anything salvageable left between them, after all this time. He could only be compatible with Vincenzo, the character Napoleon played so well. Illya realises this
isn’t only a test of compatibility, but also of truth. He could discover the reality of Napoleon through this, see the facets of his character and compare it to what he knew.

He can remember Vincenzo fighting; he still knows the ways he moved, the choices he made.

If Napoleon is too different, they won’t be compatible, and Illya will know, and he will decide.

The rest will come later.

If it ever will.

Chapter End Notes

This week went a lil better ha. See here, a reasonable chapter + bonus: my french homework is also almost done. Who would've thought. Next week we're gonna go back to a more fluffy past!

For folks who were confused: Illya destroyed his desk during the conversation with Gaby, but if you forgot that don't worry about it. It's been a few weeks since that chapter ;)

Thank you for all the support! I love y'all.

(Also, we reached 40 subscribers and I feel like this deserves some sort of celebration... If any of you have an idea lemme know.)
Music for the first half of the first scene.
Music for the second half of the first scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April 2015

“How was your shift?”

Vincenzo’s claimed both the bed and the record player in his absence. He’s stretched out over the mattress with a book in his lap, wearing one of Illya’s sweaters that is just that slight bit too big for him on the edges. Illya steps into the room with an involuntary smile, only barely noticing the music that’s playing—stringing guitars and a singer Illya doesn’t recognize, and doesn’t really care about at this moment.

Vincenzo raises an eyebrow. “I asked you a question.” He says it seriously, but there is a hint of playfulness in his eyes that makes Illya’s heart thud. He puts the book away as Illya closes the door behind him.

“Just one second,” Illya murmurs, and within two long strides he’s beside the bed, dragging Vincenzo up into an eager kiss. Illya sighs into it, cradling Vincenzo’s head in his hands. He briefly pulls back to tip himself into the bed and drape over Vincenzo, his knees bracing around him. Deep kisses give away to chaste, soft, nips and Illya leaves a trail of them all along Vincenzo’s jaw, he feels rather than hears him smiling.

“What did I do to deserve this?” Vincenzo asks airily, raking his hand through Illya’s hair, encouraging him as Illya reaches his neck. There is a moment where Illya has to weigh the benefits of ridding Vincenzo of his sweater against the atrocious torture of having to move away from him to do so, and eventually Illya gives up and just buries his face into the soft point between Vincenzo’s neck and his shoulder and huffs.

Vincenzo just laughs and wraps his arms around him, hoisting him closer. The book falls to the floor with a thud, but neither pay it any heed.

“The count is two now,” Vincenzo says, and Illya closes his eyes to the sound of his voice, and the sensation of his breathing so close. Vincenzo pinches him.

“What?” Illya says gruffly.

“Two questions you haven’t answered, Peril.”

“Oh,” Illya says. The questions. He digs around in the softness of his mind until he finds them.

“Shift was boring,” Illya says. “You weren’t there.” Illya smiles at the laugh he gets from that, and leans into Vincenzo’s petting hand. “And you don’t ever do anything to deserve anything.”

“Well, that clears that up,” Vincenzo mocks. Illya just shrugs, too occupied with Vincenzo all
around him, the warmth between them. He knows Vincenzo can take his full weight, and Illya is grateful for that as he slowly relaxes, sagging into Vincenzo with a happy sigh.

There is a easily drawn silence, only interrupted by the music and their breathing. Illya doesn’t know if he fell asleep, but when Vincenzo’s voice drags him back into consciousness there is a new song playing.

“You know,” Vincenzo starts, and Illya tries to blink awake a little more, recognizing the tone as one of importance. That is to say, many things regarding Vincenzo seem to be ‘of importance’ lately, but this tone signifies something that Vincenzo deems important, which is for, a lack of a better word, quite important to Illya.

“I never imagined you’d be like this,” Vincenzo continues, and drags his hand between Illya’s shoulder blades. Illya suppresses an embarrassingly pleased sound. He is unsuccessful, judging Vincenzo’s subsequent snort. “Yeah, that. You’re like a cat… A cuddly Siberian tiger.”

Illya doesn’t deign that with a response, though he can’t say it’s untrue, exactly. Something switched after their relevating conversation, and without actively deciding Illya fell into the being–together part of the relationship headfirst.

Luckily, Vincenzo doesn’t seem to mind.

It’s just that whenever they’re together now in public, Vincenzo’s magnetisation has only gotten worse. A lot worse. Illya knows his presence will be welcomed and met with eager response. He knows that if he feels like taking Vincenzo’s hand and holding it in his, Vincenzo will maybe snort or chide at him for it, but he will not pull away. Rather, he will twine their fingers together and hold tight. Illya knows this because he’s done it every single night when they are alone together, having picked their nightly music habit back up the moment they started… this.

But Illya can’t touch Vincenzo whenever he wants to, because people would see. There is a great amount of time where Illya and Vincenzo are near, but equally separated by social interference and secrecy. And Illya hates that time with an intensity he normally reserves for people who want to lock him in a freezer.

“I thought I’d need to force it out of you,” Vincenzo says, mostly blind to Illya’s inner ramblings. “Wrestle you until you were too exhausted to mind me using you as a pillow. I had this whole plan.”

“We can still wrestle,” Illya says, but makes no move; too comfortable in his spot.

Vincenzo laughs. “What kind of wrestling are we talking?”

Illya yawns. “Whatever you want.”

“Hmm,” Vincenzo says. “I’m good for now. You mind if I keep reading?”

“No,” Illya says, and blindly searches for the book still on the ground. He throws it in Vincenzo’s direction when he finds it. It’s probably Vincenzo’s fast reflexes that saves him from a bloody nose, but Illya is too exhausted to care.

“Thanks, love.”

Illya feels a thrill through his body at the endearment and hides his smile into Vincenzo’s — his — sweater. It’s a new one, Illya’s noticed the first time two days ago, when it slipped out in Vincenzo’s euphoric gasp as he came over Illya’s fist, after having lain together like teenagers in
Illya’s bed.

Illya thinks Vincenzo hasn’t noticed yet, and he still can’t decide between keeping silent in the hope he keeps doing it, or chirping him about it; finally something to prove that he’s not the only one being disproportionately sappy. It’s been only three weeks and Illya feels less like a strong Russian and more like a permanently cheery puddle every day. It’s becoming exponentially harder to keep away from Vincenzo, or to keep a stubborn smile off his face.

Illya hasn’t felt this content in a long time. If ever.

Illya doesn’t fall asleep again, but he doesn’t mind just lying there, thinking not much at all. It’s still fairly early in the evening. Illya’d been lucky with a short shift this time, although he’ll have to guard the whole night tomorrow. Most likely the perimeter, which is one way of losing your mind in this weather; staring at nothing but the sky, a big black void lit in stars reaching across the universe, distances too far away to comprehend. They’re supposed to look out for intruders, or other kinds of criminal activity, but the training base is far from the closest city, enough to deter even the most determined of thieves.

Guarding the perimeter is an uncontestable and mostly useless task, but as part of the S.O.P, Illya has little choice. The first years are forced to clean the rooms, the second year the Hall, etcetera. Everyone has their duty, and Illya very nearly misses fourth year; cleaning toilets is almost preferable to this.

Vincenzo starts to read aloud after a little while, mixing the low cadence of his voice with the background music. He’s reading something Italian, so very little of what is said Illya actually understands. When asked, Vincenzo told him that the book was about an art heist of grand overture, but something about the cover makes Illya think otherwise. He has a suspicion that Vincenzo’s reading a cheap and cheesy romance instead. Not many heist books have a barechested man holding a thorned rose on it’s cover, Illya thinks.

Inspired, Illya slips off of Vincenzo, ignoring his non–verbal protest, and reaches through the growing stack of records that are placed neatly along Illya’s bedside wall. They’ve not been back to the record shop together – something Illya’s planning to surprise Vincenzo with the next day off they have – but more records have accumulated anyway, either gifts or loans from other recruits, in the promise that they place it in the lounge on free evenings for everyone to use.

But Illya isn’t looking for one of the many new additions. He searches through the catalogue until the familiar moon cover catches his eye. He carefully extracts the record from its jacket, and replaces the current record, still playing, impatiently. Vincenzo’s following his actions with a small smile before continuing to read, not yet remarking upon the new song playing.

*Che vuole questa musica, stasera,*

*Che mi riporta un poco del passato,*

Illya moves back to the bed, this time sitting next to Vincenzo instead of over him, pushing him gently to make space. Vincenzo allows it. As he allows Illya to drape his arm over his shoulder and tug Vincenzo’s head against his chest, balancing the book against his knees.

*La luna ci teneva compagnia,*

*Io ti sentivo mia,*

Vincenzo starts to hum alongside the song, and Illya joins in softly, barely audible. He’s never
liked his singing voice, which is of course why Vincenzo tries to bait him into singing every chance he gets. This time however, Vincenzo keeps silent, and Illya only knows about his satisfaction by the way he stops turning pages, focused solely on listening.

**Soltanto mia,**

**Soltanto mia.**

Illya knows more about the meaning of the words than he did when he gifted it. But they were no less true than as they are now, Illya just hadn’t known the extent of their truth then. Though the singer tells a story of sadness, Illya finds hope in it. His experiences of the last months are not experiences he’d ever thought he’d have. He saw no connection in his future, no companionship nor love. Vincenzo’s breaking any and all expectations he had. And though Illya’s grateful for this, there is a slight fear beneath it all. A nagging feeling that it will all dissolve in their silence. Vulnerable in the darkness.

Sometimes Illya still feels like he’s dreamed it all; that there is no reality where in he holds Vincenzo close, because the majority of their time together, he has to pretend it isn’t.

“*Peril?*”

Vincenzo pulls him out of his musings with a soft concerned note, and Illya belatedly realises he’d stopped singing. Vincenzo leans back a little to look him in the eye, and raises a careful eyebrow in question. “Talk to me?”

Illya just hums, hesitant. There are reasons, of course, for their secrecy.

Other than the situation Vincenzo has hanging over his head, Illya can’t imagine his own squadmates would react very well if they discover the precise nature of Illya’s relationship with a member of another squad. With this, his position as the black sheep is fortuitous for once; they don’t tend to watch him very closely, much less care about his whereabouts all too much. But Illya knows that when the rumor mill gets a hold of this, they can’t afford to do nothing anymore. It’s about status, and divergent behavior will be punished.

Illya can understand that a traitor will blemish his family for generations, and he carries this burden with him. But as Vincenzo still watches him carefully, their bodies lined together and leaning on one another, Illya can’t understand why anyone has a problem with *this.* But Illya’s not naive enough to think that logic will impede the rage of those who see wrong in everything.

“All right,” Vincenzo says. “You’re frowning. You weren’t two seconds ago. What’s going on in that mind of yours?”

Illya blames his exhaustion and treacherous heart for answering honestly. “I just miss you, even when you’re right next to me, and that scares me.”

Vincenzo sits up straighter now, expression serious. Illya holds his breath as he’s put under the brunt of Vincenzo’s full focus raking over him, taking him in and figuring him out. This used to feel like an invasion, but now it feels like a relief. Illya doesn’t need to find the words to explain something, doesn’t need to dig through vocabulary and try to convey the sensation he’s feeling. With the barest of hints, Vincenzo can make a guess that’s always erringly close to the truth.

“Hiding costs energy,” Vincenzo says after a second. “It hurts. I know. I feel it too. You know I rather didn’t have to pretend either…”

“I know,” Illya says. “I’m not blaming you. That’s why I didn’t say anything.”
“Until I asked,” Vincenzo says.

Illya nods. “Until you asked.”

Vincenzo leans back, his eyes flickering to the ceiling, and sighs. Without looking his hand finds Illya’s and he fits their fingers together, squeezing in comfort.

“I can’t risk– We can’t risk,” Vincenzo begins. “I trust all of them with my life, but not with something that should be kept quiet.”

Without asking Illya knows he’s talking about the B–Squad, and can’t help but snort. “I don’t know how they’ve not noticed.”

“Please, Alexei only found out yesterday that Fen and Nadya have something. Though it’s more off than on at the moment,” Vincenzo says with a slight smile to his voice.

“I didn’t know,” Illya says.

“You two are too dense,” Vincenzo says. “It’s almost painful.”

“Hey,” Illya says, and bumps his shoulder against Vincenzo’s. “I was distracted. I still am.”

“Touché.”

They fall silent again, and this time fully; both too lazy to stand up and put up another record. Illya expects Vincenzo to pick up his book again, but he doesn’t, he only stares into nothing again, seemingly deep in thought.

“Have you told your mother?” Vincenzo finally asks. “If telling someone will help… You trust her.”

Illya sighs. It’s an option, and rationally he knows that his mother will not shun him for it. But the idea of having to explain something she won’t understand makes Illya tense. There already is a rift between them Illya could never dream of covering. Their shared history filled with hurt. But they survived and loved each other through it. He doesn’t want to add another burden to that.

Vincenzo says. “She loves you. I mean– I can’t predict how she’ll react, but I can’t imagine–”


“Tonight?”

Illya thinks on it for a moment, and eventually nods. He’s never told her about his sexuality, not explicitly; it never seemed relevant. But now it’s starting to feel like keeping a secret from her as well, and despite the fear Illya actually doesn’t want to omit or lie to her about anything, it’s been a reason for why he hasn’t called her at all for a long time. She might be getting worried.

“Do you want to be alone?” Vincenzo asks, and there is no judgement in his voice, no predilection for one answer above another. It helps.

“I’m going to take a walk,” Illya says and stands from the bed. “You can stay here.”

Vincenzo hums. “Wear your scarf then, it’s cold out.”

“Yes, dear,” Illya drawls, chuckling, but does as he’s told and finds a scarf in the top drawer of his closet. He picks his jacket up from the ground, leather and worn, sturdy enough for the cold winds,
and wraps the deep red scarf around his neck with quick movements. Vincenzo’s watching him, and tilts his head up when Illya nears to give a chaste parting kiss.

“Don’t fall asleep,” Illya says as he moves away.

Vincenzo pokes his toe into Illya’s knee. “I’ll be here when you come back.”

Illya lets that thought settle in for a second. Someone waiting up for him, to get back to after a long and heavy day. It warms him from the inside out, and with a breath he feels a little lighter. A little more like he can handle whatever’s going to be thrown at him in the future. He’s not alone.

“Thank you, Cowboy,” Illya says softly, hesitating before the door, holding the doorknob in his fist.

Vincenzo only smiles. “You’re welcome, Peril.”

Illya’s breath is a white warm huff in the cold, and Illya shields himself from the wind behind the building alongside the jogging track. His mother picks up on the second ring, sounding slightly hurried. “Illyusha? Are you okay?”

Illya sighs softly; he should’ve called earlier. “Yes, Tatiana. I’m alright. Nothing’s wrong.”

“Oh,” Tatiana says, barely covering her relief, and Illya swallows his guilt. “It’s nice you hear from you then,” she says, a smile forming in her voice. “How is my Star-Pilot doing? I just got a notification that you made the S.O.P’s, but we both know that wasn’t much of a surprise.”

“Mamochka,” Illya groans, easily falling back into a younger version of himself, as talking to his mother always does. “You could just congratulate me, instead of embarrassing me.”

“Embarrassing you is more fun,” Tatiana says smartly. “I have earned this right by birthing you.”

Illya just hums, not quite sure how to respond to that. Still, his own smile edges forward as he leans against the building wall as he looks out over the empty jogging track. There is some commotion in the background of the phone, and Illya recognizes the sounds of pots and pans clashing. There is some time difference between them, but the appropriate time for cooking has passed for his mother too. Illya’s not the only one with an history of sleepless nights, but he took up drawing and music where his mother turned to the kitchen.

“Why are you calling, really?” Tatiana says finally. “You always have a purpose, don’t try to trick me, boy.”

Illya imagines her pointing her ladle at him threateningly and laughs. “I’d never dare to.” But after a breath he falls silent again, the words without shape, getting stuck in his throat. He doesn’t even know how to start.

With the erringly accurate psychic abilities many mothers have developed, the background noises cease immediately and Tatiana sets something down before picking up the phone and holding it close to her ear; Illya can hear her voice closer now, soft and careful.

“You said there was nothing wrong, Illya,” she says. “But something is bothering you. I can hear you grinding your teeth from here.”

Illya relaxes his jaw and clenches his fist around his phone instead, burying the other in his jacket pocket, finding a coin to palm repeatedly.
“I’m here to listen,” Tatiana says. “If you need me too.”


“No exceptions, Illya, you know this,” Tatiana says. “Come, I’ll even sit down on a chair for you, hmm? Your tired old mother is comfortable and can do her maternal duties now.”

Illya huffs under his breath and closes his eyes, gathering courage. “I found someone,” Illya says. “On base. We’re together.”

There is a surprised silence and Illya hears his mother gasp quietly.

“Does she make you happy, Illya?”

And there is the question Illya dreaded. He bites his lip. It would be so easy to talk over it and never mention the lie. But Illya can’t bear to lie to his mother. “He does.”

This time the silence is different. Ominous. Though that also could be Illya’s biased mind filling it in a darker light. It feels like an eternity has passed before Tatiana breathes out a heavy breath and asks, “Are you safe, Illyusha? I need you to be safe. Be careful. People who don’t understand can be very dangerous.”

The relief is like a flash in his mind. Fireworks lighting up his lungs until he can breath without restrictions. He should’ve known that his safety would be his mother’s first and only concern. He smiles, broadly, and breathes through a rush of dizziness. His hands are trembling.

“Illya?”

“Yes,” Illya rushes to say. “We’re safe. No one knows, and he’s secure in social status. His squad loves him, and they accept me. I just had to tell someone. You’re the only one who knows about us.”

“Oh, Illyusha,” Tatiana sighs. “I wish it was easier for you. Are you happy? Does he make you happy?”

“Yeah,” Illya says, feeling breathless again, but for very different reasons. “Yeah, I’m happy, Mamochka.”

“That’s good,” Tatiana responds. She sounds a little choked up, a little strained.

Illya’s stomach sinks.

“Oh no, love,” his mother says, before he’s spoken his fear out loud. “I’m just so glad that you found someone who can make you feel good. I haven’t heard you talking like this since–”

She trails off, and Illya nods quietly to himself.

“You deserve a good life, my boy,” Tatiana continues. “And I hope your man can work with you to reach that.”

“He’s not ‘my man’,,” Illya protests, but he feels himself smiling again, last doubts flowing away. “He’s not anyone’s anything.”

“Is he stubborn like you?”
Illya laughs. “Worse.”

“Didn’t know it was possible,” Tatiana says. “You be sure he calls me soon, okay? I want to get to know him.”

“Maybe, someday,” Illya says. “It’s still early. I don’t want you to scare him off.”

“Don’t be so rude,” Tatiana scolds, but she’s laughing too. “Call your mother more often, though. I would like to hear some happy news every once in awhile.”

“I promise,” Illya says.

They fall into another subject and chat until Illya yawns and has to pace to stop from freezing against the wall. Not soon after, Tatiana sends him to bed, and hangs up.

When Illya walks into his hallway again, rubbing his hands together, he thinks of telling Vincenzo about everything and smiles. He’ll be relieved on his behalf. Something positive they can share both. Maybe Vincenzo also has someone he can tell, Illya knows he’s not the only one who can have trouble with keeping up the facade.

Illya nears his door, but stills when he hears angry German being snapped behind it. Illya hesitates. It’s probable that Vincenzo’s speaking with his Uncle again, though he’s been routinely ignoring calls and messages ever since they got together. Whatever they’re talking about, it doesn’t seem like the feud has gotten any less.

“I need another way. I need more time. I can’t do it like this,” Vincenzo spits loud enough for Illya to understand.

“I know what you want! And I’m telling you. I refuse!”

Illya knocks on the door, feeling uncomfortable to be listening without Vincenzo knowing, but he can’t also leave him alone like this. He hopes there is no alcohol in his room.

“Fuck, I need to hang up, someone is coming. Don’t. Fucking. Call me. Again.”

Illya flinches at the venom in Vincenzo’s tone, barely recognizing it. A slow wave of anger forms in Illya’s belly, directed at the faceless entity that is Vincenzo’s Uncle.

Vincenzo opens the door, red faced and harried, and for a second something that looks like fear flickers over his face, but it’s quickly absolved in an abashed grimace.

“I’m sorry,” Vincenzo says, stepping aside. He sounds like himself again.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Illya grinds out. “Was it your Uncle again?”

Vincenzo nods, raking his hands through his hair. “He’s getting positively dickish now, the impatient asshole. I just need more time to—” Vincenzo stills suddenly and shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Illya. How did it go with your mother? It’s more important.”

“Vincenzo,” Illya says, but Vincenzo shakes his head again and reaches out a hand to quietly ask for Illya to come closer. Illya does, folding his arms around Vincenzo’s waist until he sags into him, breathing.

“It’s better that we just ignore him,” Vincenzo says quietly. “Please. I just want to have this, us, without him hanging over us, yeah?”
Illya sighs. “Okay.”

“Really, though,” Vincenzo continues, leaning back a little. “How did it go?”

The last edges of his anger are not gone yet, but in the face of Vincenzo’s earnest expression he can’t help but smile and push them further. Vincenzo’s right. There will always be people against them, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be happy.

“She wants you to call her, to get to know you. Make sure you’re a good boyfriend,” Illya says, and not regretting it when Vincenzo smiles immediately.

“So I’m your boyfriend now?” he asks, waggling his eyebrows. “What are we, highschoolers?”

“Hmm. You have a point,” Illya says, and presses a kiss on his jaw.

“I have those sometimes,” Vincenzo says seriously, hiding a chuckle.

“Oh! I know.” Illya pulls back and smiles. “You’re my partner, Cowboy.”

Vincenzo throws his head back and laughs. “Your genius knows no bounds.”

“Exactly,” Illya agrees, and then catches Vincenzo’s laughter in a deep kiss.

Vincenzo stops talking for a long time after that.

Although, he does say ‘love,’ again.

Thrice.

Illya counts it as a successful night.

Chapter End Notes

Someone called this a Honeymoon in a car crash, or something like that, which I think is apt. Poor boys. Luckily they get some kisses out of it.

Next chapter we're gonna discover a way Gaby doesn't die of stress and exhaustion, and maybe Napoleon should've thought to say something earlier.

I'm also doing (attempting) Inktober this month, and I want try to do some humans this time, so feel free to tag me in pictures of our faves so I can use them as reference! You can find me on tumblr with the same username as I have here.

I think that's everything for this week! Thank you for tuning in to the Angsty Idiots Sunday Show and as always your validation sustains our diligent script-writers. (They literally eat nothing else. It's weird.)
Illya can’t help but watch as Napoleon goes through his warming up routine.

He is standing in the middle of the combat area, dressed in a tight top and loose sweatpants. Barefeet. His fists are wrapped in white cloth and they flash in the air as he fights his invisible opponent. His short breaths are the only thing that break the silence in the room, and Napoleon is focused. Illya knows him to be too alert not notice his audience, but he doesn’t show it. The only betrayal of the tension residing under his easy movements is the slight clenching between his shoulderblades. Hunched as if he’s trying to be a smaller target than he is, cornered by an opponent that towers over him.

“Show off,” Alexei scoffs under his breath. Napoleon doesn’t react.

Illya disagrees. This is nerves before a performance, a way to shake off excess energy.

Or a clever distraction.

“Good that you’ve joined us, gentlemen.” Waverly appears from a hidden backroom, carrying a brand-new ‘screen and polite smile. The stress paints a more clear picture on his face; bagged eyes and cracked, dry lips he wets quickly between sentences. “I would like to see your performance for myself– not to say I don’t trust Sander’s and Oleg’s judgement, of course. Boxes to be ticked, reassurances to be made, you know how it goes.”

Waverly doesn’t seem to looking for a response, so Illya says nothing. He grabs a combat stick from the utility wall, and hesitates before grabbing a second and walking to the circle. Napoleon takes it wordlessly.

“I don’t think it bears repeating, but just to be sure. Every bodypart counts as a hit but don’t try to hurt your opponent with excessive force. The goal is predicting your partner’s actions and find a sync.” Waverly flashes another smile and sits on a bench to the side. “Think of it as a dance, if you will.”

Illya huffs a breath, and Napoleon does the same. They stand apart, three steps removed, and fall into position easily. They wait. Illya makes eye contact, and counts his breaths. Napoleon’s fingers tap along his stick.

“By all means, begin,” Waverly says, sounding put on, and they’re off.

They move simultaneously. Napoleon chooses left. Illya goes right. Twist and step. Circle. Don’t look away. Illya’s arm is bent and tense, prepared to wait Napoleon out. Impulsivity or patience. Who are you?

Napoleon steps with him, calmly and sure, and Illya knows the moment he figures it out.
Napoleon smiles. Illya’s ready.

A flash and Illya blocks Napoleon’s first hit, the stick bracketing off with a loud slap. Illya turns his weight in the movement and swipes back, barely missing Napoleon’s shoulder. Napoleon ducks down and rolls over the floor. Illya steps away and falls back into position as Napoleon easily lands on his feet. Smile still in place.

Illya feels his face twitch, and rushes forward. Napoleon parries and parries again, elegantly slipping through Illya’s brute force, but he’s cornered himself. Illya leans towards him, leaving no room to avoid the next swipe. They hit hard, splinters flying into the air. Napoleon’s hot breath touches Illya’s face. A blink, he’s gone again, the fake shot to Illya’s stomach the distraction to his escape.

Illya shakes his head and walks back to the center point. Napoleon doesn’t attack, just waits until they’re facing each other. Illya’s eyes flicker to Waverly, who’s watching them with interest. No complaints about the absence of hits, but that isn’t really the goal anyway.

Illya’s reflexes save him, automatically blocking Napoleon’s swipe before he even registers it.

“Pay attention, Peril,” Napoleon says, or snaps. Illya doesn’t know.

Illya kicks him in the knee, bringing him down. “Same to you, Cowboy.”

Napoleon groans, blocks and rolls away. Illya lets him. His heart is racing and he sees the same exertion in Napoleon. But he’s not giving in now.

They’re both smiling. Illya doesn’t question it.

Illya lunges for Napoleon the moment he’s near enough, and Napoleon blocks it before starting up his own assault. Seconds don’t have the same value anymore as they fight without end. Illya’s arms are hurting. He swipes the beads of sweat off his forehead between hits and ignores the strain in his body. Napoleon isn’t much better off– his breath is coming heavy and there is less force behind every attempt. Illya finds a gap in his defense, a rookie mistake really, twisting the combat stick between his legs to trip him up. He leans over him with the stick to his neck. Napoleon doesn’t flinch, just smiles wider.

“Kuryakin wins,” Waverly says, “I don’t think we need another round.”

Illya straightens. “You let me take that.”

Napoleon laughs sprawled on the ground, breathing deeply before answering. “Yes. We’d never stop otherwise. I was getting tired.”

Illya huffs and holds out a hand. Napoleon stares at it.

“Good show,” Alexei says suddenly, cutting through the room. “Vincenzo.”

Illya’s breath shatters. He drops his hand.

Napoleon sags back and drags a hand over his face.

Of course.

Alexei comes closer and Illya almost flinches at the fury in his expression.

“Who the fuck are you, man?” Alexei snaps, glaring down at Napoleon. “What are you fucking
Napoleon looks away and doesn’t respond. Illya is torn between holding Alexei back and running away. Neither seem right.

Waverly clears his throat and walks toward them, saving Illya from having to divide. “Alexei, would you please leave this room for me? I have some things to talk about with Solo and Kuryakin.”

Alexei crosses his arms and speaks low. “I’m not leaving.”

Waverly doesn’t even look up from his ‘screen and shrugs. “Then sit down somewhere I can’t hear you and stay put.”

Alexei seems to want to argue this too, but Illya nudges him and nods toward the bench Waverly had been sitting on. There is a storm of contradiction in his chest and he doesn’t need Alexei’s betrayal and anger to add a voice to that, no matter how good his intentions are.

Alexei deflates a little, but he still hesitates. He moves closer and murmurs, “I saw you forget, man. You can’t let him trick you again.”

Illya’s getting a headache. “I know, Alexei.” He tries to sound final in his words, ending the conversation before it’s begun. Alexei shakes his head but steps away towards the bench, walking slowly.

“Don’t forget what he did,” he says right before he sits down, crossing his arms again and glaring at Napoleon’s head.

As if I ever could, Illya thinks, but doesn’t say anything.

Napoleon scrambles upright and doesn’t speak either.

Waverly is either insanely oblivious or he does not care about the animosity before him, because he smiles politely again and nods to himself. “Now that that’s done, we shall begin.” He looks at them with eager eyes. “You’re definitely compatible, this is more than I would’ve thought. But of course we all know the best partners have a row every once in awhile, it’s how they stay together. You’re ready for the next stage.”

Illya clenches his fists and frowns. “And that is?” He knows the answer, but a small part of him is still in denial. He has to shut that down once and for all.

“‘The Drift,’” Waverly says. “A full Drift, in the Red Peril. I have heard about certain technical difficulties, but I’m sure we should be fine testing it out for once. Compatibility doesn’t 100% guarantee a stable Drift with advanced pilots like you two, more chance to be impeded by injuries or psychological difficulties, but what I just saw gives me hope.” He smiles again, typing something on his ‘screen. “Okay, we’ll plan one for tomorrow, around noon? That should be enough time to–”

The doors slam open and Gaby stalks inside furiously, followed by an equally enraged Ekko. “No fucking chance,” she snaps at Waverly, her voice rising with every word. “No one is getting in that fucking Jaeger as long as I am alive.”

Waverly raises an eloquent eyebrow. “I beg to differ?”

“I am not putting any Pilots in this mess,” Gaby shouts, “No matter who’s timeline that ruins! This
will ruin them! The neural load is too unstable, the spinal clamp connectors are burned through! This machine won’t accept anyone, and even if it could it wouldn’t function anyway! How do I know that? I build and fixed these things my whole life, so if you could please cut the casual sexism and fucking listen to me!”

Waverly holds his hands up placatingly, but Gaby persists and walks to him with sure, strong steps. Illya is almost rooting for her to throw a punch. In his experience, it’s a sure-fire way to get a point across.

“The Nuclear Processor will explode,” Gaby says. “There is no way to fix it, and it’s endangering everyone in this base. The Jaeger is done with. We tried. It isn’t working. We’re in danger and you egotistical idiots are too blind to see it. No one touches that Jaeger, and we’re carrying it out of the premises tomorrow.”

She nods, as if everyone has already agreed, and then turns to Illya, face softening. “I’m sorry, Illya,” she says. “I’m sorry I wasn’t good enough, and I’m sorry we have to move her away.”

Illya shakes his head. He had known, deep inside of him, that the Red Peril had done her last fight long ago. It doesn’t come as a surprise. Sometimes things are too ruined to be fixed, and even miracle workers like Gaby can’t piece it back together. “It’s okay.” Illya breathes. “It’s what it is.”

“What we have is a problem, a big one.” Sanders saunders inside, appearing out of thin air. He looks jovial, but there is a tightness in his eyes that belies his mask of composure. He’s frustrated, and Oleg, walking a pace behind him, looks the same. “We’re now one team down, and there is an attack calculated soon. This endangers not only the public, but also the remaining Pilots who might have to fight without back-up in the near future.”

A silence falls. Napoleon shakes his head and moves away from the combat area. Waverly scratches the back of his head. Gaby’s slowly losing her anger, and instead sits on the bench, almost sagging against Ekko who slides in next to her. Illya feels tension running over his body, and the back of his mind is slowly pulsing with grief; the loss of that last connection to his mother lies heavy on him. But despite his own inner turmoil, he’s mostly worried about Gaby who’s coming down from a adrenaline high that has stretched over the last couple of months with nothing to show for it. Nothing to make it feel worthwhile.

Failure is a sensation Illya’s familiar with, and he knows how self-loathing can slither it’s tendrils around your throat, choking you with it’s power. He isn’t quite sure how to help someone with this, but as he walks toward Gaby he’s growing more determined with every step. He will not abandon Gaby to that darkness alone.

Illya crouches in front of her, making eye contact. She holds a good face, pinched but neutral, showing little emotion, but her hands are shaking just a little and she’s biting her lip, and Illya recognizes the way she holds herself; as if the next breath might be the one that breaks her.

Illya takes her hands in his, lightly, tries to warm them with slow movements, her fingers cold and clenched. Ekko lays a grateful hand on his shoulder, and together they just breathe for a few seconds until Gaby comes to herself. She smiles. It’s a faint thing that Illya responds to immediately, squeezing her hands.

“Thank you for trying, Gaby,” Illya says in a low voice. “You gave it everything you had, and I am grateful.”

Gaby takes a deep breath and looks away, but she nods slowly too, accepting it.
“I know I haven’t been here long,” Ekko says in the same tone. “But from what I’ve seen, you’re one hell of a technician and no one could’ve done it better than you. We’re all behind you. You’re not alone.”

Illya nods, agreeing with the statement, and squeezing again. Gaby looks at the floor, but the trembling in her hands has stilled.

“What do you need?” Ekko asks, and Illya stands and moves to sit on the bench, stretching his legs and suppressing a flinch from the aches in his body. He’d almost forgotten about the combat, but his muscles haven’t.

“I don’t know,” Gabby says and sighs. “I’m fucking exhausted, but I can’t rest without finding some kind of compromise or solution. It’s my responsibility to make sure our Jaegers ready, and because of me we just lost one.”

Illya frowns. “We never had it. The Red Peril never worked, and it never had. This is not your fault. This is the fault of the Kaiju that attacked me and my mother.”

“I’m sorry– Illya–” Gaby begins again.

Illya stops her with a hand on her arm. “Stop. It’s okay.”

It’s not really okay. Nothing about this is okay. But it’s not something Gaby has to apologize for. Illya knows this for certain, ignoring the sense of loss in his chest.

Though in some twisted way, the attack feels more far away than it ever has, sitting here with a person who Illya considers to be his friend. There is no push in his mind causing him to fall back into the memories. No drowning. He feels solid and real, here in the present moment. Maybe the official field-death of the Red Peril is good for him. Maybe it will feel like closure from a chapter of his life that was so violently interrupted. His life continued on nonetheless. He’s surviving, in a better place then he was. It’s time to let the Red Peril go.

Maybe it will be okay eventually. So Illya amends, “It will be okay.”

Gaby lays her hand over his and nods. “I believe so too.”

Illya breathes, and slowly remembers that they’re not alone in the room. Waverly, Oleg and Sanders are murmuring a few steps away, Illya only hears pieces of their conversation, but doesn’t really care. Alexei’s on the other side of the combat area, arms crossed and frowning, watching Ekko in concern. The loss of a Jaeger has implications for him too of course, it’s already dangerous enough out there.

“We don’t have the resources to build a new one,” Waverley snaps, his characteristic politeness disappeared under the stress of the situation.

Sanders huffs. “I can ask the American Jaeger Association for support, but I doubt they will give it.”

“I might have a solution,” Napoleon says suddenly. He walks to them with his phone in his hand. “I just got back from my contact, and a suspicion of mine has been confirmed.” Napoleon hesitates for a second, and then looks at Sanders with a hard stare. “U.N.C.L.E is still in operation.”

Sanders flinches, shock splashes over his face before it’s smoothed out by a quick shake of his head. “That’s impossible, Solo. You know that. They destroyed the program years ago.”
“My source tells me that they only pretended to,” Napoleon says. “They swept it under the rug, yes. But they saved Uncle; it’s in a warehouse in South Korea. It’s been there all along. I have proof.”

Napoleon hands Sanders his phone. Sanders looks at it for only a second before cursing under his breath. “I have to make a phone call,” he grunts, and without another word hurries the door out.

“Excuse me,” Waverly says into the following shocked silence. “May I enquire what is going on?”

Napoleon grimaces. “I can explain, but it’s a long story, and most of it is classified.”

“We can use the conference room,” Oleg says.

Napoleon nods. “Gaby needs to hear this too, and Illya.” He looks at Alexei and Ekko in apology, “But–”

“Mister Alexei and Miss Ekko are excused. Thank you for your participation today,” Waverly says, and something about his tone makes it clear there is no room for protest this time.

Ekko squeezes Gaby’s shoulder before leaving, and Alexei catches Illya with a look that Illya recognizes means something akin to, Don’t do anything stupid. Illya nods back, and then Alexei leaves too.

“Any chance I can shower before all this?” Napoleon asks, and it’s meant to be flippant but the attempt fails right at the end. Though Illya doesn’t know if anyone else hears the vulnerability under Napoleon’s words. There is resigned acceptance in Napoleon’s smile, and suddenly Illya realises he might be getting answers to questions that have haunted him ever since Napoleon left.

Uncle. His brain suddenly catches up with himself. Uncle. Vincenzo’s Uncle.

Illya assumed it had been a story made up to provoke sympathy, but it seems like there is more too it. There always is with Napoleon.

Waverly pauses thoughtfully and eventually nods his assent. “Yes. Go clean up. Make sure to be in the conference room in fifteen minutes, please. I have the sense we will need Sanders for this.”

A shower later, Illya’s looking at his clothes in slight confusion. He hasn’t taken much from Russia, and nothing seems fitting for a conversation that might shed light on Napoleon’s betrayal. He knows that choosing clothes is not actually the problem here, and briefly he considers packing his bag and running. There is a reason he refuses still to have a conversation with Napoleon about their shared history, and one of those reasons is that he’s feeling like he’s shaking out of his own skin at the thought. But this is not for him to decide, and if there is only a slight chance Napoleon has a solution for Gaby’s Jaeger crisis in his back pocket, Illya will be there for it. Illya tries to convince himself that Napoleon will not talk more than necessary for the cause, and it almost works, if it weren’t for the fact Illya’s never been able to predict what Napoleon says next. That’s always stayed consistent.

Illya picks a black turtleneck sweater and his most comfortable but decent-looking slacks and puts himself back together from the outside in.

He’s the last to arrive, but Napoleon is too much of a distraction to feel ashamed of this. His attire makes Illya feel horribly underdressed; a perfectly tailored charcoal jacket and waistcoat, and too nicely fitting light grey pants. Illya drags his eyes away from him and sits down next to Gaby in the back of the room, noticing belatedly that she’s also dressed for the occasion. It’s almost strange to see her in something that isn’t her technicians uniform, but the way she holds herself makes it seem
very her. The lines of her black and white dress make her seem more taller than she is, giving her an imposing air. Illya allows himself to smile a little, glad that she’s ready for whatever Napoleon has to say.

When they’re all seated, Napoleon stands before them and Sanders nods at him. Napoleon takes a deep breath, and leans with one hand on the end of the glass conference table, the other loosely his pocket.

“Many of you know I did not volunteer to work for the American government, much less become a Pilot.”

Illya hears Gaby take a light intake of breath in surprise, confirming Illya’s guess that Napoleon hasn’t told her anything about his past. They’d seemed fairly close sometimes, but apparently not close enough to inform her about his illicit history.

Napoleon continues, looking down at his hand with a hopelessly fake but charming smile. “No, my ambitions lay a little outside of the borders of the law. I was a fairly successful thief, made some big hauls, but eventually the CIA got on my tail after the capture of my handler.” Napoleon looks up suddenly, gazing at Gaby, before looking away again. “My handler at the time was a man known to me only as Uncle, but I later learned that his name was Rudi, and that he was an actual Uncle to an aspiring Jaeger Technician, named Gaby Teller.

“What?” Gaby asks, eyes wide, she glares around the room before snapping at Sanders. “You had my Uncle all along? We’d been looking for him for over a year!”

“Sanders was only a mere agent at this time, and did not know about this situation,” Napoleon interjects quickly. “And he escaped soon after, which is why the CIA doubled their efforts to trap me and my former client Victoria Vinciguerra, in the hope we had access or knowledge of the information Rudi had withheld from them.”

“They captured her first, and she gave them the information needed to find me.” Napoleon takes a deep breath and his slacking composure tenses for a second, knuckles on his right hand white from the strain of gripping the table. “It took a few weeks, but eventually they convinced me to give up the information.” He laughs lowly. “If they’d paid me, they wouldn’t have to go to the trouble of torturing me, but that’s the CIA for you.”

Something ice-cold and rotten in Illya’s stomach twists. His ears ring and rage soars. What did they do to him. What did they fucking do to him. Illya begins to stand to– to do something, but he’s pulled out of his furious haze by a cold hand on his arm, colder than the sickness in his body. Gaby shakes her head imperceptibly. There is compassion in her features, and Napoleon is still talking, so Illya stays put and strains to listen over the vision of Napoleon in a dark, flashing room, hurting, and screaming out a name.

Napoleon doesn’t notice it, staring at nothing at all before shaking himself a little. He pulls a small rectangle from his pocket and pushes something on it. A screen on the wall flickers to life, and thousands of pictures and documents are streaming across it, one more technical than the other. Napoleon waves in the direction of the screen. “This is what they wanted. The information I had stolen from a vulnerable database in a Russian training camp. This was before the enactment of international exchange of Jaeger science, so in that climate any of these documents could be worth thousands to the right buyer, and I had the whole library.”

In any other circumstance, Illya would’ve thought that Napoleon is boasting, but despite Napoleon’s valiant effort it’s easy to see through his acting this time. He doesn’t sound proud. He sounds exhausted.
“The ultimate jackpot,” Napoleon continues, pressing another button, “was this. The Nuclear Processor. It was the reason why I was there. A new invention, shiny and special, that could make Jaegers 300% more effective, and more importantly, way less expensive to build.

“I had known, of course, that America would be really interested in receiving this. But I never liked to deal with governments and their faulty but rigorous morality. So I found my clients elsewhere, away from bureaucracy. The criminal world had it’s own uses for inventions like these, and young and selfish as I was, I’d only thought about the financial consequences for myself, as the deal would make me one rich thief.”

Napoleon pauses again, and Illya tries to catch his eye, but it’s like he doesn’t exist. Napoleon looks right through him.

“This is certainly an entertaining story,” Waverly interrupts, “But I’d like to know where the solution to our problem comes in.”

Napoleon smiles. “Of course.” He flicks through the pictures for a little while, until he finds the one he’s looking for. A Jaeger bigger than Illya’s ever seen fills the ‘screen. Silver and almost lithe in it’s build, but with strong structure and compact armor. “This is Uncle, ironically named after Rudi. I think they meant it as a taunt, to show him that despite his escape they were still successful in extracting and using his work.

“Because a few blueprints don’t build a Jaeger. I had kept Rudi’s research with me as well, as insurance. If he’d betray me I would release his most prized possession to the world. So when they found me through his negligence, I thought it was a good enough reason to give them what they wanted.”

“And the Jaeger, could we get it?” Waverly asks.

Napoleon nods. “You have to ask Sanders, if the right people owe him, we should. It’s in a storage facility, and according to my source, it’s in good shape.”

“Why did they store a fully functioning Jaeger? Why not use it?” Gaby asks, frustrated but focused.

“Diplomacy,” Napoleon says. “After the international information exchange was put into place, the panic ceased a little and put diplomatic pressure on everyone. Coming out with a Jaeger that was clearly built based on information stolen from Russia a few years earlier would ‘rock the fragile glass boat,’ so to speak.”

“And why didn’t you tell us about this earlier, Solo?” Oleg asks calmly, but with a threatening air. “From what I’ve heard today, you’d at least have saved Miss Teller here a lot of grief, not to mention the costs we would have saved not having to attempt a, in hindsight, futile repair.”

“My contact took awhile to get back to me,” Napoleon says. “I didn’t want to say anything before it was confirmed. I was also convinced the project had been burned to the ground until recently.”

Illya suppresses a frown. There is something that irks him in that answer. Not an outright lie, but an omission slithering under the surface.

Napoleon looks over him again, staring at the wall behind Illya. Illya remembers how much he doesn’t know about this man, except that he looks scared beneath all his charm. It feels familiar.

Waverly and Oleg take over after that, interrogating Napoleon with questions as they look over the files. Sanders leaves to make another few calls, standing behind the glass wall and looking red in the face. Gaby stays next to Illya, and they find each other’s hands again, gripping tight. There are
things Illa wants to ask her. About Rudi and about the chance the U.N.C.L.E will be able to get here, functioning and ready to Drift. But Illya doesn’t voice the questions, lets them roam around his mind, too exhausted to do anything about it. His body still aches from the exercise, and the emotional strain of the past few days is finally catching up with him.

Napoleon’s speaking in a low voice with Waverly, and Illya can’t help but stare.

Because Napoleon’s just told the story of his betrayal, and mentioned nothing about them, their connection. Only one sentence, brushed away under the overload of information. It’s strange to have a narrative told about one of the most influential experiences of Illya’s life, and have its importance diminished to a few words, almost forgotten. Illya isn’t so naive to think that nothing about their time together impacted Napoleon, but Illya can’t even look at him without remembering every breath they shared together, and every second that he experienced after, heartbroken and betrayed.

Napoleon can tell their story and not mention them, and it seems like it doesn’t faze him.

Illya stands suddenly, and stalks out of the room, hitting the glass hard on his way out. It doesn’t break, but his knuckles are bleeding again. He flinches as he stretches them, shakes his head, and makes his way to his room. He’s almost arrived when he hears footsteps running after him.

“Illya!”

It’s Napoleon.

Illya doesn’t turn around, but he stands still, waiting.

“I’m sorry.” Napoleon says between breaths. “I’m sorry that I had to talk about this at all. I know you don’t want to be reminded of any of this. Waverly wants more details, but— I promise I won’t tell more than necessary.”

Illya turns around and sneers. “Am I your dirty secret, Solo?”

Napoleon blinks. “What?”

“Or am I the mark? The success story. The one you seduced to get your fucking treasure and never suspected you because you had him fooled so perfectly. You’re a good thief, Solo. What am I to you?”

A second after the rush of words spill out, Illya realises he doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t want the confirmation of his failure; falling so easily, manipulated with the promise of affection and love, or have Napoleon confess the truth of his feelings, and Illya’ll be left to doubt what it is between them all over again. No matter the answer, he can’t believe any of it.

Napoleon opens his mouth to answer.

Illya cuts him off. “No. I don’t want to hear your next lie.” He opens his door and gets into his room. Illya shuts the door, and sags against it.

“Illya,” Napoleon says. “We have to talk about this. We can’t keep doing this.”

Illya closes his eyes. “I can’t believe whatever you say, Solo. Leave me alone.”

There is a silence, but it’s interrupted by a thud against the door; Napoleon sitting down and leaning against it. Illya doesn’t have the energy to argue, and listens to the soft huffs of breath that
are only just audible through the door. Illya doesn’t know how long they sit there in silence, but eventually Napoleon stands up again. Illya expects to feel relief, but instead his dread only increases, wanting Napoleon near but also far away. The contradiction choking him, pulling him down.

“The Drift,” Napoleon says after a while, shocking Illya out of his coursing panic. “I can’t lie in my own mind. I want you to see the truth. If you trust me enough for that, I can show you—”

Illya takes a ragged breath. “I am broken, Solo. It won’t work. Even with you, even if I wanted to. My mind is burned. It won’t accept anyone. I could ruin you. I’ve sent people into the rabbit hole, or had them break under the pressure of my wounds. I can’t.”

“You’re worth the risk,” Napoleon replies immediately, and that, more than anything, makes Illya release some of the tension in his body. He’s willing to risk it. That has to mean something.

“Peril, are we going to try this?”

Illya opens his eyes and nods to himself, slowly. “Yeah. Okay, Cowboy. Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Plot is progressing! I’m having an existential crisis because the end is starting to show it's edges. Don’t worry though, we still have some way to go :D At least 4 chapter, and most likely more. I won't put up the chapter count because it has happened multiple times an outline of a chapter had to be cut two, so I'm not tying myself down to anything ;p

(and if you're still sad this is actually ending once upon a time: Napoleon has still a story to tell. I don't think done in this verse after this fic. Though I can't promise when I actually can write it, stupid RL.)

I'm so so so looking forward writing the next present chapter, you have no idea, but first some bittersweet past to be had. Savor it!

I've been having a busy and annoying week due to real life, but I've had such amazing responses and people being so amazing (THE GRAPHIC) that it cheered me right up! Thank you! And the amazing Brooke once again beta'ed this chapter, she's a gem.

Edit two seconds after post: WE REACHED 50 SUBSCRIBERS and the fic is almost 50k! I think it counts!)
Illya’s woken by a rapid series of knocks on his door. He drags himself out of bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and opens the door. Vincenzo stands before it, already fully dressed and grinning too widely.

Illya grunts, blocking the doorway. “I had a shift until three, Cowboy. You better have a good reason for this.”

“They have a fruit salad as brunch option today,” Vincenzo says. “We have only a small window of opportunity.”

Illya stares for a moment. “You woke me up for some fruit.”

Vincenzo nods innocently, and shrugs. “Thought you’d like some.”

Illya isn’t fooled and shakes his head in an attempt to show his disapproval. He fails, of course. His lips twitch as he tugs Vincenzo inside and closes the door behind him. “You’re a bad liar, I can’t believe—”

Vincenzo grins wider. “Come on, we only have 15 minutes before they’ll get suspicious. They’re already going to the lounge.” He steps forward into Illya’s space and slides his arm around Illya’s waist. Illya does the same without deciding to. It’s become a reflex, ingrained in his system. He knows the shape of them fitting together, and it’s so natural, so easy. Illya pulls Vincenzo closer and he goes willingly, tilting his head up in silent question.

Illya answers, and kisses him deeply.

“Fruit salad,” Illya scoffs after a few minutes. It’s softened by the kiss he presses into Vincenzo’s skin, worrying it with his tongue before moving up to his jaw. Vincenzo sighs and Illya tastes the edge of his smile on his lips.

“Good excuse as any,” Vincenzo says, and gasps when Illya bites him for it. “We need still code word for ‘I would like you to ravish me right now,’ without the whole base knowing about it.”

“Not fruit salad.” Illya tries a glare, but Vincenzo just laughs.

“You say no to all of them,” Vincenzo says and prevents Illya from arguing by kissing him again, pushing him against the edge of the bed before tipping him over, onto it.
Illya feels something buzzing underneath his hand, and he pulls Vincenzo’s ‘screen out his back jean pocket. The display lights up with a blocked number. Vincenzo snatches it out of his hands. The buzzing stops.

Illya raises his eyebrows and watches Vincenzo puts away the ‘screen on the bedside table, shuffling away to the edge of the bed.

“Just,” Vincenzo sighs, “Ignore it.”

There is nothing light and easy about him now, with his jaw clenched and shoulders hunched. Illya reaches out until Vincenzo takes his hand and lets himself be pulled back into Illya’s arms. Illya waits until he relaxes a little, kneading between Vincenzo’s shoulderblades. He can’t let it slide away into silence again. “That’s the tenth time I’ve seen you ignore his calls.”

Vincenzo tenses, but doesn’t lean away, instead sagging deeper onto Illya. “Is it too much to hope that he’ll stop calling if I just pretend he doesn’t exist?”

Illya shakes his head, despite knowing Vincenzo can’t see it. “You sound like a petulant child, Cowboy. Cut him off, block him. Let me threaten him. Any of those things would be taking some form of action. You’re now just avoiding the problem, and with that keeping it.”

Vincenzo sighs. “It isn’t that simple.”

“I know.” Illya closes his eyes, and represses a frustrated huff. This argument has been going around in the same circle for weeks, and it always ends the same. But Illya doesn’t want to ruin the little time they have by arguing about someone who’s not worthy of it. And he knows he’ll never get Vincenzo to agree with him on this.

Instead, he presses a kiss to Vincenzo’s forehead, and smiles at the pleased hum he receives for that. He places another kiss lower, and lower, until Vincenzo tilts his face up and Illya murmurs against his lips, “What were we doing, before we were interrupted?”

Vincenzo smiles slowly, and Illya leans forward to taste it. A soft lingering press of lips before pulling back. “I need a reminder, Cowboy.”

Vincenzo laughs, and tackles him, tracing his tongue along Illya’s upper lip and—

The ‘screen starts buzzing again.

Vincenzo groans and pulls away, cursing as he goes, “I swear to god– I’m going to fucking throw that thing in a river– jesus–”

Illya tries to find his breath back.

“Fuck,” Vincenzo says.

“What?”

“It’s Alexei,” Vincenzo replies, raking a frustrated hand through his hair. “He’s asking where I am. I have to go.”

Illya falls back onto his mattress and tries not to pout or make a displeased sound.

Vincenzo grins at him. “Agreed.” He walks back to Illya and gives him one last kiss as a goodbye. “I hate it too.”
"You say you do, but you’re a tease, Cowboy," Illya says.

He knows he’s blushing red, and his heart hasn’t gone back to normal just yet. Illya has the sudden urge to cover up his lap with a blanket, his thin pajama pants leaving not much to the imagination on how much he was getting into it. It doesn’t help that Vincenzo is blatantly staring, smugly. Illya covers his face with his hands. The shift of the mattress tells Illya Vincenzo’s getting out of bed.

“Maybe tonight,” Vincenzo says as he shrugs his sweater back on, and the slight hesitance at the end of his not-question makes Illya look at him again.

“Yes,” Illya says, a little too quickly. “That would be acceptable.”

Vincenzo laughs. “Official approval is all I’m looking for. You’ll be at brunch in five, too?”


Vincenzo’s renewed laughter fills the room before he closes the door behind him.

Illya turns around and groans into his pillow, contemplating never leaving his bed again.

The lounge room is a rowdy affair. Too many people are talking and laughing, the noise echoes off the walls and Illya can’t hear his own thoughts anymore. He scans the room and finds the majority of the B-squad sitting in the corner, with Alexei looking grumpy and dark, arms crossed and hood up.

Illya sits in between Vincenzo and Vitaly, the latter of which passes him a cup of coffee. Illya nods at him in thanks.

“Good morning, Peril,” Vincenzo says. “Did you sleep well?”

Illya glares at him and downs his coffee, ignoring the burn.

Alexei stands abruptly, his chair scraping the floor. “I’m going to get some fucking fruit salad, save my seat for me.”

Vincenzo hides laughter in his fist.

“What is wrong with Alexei?” Illya asks.

“He’s still grumpy,” Vincenzo replies.

“Why?”

Nadya joins them suddenly, claiming the seat next to Illya, patting him on the back. “Because Alexei sees it as his right to know what’s going on in his squad and he gets angry when he realises he doesn’t know anything.”

“It’s about responsibility,” Fen argues. “He feels responsible for us. Wanting to know what’s happening is his way of caring.”

“Still doesn’t mean he’s entitled to everything,” Nadya snaps.

Vitaly nods and says, “It wasn’t like you two were lying to him.” He pauses thoughtfully. “I think he’s more annoyed by the fact that he didn’t notice.”

Vincenzo laughs. “That could be it.”
“Are you done gossiping about me?” Alexei rounds the table and glares at all of them. He puts his plate down harshly and drags a new chair to the side. “I thought we had some sort of loyalty going on here, what’s changed?”

Vincenzo reaches over and squeezes his shoulder. “Drink your coffee. It will improve your mood.”

“All the coffee is shit,” Alexei grumbles.

“It always is,” Vitaly says. “Doesn’t mean we’re not addicted to it.”

“Touché,” Alexei says, just a hint lighter, but he still keeps silent as the conversation moves away, and Nadya periodically side-eyes him. Illya hopes that things go back to normal soon.

“Okay,” Vitaly announces when they’re all cleaning off their plates. He leans over the table, and claps once. “I need a plan for this weekend, guys. A free weekend. A miracle on earth.”

“I agree, my friend,” Vincenzo says. They grin at each other.

“I’ve heard about a party in a few towns away, Sunday night?” Nadya offers. “There is a student thing going on, I bet we can party crash.”

“You can go,” Illya says. “I have a night shift.”

Alexei raises his eyebrows. “Again? That’s your third this week.”

“They want to strengthen the security of the data–room.” Illya says. “I don’t know why. Computer–people are paranoid.”

“So Sunday night, party night– for those who are able to come,” Vincenzo says quickly. “But what about today?”

They all think to themselves for a little while, until Fen looks outside and hums. Wordlessly, everyone follows his gaze. The sun is beaming over the wet concrete of the base’s streets, and the sky is blue and bright, not a cloud in sight.

“I vote for spending a day outside,” Alexei says. They agree.

After a short discussion they decide to take two jeeps and drive to a nearby meadow with a small lake. Some take swimming gear with them, but Illya refuses to touch the water; the sun may shine but he’s not going to throw himself into freezing water.

Spring stretches around them in the green grass and the legion of dandelions covering the ground. The lake looks like a mirror, calm and still without a breeze disturbing surface. Illya see trees reflecting in the lake, an upside–down forestry, and squints his eyes against the sunlight making the water shimmer.

“This is beautiful,” Vincenzo murmurs, if a little unnecessarily, but the B–Squad make various agreeing noises as they stare for a second.

Illya moves his gaze to Vincenzo himself, standing with his hands in his pockets, casual and relaxed. The light makes his hair stand out even more darkly, the cut of his jaw even more sharply, and Illya thinks the lake has nothing on this. Vincenzo turns around and smiles back, reading Illya’s thoughts on his face.

The collective spell is broken when Vitaly reaches down, picks one of the dandelions, and blows
the seeds into Fen’s face, cackling. Before Illya knows it, it’s a free–for–all. There is chaos everywhere, and Nadya and Vincenzo are wrestling on the ground. Illya throws a bunch of grass in the general direction of Alexei, who then proceeds to almost choke on it.

“Time out,” Alexei shouts when he catches his breath. “No more nature related fighting!”

Illya pulls Nadya off of Vincenzo.

“I didn’t hurt him,” she squeals as Illya carries her to the edge of the lake. Illya laughs and drops her on the ground just before the small beachline ends.

“Peril! Throw her in!” Vincenzo calls after him, and boos when Nadya’s put back on two feet.

“No, Cowboy,” Illya calls back. “That would be mean.”

Nadya smiles between the two of them. “I’m glad you two got your shit together.”

Illya freezes, and quickly dampens his smile. She knows. She knows.

“You two have a good friendship,” Nadya continues as she squeezes his arm. “It’s Drift–material.”

Illya just nods. She might have used too much emphasis on the word friendship, but if she’s not asking questions, Illya sure won’t bring it up. He searches his mind for a change of subject and clears his throat. “You and Alexei… Is that going to be fixed too?”

Nadya crosses her arms. They watch Alexei lay out picnic blankets in silence.

“Maybe,” Nadya says eventually, but then shakes her head. “Definitely. I’m not angry anymore, only annoyed. I’ll talk to him.”

Illya sighs in relief despite himself.

Nadya smiles at him. “You’re a good friend, Illya.”

Illya huffs. “Where did you hear that false information? You have bad sources.”

“I’m the best source to myself,” Nadya says.

They reach Vincenzo, who’s still sprawled in the grass, plucking dandelions and clovers. He beams at them. “Come,” he says, patting on the ground. “It’s comfortable.”

Illya sits down but Nadya stays standing, shaking her head. “I need to have a certain conversation, ordered by S.O.P Kuryakin.”

“Oh?” Vincenzo says, raising his eyebrows. “Sounds official.”

“It is,” Nadya replies deadpan, and walks off.

Illya finds his sketchbook in the bag next to Vincenzo, and starts to draw his surroundings, starting with Vincenzo and ending up with various sketches of the shoreline.

Nadya and Alexei walk along the lake at a leisurely pace. They look companionable, no yelling or angry body language. They stop some distance away and sit down on a small dock, legs handing over the edge. Alexei’s skipping stones on the water.

Illya lowers his sketchpad and sighs. “It doesn’t bother you?”
“Hmm?” Vincenzo blinks his eyes open and yawns. “What?”

“Lying. About us”

Vincenzo frowns. “I’ve told you, I wish it could’ve been different. It’s not my choice to hide this.”

“No, I know. I don’t mean that,” Illya says, and looks away from the lake, staring at the ground as if he can burn it with his glare.

“What do you mean?” Vincenzo asks.

Illya struggles to find the right words, and eventually gives up to find the perfect ones and says, “The guilt. Keeping something from people that trust you.”

Vincenzo shrugs. “Sometimes, it does. It depends on the lie. But Alexei isn’t that hurt from not knowing, he’s over exaggerating the thing with Nadya and Fen. I’d waste my time feeling guilty about something that is necessary.”

“So you don’t feel it,” Illya says. “At all.”

Vincenzo shrugs again. “Why should I?”

Illya feels frustration bubble up, and his jaws clench, but his annoyance is immediately dampened by a hand wrapping around his. Vincenzo doesn’t say anything. No apology or change of mind, but Illya feels the warmth between them and breathes through the rush of anger. He doesn’t want to start an argument when they have so little time together anyway.

Vincenzo leaves his hand there, hidden between their thighs. Without the use of both of his hands, Illya gives up on drawing more today, and instead picks up the cheesy romance book with his free hand and starts where he had left off last time he stole the thing from Vincenzo.

“Read it to me,” Vincenzo says.

“No,” Illya replies decisively, and Vincenzo laughs. He shuffles a bit closer, and Illya reads with him, somehow ending up reading out loud anyway, laughing together at the ridiculous prose and horrifying details.

The day moves along slowly through the heat. Vitaly and Nadya are the only ones who dare to swim, but even their strong nerves can’t take the strain of ice cold water for too long. Huddled in blankets they come to sit with the rest of them, teeth clattering but very proud. The sky slowly loses its blue hue with clouds rolling through, and they watch worriedly as dark grey starts to stain the edges. The first rumble comes soon after, only just beating the loud noise of Alexei complaining that they didn’t take enough sausages with him.

“We need to go back anyway,” Fen says. “I think it’s going to rain soon. A thunder storm is coming.”

“It’s barely evening,” Nadya says. “I don’t want to go back yet.”

Illya ignores the arguments and nudges Vincenzo to stand.

Alexei breaks out of the discussion to ask, “Where are you two going?”

“The record shop,” Illya says shortly, and tries not to blush when Vincenzo smiles in pleasant surprise.
“You can’t take the car from us,” Alexei says, frowning.

Illya shrugs. “We’ll just take a walk. It’s not that far from here.”

“Sounds good,” Vincenzo says. “We’d promised her we’d be back.”

“For tea, yes,” Illya confirms.

“Tea sounds good! I’m coming with you.” Vitaly jumps up from the ground, dusting his trousers quickly with a hurried rub of his hands—he’s still covered in dirt anyway, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

Illya’s right about to say no, when Nadya and Fen also stand up and look at the rest expectantly. Illya closes his mouth with a snap and lets out a long, frustrated sigh.

Vincenzo sneaks a hand along his side in comfort before pulling away again. “The more the merrier,” he says.

“If we’re all going, we can take the car anyway,” Alexei says. “I hope that shop of yours has some food.”

A few minutes later they’ve packed up most of their stuff, and they make it back into the car just before the sky breaks open. Rain pounds on their roof. The road is barely visible. Alexei fights with the windshield wipers until they finally click on, ridding the front car window of just enough water to be able to drive. “You two are glad you’re not walking now,” he comments as he restarts the motor.

Vincenzo hums in agreement, pressed tightly against Illya, his hand somehow having found a way to the crook of his neck. Illya doesn’t dare to move, scared that Vincenzo will notice what he’s doing in such close proximity with others, and stop. Fen and Nadya are deep in conversation behind them, and Alexei and Vitaly murmur between them in the front. They won’t notice.

The drive is short, and they pile out of the car and into the shop quickly. They’re dripping wet anyway. Illya shivers a little as a cold bead of water slips under his shirt. Vincenzo shakes his head, droplets flying everywhere.

“You’re not a dog, Vince!” Alexei cries out. “Quit it!”

“I don’t know,” Illya says pensively. “He looks like one to me.”

“You’re an asshole, Kuryakin,” Vincenzo snaps, but he’s grinning as he does it.

“Oh oh,” Nadya says, she steps closer and murmurs in Illya’s ear. “Last names means there is trouble in paradise.”

Illya pinches her side.

Someone clears her throat behind them. It’s the old woman, tapping her feet on the ground with her arms crossed.

“Hi,” Vincenzo greets her with a wide smile. “We’re back.” He looks around and adds, “And brought friends.”

The old woman huffs and shuffles to a small door behind the counter. She returns with two mops and gives them to Alexei and Vitaly. “The floor. Dirty,” she says. “Clean.”
She narrows her eyes at them and then points to Vincenzo. “Cook?”

Vincenzo nods wordlessly.

“Good. Kitchen upstairs. The rest of you, buy records.” She doesn’t wait on Vincenzo to follow her, just stomps up the stairs with another huff.

“I like her,” Alexei declares, wringing out his jacket and laying it to dry over a chair. He begins to mop the floor, whistling. “She reminds me of my own grandmother, may she rest in peace.”

Vincenzo moves closer to Illya. “Hope she doesn’t decide to kill me.”

“Just do what she tells you to do and you’ll be fine,” Illya says with a chuckle, pushing him towards the stairs. “I didn’t know you could cook?”

“I’m a jack of many trades,” Vincenzo says grandly.

“Get up there and make food for us then.” Vitaly gestures with his mop in Vincenzo’s direction. “I’m hungry.”

“Don’t use your mop as a combat stick, Vita,” Fen says and shakes his head.

“Why not?”

“Because—” Fen steals the mop out of his hands. “You’ll break something.”

“Good luck with this mess,” Vincenzo says just before he leaves.

“Thanks.” Illya sighs. “Don’t annoy her!”

“I’ll try!” Vincenzo calls down, which doesn’t reassure Illya at all.

Avoiding the mess Alexei is making of the floor, Illya walks to the back of the shop and flips through the stack of records he finds there. There are no new titles, as far as he can see, but the only other time he’s been here, he had been understandably distracted, so whole sections of the room still feel like discoveries to him. As instructed, he picks up a few records to buy later. One single he imagines Vincenzo would like, and a set of instrumentals. The time for excessive studying comes closer again, and Illya’ll need some background music to get through the study stress. He wonders how Vincenzo will get through the next months.

After they aced their field tests, the B–Squad is progressing into reaching new historic, record breaking scores. If they all get perfect grades on their procedure and safety exams, Illya’s sure various Jaeger teams will start bidding for their contracts before they’re even chosen as S.O.P’s. Illya’s fairly sure Vincenzo will stay to become Drift–partners together, despite never having it said out loud. It’s a big decision to make, choosing the one who knows your most intimate thoughts. Through the base nightmares make the rounds, stories of marriages destroyed because an affair was revealed by the Drift, or children discovering their father isn’t their biological parent. Even with a romantic relationship backing him up, Illya doesn’t dare to ask just yet.

The cleaning crew seems to be finished with their task and now join Illya in the search for music. They find some easy jazz for late nights in the lounge, and Alexei refuses to put his 90’s rap album back, despite everyone swearing it will never be played. Alexei isn’t an exception in surprising tastes. Illya smiles to himself when Nadya comes back with Chopin and Vanhauw Williams, and blinks twice when Fen only picks up metal music. Vitaly has a secret love for 60’s swing, but tries to hide it between modern electronic music that Illya’s very puzzled by. How did those end up on a
Illya’s confusion is interrupted by Vincenzo calling them up. “I need people here to peel some fucking potatoes!” A millisecond later, he squeaks; presumably hit with a ladle for language.

They make their way up the tight, steep stairs with their records under their arms. When they walk into the shop’s second floor, they all take an awed breath. The living–space is more like a very roomy attic; the walls are tall but angled, beams stretch alongside it to support the roof. Illya has to duck beneath the beams to avoid hitting his head, and slaloms his way between low hanging lights and potted plants held up by ropes. The kitchen lines the southwall, old wooden counters filled with various plots and tins. From dried herbs to fresh mushrooms, there is food everywhere. Illya spies picked eggs in a tall glass pot at the end of the table, and prays that they’re not a part of the dinner; he’s never been able to eat them without puking right after.

Two cats perk up from their places on a comfortable looking couch, and jump to the ground; bells ringing. They immediately run straight at Illya, winding around his legs and purring loudly.

“They like you,” the woman declares, her tone implies it’s potentially a death sentence.

“Hmm,” Illya says, watching the cats with timid interest. “What are their names?”

The woman points at the fluffy white cat and says, “Cookies,” and then points at the big brown Maine Coon and says, “Cream.” She nods to herself and then turns back to the kitchen, a stream of Russian directed at Vincenzo who has done something wrong with the onions.

Illya, followed by Cookies and Cream, walks to the sofa and sits down. The cats don’t hesitate a second before claiming his lap. Vitaly and Fen drop down on either side of him.

“It’s adorable,” Fen murmurs as he holds out a hand for Cream to smell.

Vitaly pets Cookies and nods frantically, “Do you think we could take them with us?”

“No, we can’t.” Fen sends Vitaly a look. “We will not kidnap the cat’s.”

“You’re no fun,” Vitaly complains.

Illya ignores them and takes another look at everything around him. It’s almost overwhelming, the way they talk over relatively small space, crowding it to the brim. There seems to be enough space for them at the dinner table, a long wooden monstrosity that takes up most of the middle of the floor. Nadya and Alexei have dutifully taken a place and are peeling potatoes. Where else there is only a little room left, is filled with books. They are stacked absolutely everywhere, like a library slowly took over the place. Illya thinks there are more books in this house than records, which is a serious accomplishment.

The woman opens the oven and a heavy delicious smell drifts around them. Vitaly looks up from petting and shakes his head. “Are we sure we’ve not made friends with a nice witch, or something? Surely this only can be made by magic, and look at all the stuff around here. We don’t even know her name– that is a thing with witches, they–”

Fen frowns and interrupts him, “We do know her name? Her name is Lidia?”

“How do you know that?” Illya asks in surprise. He’d forgot to ask when Vincenzo and him met her, and doing it later would probably have been rude.

Fen looks between them as if he’s scared they’re getting sick. “It’s on the window of the shop?
‘Lidia’s Record Shop’?

“Oh,” Vitaly says. “Still believe she’s a witch, though.”

“Morons.”

“Are you guys going to help or what?” Vincenzo asks loudly. Illya notices he’s wearing an apron and chuckles.

“I’m babysitting,” Illya says to answer his question, nodding to the cats on his lap, and then to Vitaly and Fen.

Vincenzo laughs at the twin’s offended gasps. “Vitaly, you can help the potato peelers. Fen, can you set the table? Illya, stay where you are.”

“Aye, sir,” Illya quips.

Fen and Vitaly grudgingly stop petting the cats and walk to the kitchen for their respective tasks. Illya digs his hands in Cookies’ soft fur, and lets himself be conscious of how content he feels. The commotion in the kitchen is a nice backdrop to his peaceful and quiet thoughts. The cats are warm and purring on his lap, and everytime Vincenzo looks away from his cooking, his eyes flicker toward Illya, and his face melts into a smile.

It takes another hour before Vincenzo declares the food to be done, and Illya gently relocates the cats in order to help with the final preparations. The finished result is a table filled with pots and pans and breads, stew and sausages, fresh potato salad and various soups.

Lidia scans the dishes with a critical eye, before nodding in satisfaction. She sits down at the head of the table, and slams her fist on the table. “Eat.”

Illya takes the chair next to her, and Vincenzo sits across. A dance of filling plates begins, bread is passed down and soup bowls are topped off. Illya isn’t quite sure what ended up on his plate, but he’s beginning to get so hungry he doesn’t really care all that much. He starts off with his soup, cherishing its hardy taste.

“You are a recruit, yes?” Lidia asks suddenly, raising a bushy eyebrow in Illya’s direction.

Illya nods. “We all are. We train on a base not far from here.”

“I know that base,” Lidia says. “My son—my oldest son, lives there, too. Not my youngest son. He is too lazy.”

“Oh, who is your son?” Vincenzo asks.

“Viktor,” Lidia says, a hint of pride warming her icy demeanor, but a second later she’s frowning again. “He’s a good son, but he never visits.”

“That’s a shame,” Vincenzo says.

Lidia huffs. “Yes. Do you visit your mother, Enzo?”

Illya almost laughs at the nickname, but Vincenzo kicks him underneath the table while smiling charmingly at Lidia. “No, I’m afraid they’re not very local.”

“Hmm,” Lidia says. “And you, boy?”
“Illya,” Illya corrects her, and then shakes his head. “No, my mother is too far away for a weekend trip.”

“I know who you are, Kuryakin son,” Lidia says. “I can call you boy.”

“How do you know him?” Vincenzo asks before Illya can stop him.

“His father was on television, long time ago,” Lidia says, reaching over to grab another piece of garlic bread. “Is he alive still?”

Illya shrugs, clenching his jaw. “I don’t know. I don’t care.”

“You don’t visit him,” Lidia concludes, nodding. “Why not?”

Illya drops his spoon, it clangs loudly on the edge of his plate. He can’t remember anyone directly asking him why. He takes a quick breath, and the words spill out. “He lied to me. He pretended to be someone he wasn’t. He lied to me about his work, about where our money came from, about his friends. My whole childhood was built on lies. He does not deserve another chance.”

Illya comes back to himself, and notices the rest of the B–Squad pretending they’ve not heard what they heard. Vincenzo presses his calf against Illya’s thigh in comfort, and Illya slowly relaxes.

Lidia hums pensively, before patting Illya on his hand once. “I gave my husband too many chances. You are smart, boy. Protect yourself, it’s good for your liver.”

With that, her interest in the conversation seems to be over, and she shuffles away from the table to open a cabinet that lets out a whelm of alcohol. She chooses a big bottle with clear liquid in it, and pours a glass for herself, and after a moment of hesitation, gives Illya a glass too.

Vincenzo leans over the table. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Cowboy,” Illya says, leaning against him under the table. Vincenzo nods, but there is a layer of worry and uncertainty beneath his features that makes Illya anxious. Their moment is interrupted by Alexei demanding another round of stew, and Vincenzo stands to provide everyone with a second helping.

After everyone is full and sated, and the cats are petted into oblivion, they help Lidia with cleaning before driving back to base.

Alexei, Nadya and the twins all declare that it’s time for sleep, and walk to their dorms at a pace Illya normally would equate to zombies. Vincenzo follows Illya down to his room, and nicks the bag full of new records and flips through them gleefully.

“Oh, Peril.” Vincenzo picks the single out of the stack and smiles. “You got me this one? I love this song.”

Illya shrugs, pleased. “Thought you’d like it.”

Vincenzo puts the record on, and beckons Illya with a grin. “Come on, Peril.”

5 Months, 2 Weeks, 2 Days

My lovin’ baby's been gone

Illya already knows where this is going. “I don’t dance, Cowboy. Go charm someone else.”

5 Months, 2 Weeks, 2 Days
My lovin’ baby's been gone

“But you’re my baby,” Vincenzo pouts, twisting into a spin and grabbing Illya’s hand.

If you see my baby
Please send her home to me

“Don’t call me that,” Illya says, as flush rushes through his face. He lets Vincenzo pull him in, but stands ramrod still as Vincenzo dances around him.

“Snookums, Darling, Sweetheart,” Vincenzo says, “I could go on.”

Illya punches his arm, albeit gently. “Stop it.”

Hurry, oh oh, baby
Hurry, oh oh, baby

“Come on, Peril, please, for me?” Vincenzo pleads, eyes wide and unfairly bright.

“I don’t even know how—” Illya protests.

“Just follow me, love.”

5 Months, 2 Weeks, 2 Days
I’m about to lose my mind

Maybe dancing isn’t that bad after all.

If you see my baby
Please send her home to me

By the time the song is over, Illya’s breathing heavily and when Vincenzo lets him go, he flops face first into his bed.

“That wasn’t that bad, was it?” Vincenzo pokes his side.

Illya groans. “That was worse than Vitaly’s squad routine. I’m exhausted.”

Vincenzo whistles. “Heavy verdict.” Illya can hear him put the single back in it’s jacket. “Do you want Che Vuole Questa Musica Stasera or a new one?”

“A new one,” Illya decides after a second. “The one with the suit on the cover.”

“You like that, don’t you.” Vincenzo grins. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Illya throws a pillow at him.

High strings fill the room, and a mysterious melody plays over it softly, until the bass takes over, slow and confident.

Vincenzo hums. “This is interesting. I like it.”

“I’m glad,” Illya mutters distractedly. He grabs his ‘screen where it had just lit up on his bedside table. He flicks through the series of messages and curses, repressing the urge to throw the damned device against a wall.
“What is it?” Vincenzo asks, sliding in next to Illya on the bed.

Illya clenches his fists and huffs out a frustrated breath. “They’ve been updating the security system, this past week. That’s why I have so many late shifts. It’s a nightmare.”

“Did they call you up for another one?”

Illya shakes his head. “No, not tonight. But the rest of the week, yes. They’re even canceling my classes, we’re going to be on full lock down.”


Illya looks up from his ‘screen, to be faced with a shaken looking Vincenzo, shock flashing through his features.

“Don’t worry, Cowboy,” Illya assures him. “I’m not going to be alone. I’ll be safe. It’s probably nothing.”

Vincenzo reaches forward and squeezes Illya’s hand. “Peril, please. Tell me what happened.”

Illya bites his lip, hesitates, and then nods. He’s going to have to trust his future Drift–partner with everything. “They found an anomaly in the system. They won’t tell me what. But I’m guessing we’re vulnerable for infiltration right now. Every cook and cleaner is going to be triple checked tomorrow, that’s usually how people try to get in here.”

“Damn,” Vincenzo breathes, and then shakes his head. “Are you sure you’re going to be safe?”

Illya smiles. “Yes, of course, Cowboy. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Vincenzo says, sounding relieved if not a little fragile. “Okay, good.”

Illya twines his fingers through Vincenzo’s, and they lay down together for a moment. Illya doesn’t mean to fall asleep, but the busy day is catching up with him and the warmth of Vincenzo around him sends him in a peaceful, dreamless oblivion.

He does not wake, hours later, when the weight of the mattress shifts, and Napoleon Solo leaves the room.

Chapter End Notes

The last song :)

IMPORTANT MESSAGE
The next chapter is going to take me two weeks to complete. The plot is slowly unraveling, as you guys can see. We're moving toward various climaxes and major scenes. I need more time to rest, think and work through some problems I've been battling with this story.
This chapter posted later because of this reason, it just takes more and more time to outline and make sure everything is put in that needs to be... After most of the week lost to writer's block, I was able to outline and finish this chapter in the nick of time, but I can't force myself to do that again. The next chapters need a little more love and attention than that!

I hope I can pick a weekly schedule backup after those two weeks, but we'll see. I don't want to rush this story and make the overall quality of it less than it could have been :D

I have another NapoIllya ficlet outside of this 'verse in my wip doc, a mostly canon Modern AU lil thing :). Maybe... just maybe ... I'll find the energy/time to finish that one up and post it next Sunday, so that we're not 100% without anything at all. I already know I'm gonna miss you guys next week <3
December 2020

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Illya regrets not taking Gaby up on her offer to borrow her umbrella.

His walk was meant to be an escape from the anticipation running through the Shatterdome. Not only is the planned arrival of U.N.C.L.E the talk of the day, the clock is ticking down for the next attack. Illya will have a Jaeger again in the same week an attack is due too.

Illya looks out over the sea, its harsh waves crashing into the concrete border. The rain drizzles on his coat, slowly drenching him to the bone. Illya is too drained to care.

He knows that even if the Jaeger makes it here on time, there is no chance they’ll be ready a fight. Gaby has been very vocal about her wish to check everything personally. And on top of that, Illya doesn’t know what the effect of a Drift will be on his new partner. The damage it might do.

Illya sighs to himself. He doesn’t know long he stands there, but by the time a sound wakes him from his thoughts, the rain has stopped.

“Illya!”

Illya turns around. Napoleon’s running towards him.

There are alarms going off, Illya notices distractedly. Bright flashes of orange circle around the Shatterdome. The round roof is opening up. Helicopters fly low over them, and Illya flinches in reflex.

“Kaiju,” Illya says. It isn’t a question, but Napoleon nods anyway.

“Cat 3,” he adds. “Starshooter and Peacemaker are already in Drift and going out. Crimson Warrior will be the backup. It’s timed to breach in 15 minutes.”

The moment Napoleon’s finished his sentence, the shining iron of Peacemaker flickers into the orange alarm lights. Carried by four choppers, the sound is almost unbearable. Illya covers his ears as Napoleon does the same, motioning his head towards the base. Illya follows him.

The helicopters fly away into the distance, but Illya keeps his ears covered. They near the Shatterdome and intercoms are calling out orders, people are running about. It’s show time. Illya and Napoleon rush between groups of technicians and clusters of cars. They hurry inside when the Shatterdome opens again to let the Starshooter out. Inside the base there is a little less noise. Most alarms are quieted so the crew can do their work, and instead of intercoms, everyone receives their orders through earpieces. Illya follows Napoleon up and realises they’re walking towards the communication room.

“I’m ready to proceed. Alexei, Ekko, you copy?” Gaby stands before the great glass expanse looking into the Shatterdome. On the sides of the wall large screens, show Alexei and Ekko in their cockpit, locked in and ready.

“Aye,” Alexei says.

Ekko nods. “Ready.”
“Prepare for BTB,” Gaby says. “Pons are connected and on full capacity. Drift in 3, 2, 1. Go!”

Three technicians and Gaby all press a button simultaneously, and the screen lights up in yellows and greens. Illya watches, mesmerized. He’s never seen it from this perspective- outside the Jaeger’s cockpit.

The process bar rises and Gaby keeps track of the neurological scans of both the pilots.

“You’re doing great,” Gaby says. “78% Neural handshake. Keep it up.”

Alexei laughs and closes his eyes. “Welcome, Ekko, to my twisted mind.”

“I should get a raise,” Ekko says through clenched teeth, but she smiles too.


Alexei and Ekko quirk a smile and shrug, moving perfectly in sync. They take a few steps with the Crimson Warrior in standby, so it doesn’t move with them, and throw a left combination and a right swipe.

“I think we’re good,” Alexei comments. “How are the other teams doing?”

Gaby moves her interface to another stream, but it’s Waverly who answers. “They’ve made contact. It’s a flying type. They’ll need your boosters.”

The wall screen switches from the Crimson Warrior’s cockpit to a dark and stormy sea. The Peacemaker is only just visible through the neon lights scattered over it’s armor. A green fluorescent entity stands behind them and opens it’s wings. There is no sound, but Illya can imagine the screech from it’s beak.

“Oh, I’ve been wanting to fly for a while,” Ekko says. “We’re ready.”

“They are, sir,” Gaby confirms.

Waverly nods and speaks into his mic to call in the helicopters. Slowly, the Shatterdome creaks open again, and alarms ring through the Base.

Illya watches as the Crimson Warrior is carried out, and then watches the fight that already is in full swing far out at sea.

“I don’t remember feeling this useless for a long time,” Napoleon says behind him.

Illya nods.

“Soon, we’ll be there.”

Illya isn’t so sure.

They watch in silence.

“Starshooter and Peacemaker. Crimson Warrior is on it’s way. Keep the Kaiju distracted around it’s arrival.” Gaby’s calm voice is met with the nod of two pairs of Pilots, all focused on their respective tasks.

Li, the dominant pilot of the Starshooter, throws in a mock salute that her brother repeats.
“Good,” Sanne speaks up. “We’re going in double formation. We need air support soon.”

“Our booster is charged, stay South,” Li says, the screen flickers to the side to accommodate the cockpit view of the Starshooter. “We’re aiming for its chest.”

“Avoid the center and the left side,” Ekko instructs over the comms. “I’ve seen a Cat 2 of this flying type before. They have armored plates to protect their heart and lungs, but there are weak spots where the wings connect with the torso.”

Li grins. “Acknowledged. We’re aiming.”

A series of white balls light up the darkened sky and hit the Kaiju in his chest. It screams, flapping its wings.

Gaby curses. “Keep it down!”

The Peacemaker falls into a sprint and jumps forward, landing next to the Kaiju and extending their sword. They hack at its wings, and dodge the long tail coming around with spikes to its end.


“We’ve recharged! Get out of the way!” Li yells.

“Crimson Warrior arrival in two minutes!”

The white balls of light shoot out into the sky again, hitting the Kaiju. Perfectly aimed. The Kaiju hunches forward and shakes off the pain. Illya can almost see its blue blood shining over its body. The camera of the Peacemaker shows the rows and rows of eyes the creature has on its skeletal head, with even a few scattered over its beak. All eyes blink once, and follow the Starshooter. Target acquired.

“It’s getting angry,” Sanne says. “Brace yourself Star!”

“Shield is at full capacity. Lower anchor.” Gaby runs her fingers over her keyboard.

Li grunts “We should be secure.”

“How long until we have air support?” Sanne asks. “I think it’s going to fly.”

She isn’t wrong. The Kaiju stretches and its wings double in size. The ridges fill with luminescent barbs and it flies up, and out of the sea. The Kaiju dives towards the Starshooter. They release another round. They miss.

The Kaiju lowers itself above the Starshooter.

“Fuck,” Li says tensely. “We need help here.”

“Run!” Gaby commands.

“We can’t! We’re anchored.”

“It won’t hold!”

The Kaiju closes its claws around the Starshooter shoulders. Illya flinches. It carries the Jaeger out of the water, up in the air.
“Release Pods!” Gaby yells. “Get the fuck out of there!”

“We’ll pick you up when you get out,” Sanne promises along with her sister.

Li shakes her head, but the fear is clear in her eyes. “What about the Starshooter—”

Illya clenches his fist as the Kaiju carries them higher and higher heedless of the discussion of life and death.

“We’ll get it back,” Alexei says. “We’re going after it. Boosters ready!”

“Oh,” Li says, and her brother nods when she reaches for the evacuation button.

The cockpit lights up red with warning signs, and they’re released out into the air. The Peacemaker’s front camera shows the two safety-pods lighting up and falling down slowly with a parachute. “We have them, we’re getting them to safety.”

“We’re in pursuit,” Ekko says.

Peter runs to the front of the room, tapping Gaby on the shoulder. “There are journalists coming.”

Gaby curses and mutters under her breath, “Jesus, why can’t they stay away.”

“I don’t know, but I’ve got the streams here. New perspective?”

“Good thinking.”

Peter nods and in a flash the wall screen is filled with a broadcast of the combat. A young woman’s voice filters into the room, along with audio of the fight. The rainfall clatters on the helicopter’s roof, and the howling winds almost make the screeching of the Kaiju impossible to hear.

“We’re here, live, filming the fight between three Jaegers and one Cat 3 Kaiju, who hasn’t been named yet. As we arrived first, we dub it Nightfall.” The woman sounds triumphant, unaware of the incredible danger she’s in. The camera follows the Nightfall up, still flying with the Starshooter in its claws. From a distance, the Crimson Warrior nears.

“We’ve just been informed that the Pilots of the Starshooter, the Jaeger Nightfall has in its claws, have been evacuated. We are not certain if they’ve been rescued.”

“Do you have them?” Gaby comms the Peacemaker.

“We have them, we’re nearing the coast.”

“I’ll have a chopper pick them up,” Waverly says and moves his directions to the other side of the room.

A loud sound clashes through the speakers, like a mountain falling upon the earth. The news reporter curses, and their helicopter’s flashing red in warning. “The Nightfall has just let the abandoned Jaeger go. The Crimson Warrior is nearing. The legendary Pilots Alexei and Ekko have boosters, a flight system, and long distance range. They are the perfect team for this type of Kaiju. We have will try and follow them in the air.”

“Stupid fucking journalists,” Gaby grumbles. “Someone call them and get them the fuck out of dodge? It’s going to be dangerous in the air. Are all airports informed?”

“I’m handling it,” Peter says.
“Alexei, Ekko. Report.”

“We’re near the breach, but we’ve lost the Kaiju”

“It’s above you.”

“Roger. We’re going up.”

Gaby clenches her fist. “Be careful.”

“Will do.” Alexei flickers his gaze to the cockpit camera and nods once.

The news reporter speaks up again. “Shatterdome communications have just called us to stay out of the dangerzone. We’ll continue to film the fight from afar.”

The Crimson Warrior comes in shot before shooting up into the air as the camera follows them up. The dark, stormy clouds cover the fight, but lightning and gunshots light up the sky, showing only flickers of the shadows of the Nightfall and the Jaeger. A thunder thunderous sound shatters through the speakers.

Gaby gasps and Illya tears his gaze away from the screen. He steps toward her, while she’s typing on her keyboard, numbers and data running over her display.

“What is it?” Illya asks.

“They got hit. I see the vitals going down, but there is no response.”

Gaby reaches for her mic. “Central to Crimson Warrior, respond.” Her eyes move quickly between her display and the camera’s. The Crimson Warrior’s camera has turned into static. Gaby repeats the call four times before adding, a little softer, “Ekko, please. Respond. I can’t hear you.”

She shakes off Illya’s comforting hand. “Fuck. The audio system must have been hit somehow. Do we have visuals?”

“Barely. They’re still in the air and fighting. But can’t see enough,” Peter replies.

“Peacemaker, switch to infrared, can you give us a status report?”

“We’re beneath them, but we can’t fly. The moment they get it down, we’ll be ready.”

They wait. A series of flashes end in a loud screech, and then a sudden silence falls.

“There is nothing wrong with our sound system, the silence is real,” the news reporter says in a shocked voice. “It’s just like... they disappeared.”

Illya counts his breaths. Napoleon steps in the space next to him, and Illya doesn’t move away.

“Central to Crimson Warrior,” Gaby tries again. This time her commanding and strong voice has an undercurrent of worry, of uncertainty. “Please respond. Central to Crimson Warrior.”

“–Ah, We-.” Distorted and cut up, but Illya recognizes Ekko immediately.

“Again!” Gaby orders. “Central to Crimson–”

“We’re going down!” Ekko yells, and the sky lights up.
The Jaeger and Nightfall fall through the clouds, entangled in one another. The long tail is wrapped around the Jaeger’s leg. They twist and turn until the Kaiju falls onto the ocean plane, back cracking. The Crimson Warrior stands first and punches the Nightfall in the jaw. The Peacemaker jump in to assist. They unsheathe their cleaver and push it through the Nightfall’s chest. It shudders and trashes, trapped between the two Jaegers.

“We’re punctured,” Alexei says. “Acid is burning through.”

“I got it,” Sanne says, and the Peacemaker releases the cleaver and grabs their sword, hacking into the tail.

The Crimson Warrior shoot close range into the chest and face. The Kaiju collapses and goes dormant.

“Be careful,” Gaby warns.

“The vitals are dropping,” Ekko says. “It’s stopped breathing.”

They shoot again. “I think we’ve got it.”

The Peacemaker scans the Kaiju, and the results show on the wall’s screen.

The Nightfall is defeated.

A wave of victory goes through the control room. Illya watches as the newsreport is clicked on the screen again. The reporter is retelling the victory in an excited voice, but Illya can’t feel anything but a heavy relief.

Celebration is introduced later, when the Pilots have arrived and are hailed as heroes. Illya claps until his hands hurt, and even has to repress the urge to hug Alexei – something he’d not experienced before. Crew and Pilot alike gather in the cafeteria, and under the careful blindness of Waverly, alcohol flows. The same kind of various assembly is collected like the one Gaby acquired. Illya stays away from it, but he watches as Napoleon drinks liberally. Without deciding to, Illya stays close to him, in his orbit gravitated by concern. In his exhaustion, he cannot pretend that his experience with Vincenzo’s alcohol use has no relevance here. There is that similar desperation, the will to escape something. Illya’s slowly starting to realise what that might be.

The hours pass between elation and and relief, and Illya takes it upon himself to carry Napoleon to his room. He’s draped all over him, barely taking a step for himself, giggling about something or another.

“I had a great time,” Napoleon says. “and I didn’t even deserve it.”

Illya hums noncommittally. “You need to sleep, Cowboy.”

“Peril,” Napoleon sighs. “Why are you here?”

Illya isn’t sure about that either. The point is that he is. “Does it matter?”

Napoleon just nods, but doesn’t say anything more. The bright drunken happiness melts away in a millisecond, and Illya doesn’t know what he did wrong.
Silence falls around them as Napoleon struggles with his room key. After a second, Illya grunts and snatches it away from him and opens the door.

Napoleon stumbles in and falls face first onto the bed. Illya ignores the sense of familiarity as he closes the door behind him and kneels to help Napoleon out of his shoes.

Napoleon watches him, moving gently from side to side as if floating along at sea.

Illya pulls the left shoe from his foot, and moves on to the next. Avoiding Napoleon’s searching eyes.

“Peril,” Napoleon whispers. “Why are you here?”

Illya keeps his head down, his fingers tremble around Napoleon’s shoelaces. “You’re drunk. You need help.”

Napoleon sighs. “Yes. No. That’s–”

The right shoe is off. Illya doesn’t stand up.

A hand is gently placed on top of his head. The fingers carefully twine into the strands of his hair. Illya freezes. It’s all he can do to prevent himself from leaning into it, to demand more. How he wants.

The hand disappears.

“Peril,” Napoleon pleads.

Illya looks up.

Napoleon’s eyes tear up, intoxication elevating emotion and Illya wants to run far from here, and stay here for as long as this lasts. There is no mask. Not anymore.

“I loved you, Illya. It was all true, I wasn’t pretending.”

The words are expected. The idea, the thought of it, accepted some time ago. Ever since the moment Illya collapsed in the Shatterdome and Napoleon was the one to catch him. Ever since music of the past played into his ear. Every moment between them adds up into one solid truth of reality. And that is what hurts, because the truth of love isn’t what cuts into Illya’s skin anymore. He knows that what they had felt was true.

But.

Illya reaches out, a soft caress before delivering the final blow. “You still hurt me, you still betrayed me, you still left me. So if you truly loved me. What is your love worth, Cowboy?”

Napoleon flinches. His face shatters.

Illya’s heart does the same.

“I can do better,” Napoleon slurs. “Believe me. I won’t ever do it again.”

Illya stands. “Do you even know what you did? How can I believe you?”

Napoleon shakes his head. “I–”
“Goodnight, Cowboy,” Illya says, and steps away from a conversation without answers, a beginning without end.

“What if I still love you?” Napoleon asks, suddenly, desperately, words flung out in a rasp, landing before Illya’s feet.

Illya feels dizzy, and swallows. He forces the words out. “I don’t know what that means, with you.” Illya opens the door. “Do you?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, and closes the door behind him.

Napoleon sobs in his room, and Illya lets the pain of it wash over him. The sound tears through his chest, constricts around his throat and makes him feel alive. He’s done pretending. They don’t deserve this, a history of betrayal and mistakes. There is no anger anymore, just hopeless hurt.

_The Drift. I will show you._

A memory. A promise made in face of distrust. Napoleon swore to show him, during the Drift.

But what is there left to show?

Over the following week, celebration slides back into routine– Illya swears Alexei keeps getting the best piece of meat every dinner. He deserves it, though.

Illya’s schedule of avoidance, drawing and pushing thoughts away as he binges music every second of the day, is broken up by a mysterious text.


It’s from Gaby, so it can entail everything from a heist-planning to a full-blown revolution. Her new obsession has turned to be the Starshooter’s mechanical issues after Nightfall dropped it into the sea, despite the fact that, this time, there is no complex thinking necessary. The repeat is straightforward and already in process, so Peter and Ekko have formed a team to not let her fall back into the same abyss she’d been in the last time. After dinner, the lab goes on lockdown for her, and now she’s around prowling for things to do in the evenings.

Apparently it’s Illya’s turn to be the victim. He hopes that it isn’t going to be some form of revenge. Peter doesn’t deserve his coffee salted again.

After finding her in the work-out room, Ekko’s happy to translate the text into something understandable. “Oh, she means the night market on the sea-district square. There is a red bench at the end of the walkway. I assume she wants to take you shopping?”

Illya’s protest that he doesn’t need any more clothes was met with a laugh.

“It’s not that kind of market.”

That turned out to be a slight understatement.

The first thing that forces Illya’s attention and claims it thoroughly is the smell of the place. Between rows and rows of stalls, the stale scent of rotting flesh almost overwhelms him. It’s not his first time on a black market like this. He’d once gone with his mother after slaying a Cat 3 a week earlier. Tatiana had bought a necklace made of it’s bones, and proclaimed it a warriors token. Illya smiles to himself at the stab of nostalgia, before pushing the memory away. He has an appointment to keep.
Trying to make sense of his surroundings proves to be futile, as any attempt to scan the area is inhabited by strange moving produce and handlers yelling for sale. People walk in drones, stopping and haggling before moving on again. Illya moves along with the stream, his physicality not imposing for once; the people here have something better to do, something bigger to fear.

As he walks along, he tries to decide how much of the limbs, flesh, and appendages are actually from Kaiju origin, or just expertly dyed chicken meat. He comes to no conclusion, but supposes that Ekko would’ve known on sight.

The narrow street eventually splits into two. One side snakes into darkness. Lights and people replaced by grimly characters and barricaded windows, giving Illya the sense that he might not get out of there without at least one stab wound. The other side widens into a bigger street with more legitimate looking shops and people, a row of trees decorating the edge. Between two trees a red bench only just fits and Gaby is perched in the middle, digging into what looks like a box of takeaway noodles. Illya hopes she didn’t buy it at the market he’d just escaped.

Gaby greets him by saluting him with her chopsticks and motions for him to take a seat. There is a silence between them but not around them, where pedestrians, cars, and cyclists pass them like ants on a anthill. Gaby eats her noodles, and after a little while, Illya grabs his sketchbook for something to do as he waits.

A few sketches later, Gaby decides the time for conversation has come.

“I researched you,” she begins. Illya stills his pencil on the paper, pressing a little too hard.

“I didn’t at first, because I thought it might be rude, but now I did.” She shrugs. “I’m really good at research. It’s my go-to when nothing to tinker is around or if certain unnamed persons don’t let me in my workshop. I’m pretty good with digging up dirt, but you’ve been a challenge. You and Napoleon together particularly.”

Illya lowers his sketchbook, resigned. Gaby is watching him shrewdly.

“Look, I’m not stupid,” she says, and snorts at the eyebrow Illya raises at that. “I know you two have a past, and that there are problems, and that there are certain emotional… emotions. But I had hoped you’d figured it out by now. So when you started another round of avoid-the-Solo, I felt like I had a right to figure it out.”

“You had a right?” Illya repeats. “You remind me of Alexei when he was younger. He wasn’t that nice.”

“Don’t shit talk your friends,” Gaby says, rolling her eyes. “Illya, U.N.C.L.E is coming tomorrow morning.”

Illya takes a slow breath.

“I need to know if you’ll go through with it. The Drift.”

“I—” Illya stops, rolls his pencil along his palm, and tries again. “You still need to check it, right?”

Gaby leans back as if she expected the question. “Yes, but I’ve seen the documents and it looks good. There are some alterations that need to be made: more modern armory, and we’ll be transferring the Red Peril’s shield. But for the Drift... I think I’ll be done by the night, and Waverly and the Despicable twins want to test the Drift right away, they’re worried—” She sighs. “Point is, there is a good chance you’ll be Drifting for the first time in a year tomorrow.”
Illya swallows. His hand trembles. “It wouldn’t be the first time.” He closes his eyes to flashes of young rookies collapsing to the ground.

Illya had watched, impassive, before demanding the next one.

“No?” Gaby asks. “I swear–”

Her voice is lost in Illya’s remembering, too vivid to focus, taking over. Next.

He’d had a infamous reputation, and a celebrity status during his time as a successful Pilot. But after the death of his mother, another side was shown to the world.

*Next. I need one with a stronger mind.*

The people on Moscow’s Jaeger base had called him Fire and Ice, to reference the way he burned the minds his partners, and afterwards, didn’t seem to care.

“Illya?” Gaby sounds worried.

Illya tries to shake himself out of it. “They buried the incidents– it was a disgrace. Right after the death of my mother, when I got out of Medbay, I went into a full Drift four times.”

It would be the last time those four recruits ever Drifted.

“I didn’t find anything about this,” Gaby says.

Illya watches cars pass by and murmurs, “That’s because... things went wrong.”

“Are they–”

“They’re alive.” Alive, but not well. They might never be again. He never dared to ask for specifics.

Despite the nickname, Illya *had* cared and *had* felt an echo of the guilt that plagues him now. But he also remembers how numb he had been, drowning more than living. Half of his mind still empty, and even the slightest bit of empathy had brought him to his knees. He had fought for continuation, for distraction. Fighting had seemed the only solution. Being useful again, no matter the cost.

But now, a week removed from what he had longed for then, he almost wants to run and hide. Illya can envisage it well.

Napoleon collapsed on the ground, clutching his head in an attempt to protect himself from the war inside. Futile. The anger, the fear, the grief. The idea forces bile up his throat, and he coughs, loudly, until he finds his breath back. He doesn’t want Napoleon in pain.

Gaby touches his arm, sitting close. After a second, she stands and nods toward the market. A short reprieve in the form of distraction. As they walk, Gaby comments on the produce they find, the people that walk by, and the dawn of a new year that’s nearing, before settling on a topic close, but not quite, like they were talking about before. Gaby tells him that she used to want to be a Pilot, that she even applied, but she never allowed someone else to take the Drift.

“It wasn’t a trust issue,” she says while touching a string of supposed Kaiju bones distractedly. “I trusted my partner. I just didn’t allow them to take their piece. I always took on more than half. Never in balance.” She laughs shortly. “It made for killer migraines.”
Illya hums, not quite sure what to say to that. The experience of sharing a bond has always been a relief. He remembers the first Drift with his mother well. The sensation of weight being lifted of his shoulders, and the feeling that he’s exactly where he’s supposed to be. The balance had been a place to get back to, he’d felt at home. Illya can’t imagine wanting more to carry.

Gaby moves to another subject before he can figure out a response, she doesn’t seem to mind one way or another.

Waving through streets and tight corners, Gaby leads them to a little restaurant a block away from the market. The tiny room is open to the walkway, plastic tables and chairs edge in and out of the premises, altogether no more than four places and a bar.

The chef, grilling shrimp in the middle of the room, perks up when he sees Gaby coming in and greets them verbosely, Illya doesn’t understand a word of it. They’re sat down in the corner, with a perfect few of the grill. The chef hurries back to the shrimp, and starts to prepare another meal, without asking an order.

Gaby sees Illya watching with suspicion. “Trust me, it’s going to be heavenly.”

The air fills with the pungent smell of seasoning and smoked fish, and combined with the quiet corner the restaurant fits into, the contrast between their current settings and the marketplace is great. A hush of peace and familiarity flows around Illya, despite never having been here before. Gaby smiles and the first dish arrives, and Illya realises that he feels safe.

“So to summarize,” Gaby says between bites. “You have a history with Napoleon that makes it hard to Drift, or to open yourself up and trust him, but even more so, you’re worried about hurting him in the process. You care about him, despite the betrayal in the past.”

Illya savors the salty taste of his shrimp for a second, before contemplating what Gaby sums up. The way she said it, it sounds all really simple, almost trivial. A world away from the sharp turmoil that exists in Illya’s mind. But she’s not wrong. “No- yes,” Illya tries. “Mostly?”

Gaby tilts her head to the side in question.

“We have, a history,” Illya agrees, and then trails off. He takes another shrimp.

“Napoleon stole the Nuclear Processor in your base,” Gaby fills in, nodding. “You knew each other, and he betrayed your country.”

“Yes,” Illya agrees. She isn’t wrong, again, but the simplification irks him. “He was undercover and… we were together,” Illya swallows, “or so I thought.”

“Illya—” Gaby’s eyes widen, her expression wars between acceptance and shock. As if she had suspected, but still is surprised it’s true. Gaby bites her lip and says, “He took advantage of you.”

“Yes,” Illya says, honestly. “He did. He used me.” The words feel like barbs in his throat.

Gaby features fall slowly into a silent anger, and Illya doesn’t know if he wants that. Napoleon confessing and begging and trying flicker in his mind’s eye, accompanied by the touch and care of Vincenzo, that Illya now believes to be Napoleon too. So he adds in a soft voice, “But... I don’t know. He claims he felt the same, that he didn’t lie about us.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes,” Illya says, and is almost surprised in the certainty of his voice. Vincenzo loved him.
Napoleon loved him. Every kiss, every touch. They had meant something to him, to the both of them. Illya shivers and shakes his head. “But he still left, so that doesn’t change anything.”

Illya looks up, and then away from Gaby’s pensive eye.

“Doesn’t it?”

It’s a simple question, but it guts Illya still. The answer of course, is yes. It changes everything, but Illya has no idea how. “I- I still have feelings- for him,” Illya confesses, despite himself. “And he claims to do so as well. But- we’re…” Illya sighs. “You can’t build anything on a past like this.”

The chef moves in with the next round of dishes before Gaby can reply, and Illya tries to keep his mind onto the steaming bowl of miso-soup. He swirls the broth around with his spoon and watches the spiral until Gaby speaks again.

“I’ve talked a lot this week, with Napoleon.” Gaby pushes her plate away and takes a sip from her ice coffee.

Illya stops staring in his soup for answers and listens to her instead.

“He never went into specifics about your relationship,” Gaby says, a little bitterly. “But he told me about the theft, and the plan he had, the people he worked with. I interrogated him about my Uncle, of course, so I have a lot of insight into why he did some things that he did. That is to say, there is no excuse, no reason for hurting you, and I am in no way suggesting that he is not at fault here but… I don’t think you know enough to decide it’s hopeless, Illya.”

Illya clenches his fist around a napkin.

Gaby sighs. “He seems to think that the Drift will heal you two magically somehow.”

“What do you think?” Illya asks.

“I think that’s bullshit,” she says harshly, which pulls a reluctant snort out of Illya.

“I think you need to sit down and talk to each other. But if the Drift will push him toward doing that, I say go for it.” Gaby shrugs. “Placebo effect.”

“Your solution is to talk,” Illya repeats, frowning.

“Yes?” Gaby looks at him as if he’s started speaking in tongues and then sighs.

“The last time we talked I broke down,” Illya says. “And the few times I tried with Napoleon… It didn’t always go well.”

“You’re doing great now,” Gaby argues. “And of course you had trouble talking about your mother, but Illya. I think this, talking through it with Napoleon and figuring out what actually happened will be easier than you think.”

Illya shakes his head. Just the idea of opening himself up to that part of his past shakes him. What if it’s worse than he even knew? What if something he did made Napoleon decide to leave? There are so many ways it can cut more than it does now. Illya doesn’t want to risk it.

Gaby reaches out and places a hand on his arm. “I think you’re living in the past Illya, without actually knowing the big picture. I think if you want to make any kind of progress, you need to trust him to carry half the load. Talk it out. Stop avoiding it.”
Illya suppresses a flinch at her tone. It’s true though. Illya suddenly feels ashamed. He’s been running too long. He’s been a coward.

“No, no,” Gaby says, and squeezes his arm. “Don’t do that with your face. Illya, I’m not angry at you. You’ve done nothing wrong, okay? Everything you’ve done is completely understandable. I just–” She stops, and sighs in frustration. “I want you to be the best Pilot team in history like any other, but mostly I want two people I consider to be friends, to stop acting like they can’t be near the other while still longing to be. It’s awful, like a tango dance of angst and suffering. You’re hurting. Napoleon is hurting. I just want you to be happy, you deserve that. And what you’re doing now isn’t helping you, it’s making you both miserable.”

Illya swallows, there is something heavy in his throat.

Gaby looks worried. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” Illya murmurs quickly, shaking his head. “No. You just– That’s what Tatiana would’ve said. My mother would’ve said that if she’d been here.”

Gaby takes a hushed breath and squeezes harder, blinking a little too quickly.

Illya tries for a smile “Thank you, for–”

Gaby shakes her head. “No, no gratitude. Illya, I am your friend and I love you. Of course I want you to be happy.”

Illya shudders, warmth cuts through him and a lone tear rolls over his cheek. Gaby laughs wetly, and they both grab a napkin and take a breath.

The chef picks up the forgotten plates, and gives them a bowl of ice cream they share. Conversation flows between them until Gaby stands up to pay and they walk back to base together. Before they enter the Shatterdome, Gaby hesitates, and bites her lip.

“Come on,” Illya says, “A good friend of mine told about me the importance of communication.”

Gaby smiles. “I’m angry at Napoleon for hurting you, but I still consider him my friend and I’m worried about him. He’s getting worse, getting desperate. The Drift is his only hope and I’m very concerned about how he will cope when it doesn’t heal you two like he wishes it will.” Gaby looks Illya in the eye. “I’m asking you to not let it be the last chance for closure or understanding or even healing. Whatever happens in the Drift, I want you to promise me you’ll talk to him afterwards.”

Illya takes a breath, and considers the question for a second. He lets himself feel through the initial fear, and then see the reason and the opportunity behind Gaby’s request. Giving his word feels like promising to jump off a cliff without knowing if anyone will catch him. There is a risk, but there always is, and his indecision is hurting them both– is hurting them all.

Illya nods, steels himself, and falls.

“Okay.”

The next morning comes with clear night’s sky. Illya wakes hours before the sun deigns to shine, but in the absence of clouds he spends the first moments of the early morning watching the stars.

After this peaceful time, Illya stands in search for coffee and something to eat. Over the weeks he’s become closer to the early shift crew, and he looks forward to greet them and see them smile.
But when he shuffles into the cafeteria, an intruder sits on the far edge of the room. Illya huffs at himself for the thought. Napoleon has every right to have an early breakfast.

Illya hesitates, but then approaches, his promise a leading thread stringing to Napoleon’s table. As Illya nears, he sees Napoleon is playing with something in his hand.

Illya stills. It’s a bug. “I didn’t-”

Napoleon jumps and looks up, and then relaxes minutely when he sees Illya. “I know you didn't,” Napoleon says quickly, puts the thing in his suit pocket as if it's normal “I just couldn't get myself to throw it away.” He smiles wryly, tapping his fingers on the table, before continuing pleasantly if a slightly measured, “What can I help you with?”

Illya chooses to let it go. He sits on the chair across and takes a deep breath. “About the Drift-”

Napoleon interrupts him with a placating hand. “-Gaby already informed me of the risks, but as I said. It’s worth it. I’m ready for it.” He pauses. “...Are you?”

Illya nods. He has to trust Napoleon to carry half of the weight, half of them. “Yes.”

Napoleon sits back and smiles in obvious relief. “Okay, that’s good.”

Illya stays seated, and awkward silence stretches. Napoleon frowns.

“Is there anything else-”

“We need to talk after the Drift,” Illya blurs. “About us.” He motions vaguely between them. “This.”

Napoleon clenches his jaw and shakes his head. “Don’t let Gaby pressure you into something you don't want, Peri- Illya. She means well, but she doesn’t understand. It's okay.”

“I don’t understand, Cowboy,” Illya begins softly, honestly. “I don’t understand anything. I have no idea anymore, and I just- I just need to know if there is anything salvageable, and if Gaby thinks talking will help…” Illya watches Napoleon, and finishes intently. “I want to try.”

“Oh.” It’s barely a word. A single breath filled with relief, hope, and tentative happiness. Napoleon swallows, slowly recovering from his shock. “Oh, okay.” He smiles a tiny smile Illya knows well, and something sparkles in his piercing eyes. The emptiness gone. “Deal.”

Illya takes in Napoleon’s face and revels in the sight of it, the emotion and the realness, and maybe this is going to work. Miraculously. Somehow. He holds out a hand over the table and Napoleon takes it with a smile, and they shake.

“Deal,” Illya says gruffly, releasing Napoleon’s hand a beat too slow.

Their hesitant but honest smiles hang between them for a second, and Illya’s heart grows. A sudden cough behind them breaks the moment, but not in a way Illya fears it gone forever.

“Good news, gentlemen,” Waverly says, wringing his hands together when he reaches their table. “We’re in luck for once, the Jaeger is ready for you. I’d advise you to suit up.”

His exo-suit isn’t red.

The silver and white plates sparkle strangely in the dim-light of the preparation room. Napoleon is in the back, almost done already, but Illya’s stuck staring at the shine of a colour wrong.
Illya knows that the Red Peril is over, but sometimes it seems hard to remember. His exo-suit is silver and sleek, and it fits perfectly and it isn’t the dark velvet of his mother’s lipstick any longer.

Illya stretches his arms, the plates whirr and click. The technology alive and more ready than Illya is, but the way it hugs around him feels familiar and Illya has missed it, intensely.

A man in a white uniform opens the door. “Whenever you’re ready.” He walks away before they answer and on the back of his jacket the silver letters are embroidered, bold and brave.

U.N.C.L.E

They have a personal crew now.

If everything goes perfectly, this will become routine. Illya will stand here again and again until the colour of his suit doesn’t feel strange anymore. Until he knows the name of every crewmember and every tech that wears that jacket. If everything goes perfectly, he will be a Pilot again.

“You okay?” Napoleon asks. He’s tweaking the settings on his boot. His hair gelled back in preparation for the helmet.

Illya sits down, heavy. The bench clanks against the steel. “Give me a second.”

Napoleon looks up, questioning, but Illya shakes his head. He just needs a moment to breathe.

A moment becomes a minute becomes two, and there isn’t enough space for his lungs in this suit. Napoleon doesn’t speak, for which Illya’s grateful, but his breathing is still out of his control.

Napoleon takes a deep, loud breath that resounds through the room. Then pushes the air out even louder. This repeats until Illya finally figures out what he’s doing. Illya closes his eyes, and tries to match Napoleon’s rhythm until he feels secure again.

“Better?”


Another knock on the door, and this time it’s Alexei standing in the doorway. He flickers a concerned look at Illya before motioning at Napoleon.

“Gaby wants to speak to you,” he says.

Napoleon nods, and walks out of the room, passing Alexei who’s watching him with crossed arms.

Illya stands carefully, his head a little light. He takes a few gulps of his water bottle, and sighs.

“Come walk with me,” Alexei says.

Illya follows him. They walk in silence for a moment, through the hall that leads into the bridge that connects the cockpit. The head of the Jaeger. This time they won’t make the Drop, fall down metres and connect to the body. Only the Drift is what is important now.

“Are you sure?” Alexei stops and turns around, his face serious. “Are you ready for this?”

“Ready enough,” Illya says. “Sure enough.”

Alexei huffs, but continues walking again. “I have a bad feeling about this.”
Illya has no response to that.

“You need to find something stable, Illya. Don’t latch onto a memory of your past with him, it’s volatile, and you have to let memories of your mother pass too. Stay shallow, don’t focus on him.”

Illya snorts. “I know how a Drift works, Alexei.”

“No,” Alexei says resolutely. “Not something like this. It’s a psychological trap, an inch too far and you’re lost. Any memory that holds extreme emotion will pull you in, and everything about this will push you toward that. You’re standing on an edge, and only a calm mind will keep you from falling.”

Illya reaches out and clasps a hand around Alexei’s shoulder. “I know.”

Alexei sighs and then surprises Illya by hugging him. It must not be comfortable, the harsh edges of a suit pressing into his arms. “Be careful,” Alexei says as he pulls back. “Just, be careful.”

“Kuryakin, we’re ready for you!” an anonymous voice calls out.

Illya steps back. “I will,” he answers Alexei, before calling out, “I’m coming!”

Illya sets his shoulders and crosses the bridge in sure steps. He enters the cockpit with it’s white and silver steel everywhere. Napoleon’s standing to the side, talking to Gaby through their cockpit screen. She’s in the communication room, making sure everything being monitored. Seeing her makes Illya a little calmer. Whatever happens, they are not alone.

“Lower the Connectors,” Illya commands, sounding more sure than he is. A crew member scrambles and a moment later, their places are lowered down. Napoleon quirks a smile, and they stand into the latches together, crew moving around to click them in. The spine is put in place last, and Illya feels the zing of electricity through his body when the machine accepts him as another part.

They’re both passed their helmets, and for a second everything is dark. Then the visor flickers to life, and Illya sees everything from the Jaeger’s vitals to the audio waves of Central. All information in his sight. A orange sign in the corner warns them that they’re not neurally connected yet, and Illya watches it blink until Gaby’s voice crackles out of the comms.

“Illya, Napoleon,” she says. “Last chance to put a stop to this.”

Illya shakes his head at once, and sees Napoleon do the same.

“Okay. Neural handshake in 5...”

Illya closes his eyes.

4

A deep, long breath.

3

Stay shallow, let it flow.

2

There is nothing to be afraid off.
He is safe.

“There we go, stay calm guys. 10%, 20%. You’re doing great.”

Blue is all around him, washes of the colour seeps into the edges of Illya’s mind and he tries to stay out of the water, avoid stepping in. It’s about letting the stream be the stream. It’s about recognizing the man in the little raven-haired child looking at a painting in awe and letting him go. It’s about seeing him grow and live and hurt and cry but not about claiming these memories as his own. Illya won’t remember, after, but he might ask.

The man with raven hair takes a job - a heist, a thief, an opportunity to become greater than he was - and becomes another man.

A man Illya knows, and loved. And loves.

But it’s about letting go.

It’s so hard to let go.

Illya wants to know.

“Illya?”

The raven haired man has two names but only one mind.

“Illya! You’re going too deep. Come back. Stay shallow.”


They met on a day a long time ago.

Illya remembers.

“Gaby!”

“I see it, fuck. Try to talk him out of it.”

“Peril, please. Don’t. Stay with me.”

*There are many reasons why anyone with an inkling of self-preservation tends to avoid Illya.*

“Illya! No. Stay with me!”

*His reputation precedes him. There are entire holes punched out of his past by all existing levels of classified.*

“We’re losing him Napoleon, pull him out!”

*Which is why everyone on base knows all the facts.*

“I can’t! He isn’t responding!”

*It doesn’t matter if you’re in the Army camps or the Defender training programme, the walls have ears and recruits love to gossip.*
“Peril, Please!”

“Gaby, he’s following the rabbit. Fuck!”

_The first person who dared to ask after Illya’s father had his head slammed against a metal table._

“I’m disconnecting you, Solo.”

“Don’t you fucking dare Gaby.”

“But–“

Most stopped asking questions after that.

“No! I can’t lose him! Not again! I’m going after him.”

“I’m going to get you back, Peril. **I will** get you back.”

_They stopped speaking to him all together._

Illya likes it that way.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you amazing brooke for sticking with this story and beta’ing once again when I was late af.

General Message of Vagueness (AKA NEXT CHAPTER MIGHT BE LATER THAN SUNDAY)
The next chapter can either be next Sunday- if the chapter is short and everything goes well.
Next Wednesday- if the chapter is long and everything goes well.
Or in two weeks- if the chapter is long and everything goes wrong.

I'm really gonna try and do the first one. Sigh. I'd planned to write a part of the next chapter in my 2 weeks, but then I got sick for a week so I didn't have much time left anyway. So I have to start from scratch this week. The universe just doesn't want this fic finished, it's probably a fan.

Anyway, love y'all. Hope you enjoyed this one <3

Also: There are definitely 2 chapters coming after this, and then probably an epilogue kinda thing. It depends on chapter 17. I might write one long one, or break it up in two. Let me know what you'd prefer!

Also 2: If you're confused to what happened at the end: they went into the Rabbit Hole together, which means you mentally relive memories and you can lose yourself in them. Napoleon going in with him means that he can see everything from Illya's
perspective..... *cackles.* What can the Drift show indeed.
Warning: this is not a happy chapter, take care y'all. The end-notes have more specifics (a little spoilery) if you want to be prepared.

Thank the amazing Brooke for making this all possible.

Illya’s bag on the ground is what gives it away. A soft thump.

Someone curses under their breath. Illya wakes. Footsteps near the bed.

Illya freezes, and keeps silent. The other-side of the mattress is cold.

The door creaks open. Another person enters. An alarm screeches, far away.

“Is he here?”

An anonymous whisper.

“Yes.” Illya recognizes the next voice at once. “He’s asleep.”

Losev nears the bed. A shiver runs over Illya’s body. He holds his breath, tenses, and flips over. He grabs Losev’s wrist and twists back. It cracks. He swings his leg underneath his blanket and kicks Losev in the chest. He stumbles, moaning in pain. Illya jumps out of bed and punches him in the jaw, bringing him down. Losev scrambles backwards on the floor, but before Illya can do anything else a sharp pain blooms in his side.

The other person in the room, a man Illya can’t see well in the dark, presses something that feels like a knife deeper into his skin. “Take another step, and I’ll push,” he threatens in a low voice.

Illya stills. “What do you want.”

“I want you to be calm, and go to your knees for me.”

Illya swallows. His stomach drops. The man scrapes the knife along Illya’s side and the pain makes him flinch. Illya slowly lowers to the ground.

Losev stands, dusting himself off. He spits at Illya. “Filthy traitor.”

Illya growls, but doesn’t move; very away of the knife too close.

“Don’t antagonize him, Losev,” the man says, moving the knife from Illya’s side to his neck. Illya clenches his jaw. Fear must not be shown, but the sudden realisation he might not live long eats away inside him.

Losev walks around Illya, pulling his arms together uncomfortably. Illya feels the cold sting of steel against his wrists. Cuffs click into place, too tight.
“Let me go or I will scream for help,” Illya says.

Losev laughs out loud, genuine hysteric. “Oh, the poetic justice.”

The man snorts too. “You can try, Kuryakin. But no one will help you.”

Illya takes a deep breath, filling his lungs to prepare for a yell, but all words are lost when the light flickers on, and the deputy of security stands in the doorway, flanked by three guards.

“Is he secure?” the Deputy asks, his scruffy moustache covers the grim set of his mouth. With a start, Illya recognizes disgust carved into his features, disgust directed at him.

“Yes, Sir,” Losev answers. He drags a hand over the bruise on his jaw, grumbling at the blood it draws.

“I warned you not to underestimate him,” The Deputy says.

Losev huffs and walks out of the room. The guards move go after him, but are called back by a quick motion of the Deputy’s hand. They march inside and grab Illya by the arms, hoisting him up. The touch shakes Illya out of his shock.

“What is going on? Let me go! Why are you doing this?” Illya struggles in the grip of the guards, but they persist. Illya drops his weight to the ground, forcing them to carry him. He kicks one of them in the shin and the guard lets go with a curse. Illya twists around to get rid of another one, but the strange man steps in close again, knife pressed to his throat, cutting.

Illya holds his breath.

“Enough, Valkov,” The Deputy barks. “We have no use of him dead.”

The man – Valkov, shrugs and smiles, moving the knife an inch away. “A pity.”

The Deputy directs his glare to Illya.

“You’re being arrested for treason and betrayal of Russia, Illya Kuryakin.” The Deputy inclines his head and the guards pull him up again. “Bring him to the interrogation room.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Illya yells. “I’ve done nothing wrong!”

His protests are futile. The Deputy walks away, hands clasped behind his back.

The guards try to drag him out of his room, but Illya unearths the core of his anger and growls, thrashing and raging until his arms are free. He runs out of the room, but another set of guards capture him. Two hit his knees with their batons. Illya recognizes Artur as he goes down.

With the commotion a crowd has gathered, standing in doorways and shuffling into the hall. Hushed gasps make the round as Illya collapses to the ground.

“What is going on?”

Nadya. Illya tries to look up, but blood drips into his eye. She comes running, but is pushed back by a guard. “What are you doing to him!”

“He’s being arrested for treason,” Losev says triumphantly. The crowd hears it. Slowly, the noise rises.
Five guards pick Illya up again. He tries to get away, but his head hurts from the fall and his back aches. By the time Illya’s carried out of the hallway, the other recruits are yelling after him. Crude insults and repetitions of the word traitor are flung to his ears, along with hisses and spits. Someone throws a shoe at his face but misses, hitting a guard instead.

Illya is too numb to see the humor in it.

The interrogation room is cold and dusty. Illya remembers the proud proclamations during their classes. Their base has no serious criminal activity for over a decade, too small to be much of a target. They lost their streak now it seems.

The guards throw him down into the dust and close the door behind him with a slam. Illya coughs. The lightbulb flickering from the ceiling betrays the ten year’s past too, and Illya curls up into himself as he watches it blink in and out. It’s better to lose himself into the repetition than trying to make sense of what is happening. Why they’re out for him now– or better yet why their commanders are in on it this time, visibly.

His eyes throb and he doesn’t wonder where Vincenzo is. He doesn’t think about the cold mattress. He doesn’t let suspicion take hold.

Illya recognizes that he’s in danger. He’s as vulnerable here as he was in the freezer. Anyone could walk in. He has no control. His career might not come back from this, whatever this is. Illya groans to himself. He’d been so close. So close. Why can’t they just let him be? Why isn’t he allowed to serve?

He hopes his mother doesn’t know– another loved one disgraced. She doesn’t deserve to go through this all over again.

As if raising a mountain from the ground, Illya clutches his jaw as he drags himself up. His knees shoot white hot pain through his system, and he has to dry–heave into the bucket next to the door. He stands only a second before collapsing on the steel chair bolted to the floor. It’s cold and hard and he cuts his hand on a sharp edge.

Illya wipes the dust off the table, and waits.

It takes two days for something to happen. Maybe they forgot about him. The thought is fleeting but there. Food comes once. Water more often, shoved through the slot in the door. He’s not let out.

He now knows why they put the bucket there.

The room quickly reeks and Illya cowers in a corner, shaking from the cold. He tries to sleep through it, but someone can walk in any second. He needs to stay alert. He needs to protect himself.

The door opens an unending moment later. A guard Illya doesn’t recognize steps inside, wearing a blank expression. A tremble in his hand betrays his fear. He takes the tray and the bucket out, wincing as he does, and closes the door behind him. The moment the lock latches shut Illya realises that had been his one chance to escape. He didn’t take it.

Exhaustion finally catches up with him, and Illya wakes again with a crick in his neck and a foul taste in his mouth. Two new water bottles are laid next to the door, and Illya pushes himself off the wall to get to them. He finishes one gratefully, but winces at the cold they push through his body. By the time Illya’s halfway done with the second bottle, the door opens again. This time Illya’s
ready for it.

He jumps up, and blindly runs towards the opening, ignoring the protests of his knees. He doesn’t get further than one step before vice closes around his arm, pushing him back. It’s Valkov.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” he says, a pleasant and cutting smile on his face. “Sit down or we’ll get your old friend again.” A flicker of silver catches in the corner of Illya’s eye and he flinches. Keeping his attention on the knife, he deflates.

“Good boy,” Valkov murmurs, pushing Illya back into the chair. “I came here to talk.”

Illya presses his lips together.

Valkov smiles wider. “Hear me out. Tell me what I want to know and you’ll be allowed to do your business in a toilet, and if you’re nice I might get you some actual food too. We both know a guy like you can’t live on a few crackers.”

Valkov looms over him. “But if you refuse…” He shrugs suddenly and leans against the wall, casual and pleasant again within a fraction of a second. “Well, let’s say, we don’t have enough time to let you rot here, so faster tactics will be allowed soon.” He holds his knife up, inspecting it in the light. “I have more of these. A collection. I would love to show them to you.”

“I don’t know why I’m here. I don’t know what you want from me.”

Valkov hums. “Let’s summarize what we know and I’ll give you a chance to fill in the gaps.”

Illya blinks blankly at him. Valkov takes it as agreement.

“Two nights go around 0300, someone broke into the Data Storage room and downloaded the database onto an untraceable server,” Valkov begins. “We traced the identification number, and discovered S.O.P Illya Kuryakin was on record for opening the doors and turning the main security systems off. Your ID also opened the door to the armory fifteen minutes later and accessed the storage facility to our motorcycles.” Valkov smiles. “That turned out to be the mistake. The unauthorized usage of a motorcycle was reported to the guard on staff, who then got his shit together and noticed every camera in the facility was running on a loop.

“We were surprised to find you in your bed tonight,” Valkov says after a pause. “Maybe the alarm spooked you and you hoped pretending to be asleep would solve your problem?”

It’s a strange sensation, feeling the ground fall away underneath you, your mind swooping into endless space with nowhere to turn. Illya feels numb. Illya is lost within the void of nothing. Sickness swirls in his stomach and he would’ve hurled if he had any connection to his body at all.

“This is where you explain yourself,” Valkov drawls.

Illya can’t find his way to his mouth. He can’t breathe.

Valkov huffs. “You’ll have to speak soon, Kuryakin, but in the meantime I’ll tell you what we’ve found out this last few days.” Valkov stands up straight, moving away from the wall and pacing in slow steps through the room. “We know you weren’t working alone. We know who your accomplice is and we know he was the one who got away with the Data.”

The knife is in his hands again, twisting and turning. “So, Illya. The only thing we need to know is... Where did Vincenzo White run off to? Where is he hiding?”
Illya comes back to his body with a start. Cold replaces with heat, seething. Illya can’t see anything but red. All this time. *Vincenzo*. All this time.

Illya jumps up. Growls. A guttural sound pulled from his chest. Valkov’s expression flickers for the first time, but Illya can’t see it through his rage. The table and chair are bolted to the floor so Illya grabs the tray instead. He throws it against the wall. It’s clank reverberates through the room.

Valkov retreats, banging against the door. “Get me out now!”

Before Illya can move around the table, the door is yanked open and Valkov flees. Locks click back into place. Illya follows the sound, ravaging with his fists against the door. He kicks and fights and finally bashes his head against the cold steel wall. The heat boiling through him pushes and pulls and twists and a second later he’s on the floor, shaking and emptying his stomach until there is nothing left. He spits blood.

Slowly the first wave passes and he’s left shivering in his pain. His knuckles hurt, broken and ruined, and his head feels like it’s been split in two. Illya clenches his jaw, biting through the skin of his cheek, and rides the agony like a man drowning.

Because his body hurting and aching is a relief. It’s his savior. It suffocates the sound of his heart tearing itself into pieces and falling and falling and falling. Illya feels the happiness he had held over the last months rot before his eyes. Memories overwhelm him and they lose their colour, their meaning. Each one bleeds with lies.

Vincenzo’s smile turns red and twisting and Illya cries out. He doesn’t want to lose the last thing that is left to him, but even the farce isn’t his to keep.

Sweating and shaking Illya falls into a slumber, escaping from one nightmare to another. He dreams of them together but wrong. Sickly perverted. Vincenzo presses kisses into his skin, leaving gaping wounds all over Illya’s chest and Illya takes it. Illya clings to it. Vincenzo wants it. Vincenzo’s white bright teeth sharpen into a smile filled with knives. Illya kisses him anyway and swallows the blood.

Vincenzo pushes him back with force, fingers digging into the wounds he created, pushes until a black lake engulfs them both and tells him, “This is what you deserve, Peril. This and only this.”

Illya nods and Vincenzo smiles, so proud. His hand traces Illya’s jaw gently and Illya presses into it, desperate. The hand slides from his jaw to his throat and it tightens and tightens until Illya’s breath is lost in the dark. Illya chokes and gasps, and Vincenzo laughs before fitting his mouth over his, granting him his air.

“You are nothing without me,” Vincenzo says. “You never were.” This time he doesn’t smile as Illya chokes again, falls slack in Vincenzo’s grip. “Oh, Peril,” he says in a pitiful voice. “Oh, Peril. How could you believe you ever had me? That I was yours to keep?”

Illya drifts. The hand tightens.

“Who would want you, Peril? Who would love you?”

Illya opens his eyes. Vincenzo smiles back. His mouth is bleeding. The blood drips from his chin.

“No one,” Illya whispers. “No one would.”

Vincenzo lets go. “That’s right, my love. My Peril. That’s exactly right.”
Illya wakes, sucking in air desperately. He coughs and sobs as he crawls his way back to the surface of reality. There is nothing left in his stomach but his body tries anyway, until his throat is raw and head is screaming.

Exhausted, he reaches for a half-empty bottle on the floor. He takes hurried gulps before a new wave of nausea forces it out again. Illya sags. Desperate cries ring out in the small room, and Illya belatedly realises the sounds are tearing out of his own chest. He tries to swallow his sobs away but they keep coming. Illya loses himself.

When he wakes again, Valkov is sitting on the chair, watching him.

“Be careful, Illya,” He warns when Illya blinks his eyes open. “I have people standing outside with tasers. Fighting me won’t result in anything.”

Illya closes his eyes again, doesn’t move. He’s too tired for this.

“You’re either a very good actor, or you didn’t know the plan would be unfolding that night. As I see it, Vincenzo left you here to waste away and got himself away scot-free. Did he forget to tell you when to run or was this how it was meant to be?”

There is a pause.

“Either way, your temper tantrum doesn’t let you off the hook. I still have questions, and I would like for you to answer them now. You don’t have to cover for him anymore Illya, he betrayed you. See this as a small form of revenge.”

Illya doesn’t say anything. Valkov sighs.

“Where is Vincenzo White? Who is his buyer?”

Valkov pushes his shoe in Illya’s side. “You in there?”

Illya growls and grabs his foot, dragging him off the chair. He wants to reach over and punch Valkov in the stomach, but a sharp pain in his head stops him and he sags back.

Valkov stands, dusting off his shirt. “I thought we were done with this, Illya.”

A cough forces itself out of Illya’s throat.

“I have other methods to get you to talk,” says Valkov as he moves toward the door. “Last chance.”

“I don’t know anything. I didn’t know.”

It’s barely a whisper, but it’s the truth that carves the inside of Illya’s body. He should have known. He should have seen it was too good to be true. Vincenzo with his mysterious past and secretive problems, plastering a smile on his face every time Illya looked at him. An easy target. Vinenzo never wanted him. He wanted his access, the keycard that got him in and out of the Data rooms and the base.

Vincenzo came out of nowhere and pretended to love a recruit desperate for it. Begging for it. God. Illya bites the gnawed side of his cheek. Vincenzo must have been surprised how simple it was to fool him. He must have laughed about it when Illya couldn’t see. Didn’t want to see.

Illya’s been living in blissful ignorance of his true motives, and the absolute sickening thing is that he would give his life to get it back. To reverse the past few days and spend eternity in the last
moments of not knowing. The last moments of contentment.

Vincenzo took that from him.

Valkov sighs again, disappointed. “You know I don’t believe you.”

Illya shrugs. There is nothing to be believed. His failure is so great no sane man would ever see it as truth. Illya’s never deserved adoration or love. It’s no surprise that it was never really there.

Valkov hesitates before the door before stepping back again. Illya follows him with a lazy eye as he slouches in the chair again. Illya doesn’t like the smile he’s wearing.

“I can’t help but wonder,” Valkov says. “Do you recognize me?”

Illya blinks, and he frowns despite himself, breaking his blank mask. Valkov shakes his head, but it seems like he expected the answer.


Illya says nothing, but Valkov continues as if he heard a question within the silence.

“Officially they call me an interrogation expert, and I double as the personal bodyguard of the Deputy,” he says. “Unofficially I get them what they want, information or otherwise, and then clean up the mess.”

Valkov leans forward, his smile grows. Illya flinches back instinctively

“But I wasn’t born like this. I started out right here, was S.O.P just like you and a Sergeant at that,” Valkov laughs. “I remember you, a little traitor’s son who didn’t know how to fight just yet, and everyone took advantage. But you were a sight to be seen, so I wanted a piece of you for myself. You refused.”

Illya feels all blood drain from his face. No. Not him. No.

“We’ll be seeing each other, Kuryakin.” Valkov stands, looms over Illya.

Illya can’t move. He stares at the ground. His hands shake.

“And keep my old deal in mind, hmm? You still look delectable, much more so down on your knees for me.” Valkov smiles. “Think about it. If you change your mind, I might be able to make everything go a little more easy for you around here. But it will cost.”

Valkov walks away. The door slams behind him.

Illya is afraid.

The fear is never ending, but a new routine makes itself known. The approximation of a day starts with a tray of food Illya refuses to eat. He can’t quite voice the reasons why, but the way his stomach is tearing itself to pieces is preferable to the chaos in his mind. And due to the hunger, sleep comes in short, uneven bouts that lower the chance of dreaming of Vincenzo again, and his bloodlined smile.

Valkov comes in every day, asking the same questions, and Illya only gives him the truth. He didn’t know. He didn’t know. It doesn’t take long for Valkov’s patience to run scarce. That’s when
the beatings start.

At first, Illya destroys those who try.

They wake him with kicks to the stomach and Illya finds one of their faces and forces his thumb in an anonymous eye. Losev has a love for the taser, trying and failing to keep a safe distance. The sound of bone cracking against iron has never felt so satisfying and they have to carry Losev out of the room, needing five guards to restrain Illya.

The cuffs come in after that. Valkov interrogates him with his collection of knives while Illya is tied down and useless. Kicking and screaming doesn't work, and when his answers don’t change Valkov’s requests change.

“I will stop if you kiss me, Illya.”

“Tell me you’re mine, and I’ll put my knives away.”

The pain. The pain. The pain.

After five days, Illya can’t take it anymore.

After five days. Illya doesn’t fight when they kick him awake. He doesn’t trash and claw as they cuff him to the chair, and he doesn’t spit in Valkov’s face when he makes his demands again.

Illya says yes.

Valkov has never smiled wider.

He puts his knives away slowly, as if he’s savoring the moment. Illya swallows bile and waits. The cuffs are released, and Valkov massages Illya’s wrists almost gently, almost with care.

Maybe this is what Illya deserves.

Valkov directs Illya to kneel, and he goes. He almost collapses to the ground, but he sways on his knees after a second. Valkov cradles his hands around Illya’s jaw, caressing his filth into Illya’s skin. Illya feels like he’s burning from the outside in, but the poisoned touch doesn’t reach him deeply numb inside.

“You’re so good,” Valkov murmurs, he seems almost lost in his glee. “Open up, love.”

Love.

The piercing sound cuts through Illya drowning in nothing and suddenly he’s there. He’s alive.

In a flash, Illya has his hand around Valkov’s throat, tightening. He pushes Valkov against the wall, up up up until his feet kick frantically above the ground. Illya watches with cool detachment as Valkov’s face turns from red to blue, from anger to fear, from fighting to pleading.

“You will never touch me again,” Illya says, rage courses through him but his words are dead, emotionless. “You will never touch anyone again.”

Valkov pales, claws at Illya’s hands. Illya squeezes.

Then the door breaks open and Illya feels a sharp pain in his arm. A wave of dizziness makes him release his hand, and Valkov collapses to the ground, dragging in breath.
Illya’s vision narrows and grows black. Everything around him spins.

Valkov is laughing.

“I rather have you awake and begging,” he choke out between hackled breaths. “But this is fine by me. Goodnight, Illya. You’re mine now, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“No– No. No.” Illya stumbles over the words; his mouth far away. He feels a hand gripping his hair and then the darkness takes over.

Illya comes to slowly, blinking at the harsh light above him.

Suddenly he remembers Valkov and he panics. He tries to move, but his hands are stuck to something and he can’t get them out. His wrist hurt with the strain of pulling them, and Illya gradually stops fighting when his environment becomes clear. Along with the white covers and the mint green walls, Illya recognizes he’s not in the interrogation room anymore, but in a hospital.

Before Illya can think more, a knock raps against the door and the lock clicks open. A woman with long brown hair and a polite smile steps inside. She has wears a white overcoat and holds a clipboard in her hands.

“You’re awake, good,” she says. “How are you feeling?”

The question crashes over Illya like a wave and he has nothing to hold on to. He tries to speak, but nothing comes out of his throat.

The woman smiles again. “It’s okay, take your time. They used a heavy drug on you.” She sounds disapproving but brisk, and Illya translates it into a professional distaste above a moralistic one.

“I’m Anna and I’ll be your doctor until we clear you with a clean enough bill of health. In here, you’re my patient first, a human with rights second and a suspected criminal last. To make it clear, I have no intention of hurting you, or keeping you cuffed to your bed. But I need to trust you won’t hurt me or my colleagues, and at the moment I don’t.” She pauses, and tilts her head. Illya feels like she can see the inside of him. “Or at least, not yet.”

Illya clears his throat and valiantly tries to say something. “Not… fight– hurt.” Illya sags back into his scratchy pillow with a frustrated huff. His tongue lies uselessly in his mouth and it tastes like something died on it.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Anna says almost cheerfully, as if Illya had responded with a full sentence. “When you were still out, we ran some basic tests. You’re dehydrated and there are symptoms of starvation in your system. What was the last time you had a full meal?”

This can not be true. The thought circles through his mind, distracting him from trying to give an answer to the first person who hadn’t tried to hurt him in god knows how long. But that is exactly why this can’t be true. This is another trick. Give him comfort and care before yanking it all away again. Any second.

“Illya?” Anna is suddenly close, and Illya flinches at her voice. He hadn’t noticed her coming.

Anna lays a careful hand on his arm and Illya hisses. There is no pain, but the potential of it is here and overwhelming and Illya can’t escape.
Anna frowns, but doesn’t pull her hand away. “I will not hurt you, Illya. Do you hear me?”

She waits and eventually Illya nods, hoping she will leave if he does.

She doesn’t. She sits back down next to him, taking a few notes. “I take it you can’t remember the last time you ate,” she comments and continues. “We’re already giving you fluids, so be careful with your left arm.”

Illya flickers a look at it, only now realising an IV attached to his hand. There is a little blood around it from when he tried to pull away.

Anna sees him look and tuts, grabbing a swab and some disinfectant to clean the area.

“Careful,” she says again. “I already know about your sprained wrists and multiple abrasions on your knuckles and a few finger bones, but I’ll need your cooperation with the rest of your body. When you were drugged, you were thrashing and moving. I couldn’t really get a good look at some bruises and wounds you have.”

She stands and grabs a new pair of gloves before slapping them on. “If nothing major is broken and there are no signs of internal bleeding, you’re allowed to shower. If you think you might not have the strength to go alone, I’ll call a nurse to help you. Embarrassment is a lesser punishment relative to the concussion you will get if you slip and fall.”

She reaches over and hesitates a moment, a small key in her hand. “I have to tell you that there are guards on the other side of that door who will sedate you the moment they think you pose a danger to anyone here. It took a lot of convincing for them to let me in here alone, so please don’t undo all that work. I would hate to add to the mess of stimulants already in your system.”

Illya nods – it’s clear making an escape isn’t an option now, and the promise of a shower weighs heavily on his desire to stay. She releases the cuffs. Illya winces as he moves his arms and wrists around.

“Careful,” she warns again.

Illya slows his movements and clenches his jaw when the blood flows again, the prickling numbness replaced by aching pain. Now that he isn’t preparing for the next attack, the pain through his body fights for his attention. It’s everywhere. Every breath hurts. His cheek and lips sting and Illya can finally place the foul taste as the iron of his blood.

Anna carefully helps him sit up straight, and goes through the motions of checking his wrists, arms and face. The ache in his jaw wasn’t misplaced, and she warns that it might take a while before he’s able to chew hard food again, but no fracture of teeth are spotted. Then they go through the painful and humiliation process of getting Illya out of his hospital tenue. For the first time Illya’s grateful he’d been knocked out when he came here, he can’t imagine the torture of getting out of his filthy jeans.

His abdomen is covered in bloody bandages and an array of purple and yellow bruises. Illya tries to breath calmly on Anna’s order, but the visual representation of what he went through sinks it’s jaws in Illya’s panic. He’d been close. Someone got him out just in time. With a wave of nausea he realises he doesn’t know if they were early enough to get Valkov off him before he could do too much. He tries to voice the question, but he can’t get it out of his throat.

After Anna’s replaced the bandages and cleaned the superficial cuts along his arms and side. Illya has to swallow his pride and terror and uncover himself from his blanket. Anna is professional,
practical and most of all silent. She doesn’t flinch back from the mess that are Illya’s thighs.
Valkov had prefered to maim that area above all others, and the results are clear.

Both his knees took a beating too. Anna touches them gently, but her fingers grazing over the
surface feel like nails being hammered into flesh. Along with his bruised ribs and potentially teared
back muscle, Anna concludes for Illya to be able to function at all, he’ll need painkillers stat. Illya
doesn’t protest this.

For all that he hates the way drugs make him sluggish and slow, the all encompassing agony
makes it hard to breathe, much less eat, shower or sleep. All activities he’d been promised, and
can’t help but hope aren’t another lie.

The rumble of his stomach sounds over Anna’s latest comment, and she stills, smiling.

“Do you think you can eat something now? I’d want to start with something fluid and soft.
Pudding or yogurt?”

Illya’s first instinct is to refuse, an automatic reaction deeply buried in his system. He needs the
distraction of hunger, of feeling desperate for something other than–

But then flashes of his many injuries spill before him, undisputable proof of how close he was to
not surviving Valkov and his menace. What would his mother think if she saw him like this?

The question repeats, and Illya feels her heartbeat as his own. Through the onslaught grief and
guilt, Illya scrapes enough energy together to say, “Pudding.”

Anna notes it down and nods. “Okay. I’ll get someone to give you some, and after the painkillers
have kicked in, someone will help you wash off. I can’t reasonably allow you to go into the shower
now, the risk is too great.”

The admission is like a suckerpunch to the chest, metaphorically painful if Illya could’ve felt any
more of it at all. “Please.”

Anna sighs. “Maybe later,” she says after a moment. “If you can keep your pudding in your system
and you’ve not passed out from exhaustion by noon, I’ll get two nurses to help you and personally
oversee the event.” She watches him for a second and continues. “This is not standard procedure,
and don’t get used to it. It is just that the maltreatment of you is clear, and I can’t imagine the
psychological effects of such an experience. If a shower will help you feel more safe and healthy, it
might be worth the risk. If we greatly reduce it.”

She makes her way back to the door with a quick smile. “Besides, your lawyer will have my head if
we don’t give you the utmost care. I’ll see you soon, Illya.”

Illya’s reply that he doesn’t have a lawyer is cutoff by the closing of the door.

And then Illya has to wait.

He detests the not–knowing. The giant gaping black hole in his memory. He doesn’t know what
happened after Valkov had him despondent. He doesn’t know who got him here. He doesn’t know
why Vincenzo did what he did. Where he is now. If he at all regrets leaving Illya, or if if he’s
purely collateral damage, meaningless and worthless, only useful for the job at hand. Illya feels
ripped between two states: one of fiery rage and one of overwhelming loathing. The first directed at
Vincenzo, wherever he is now, and the latter eating away within himself because he should have
known.
He should have seen it.

He never should have believed–

Illya tenses his fists around the blanket and the sting of his knuckles drag him out of the vicious cycle of self–hatred. He has to choose the one that will help him live on and bury the other. Illya breathes, and chooses red. He chooses rage.

A knock alerts him to a nurse bustling inside. She’s got short black hair that contrasts starkly with her pale, blood–drained face. She doesn’t hide her fear well.

Illya moves his gaze from her to the wall opposite, and stares quietly. He only breathes, no sudden movements. He hopes that will lessen her terror a little.

She shuffles closer without a greeting, and places the pudding on the side table, and a change of clothes on the chair. “Anna told me to tell you that two male nurses will come in an hour and help you shower.”

“No.” It’s almost a yell. The reflex loud and harsh and the nurse almost falls, scrabbling back in shock. Illya stays stock still and tries again. “No, please. Not male nurses.” Illya feels humiliated and cut open but for this he will beg. For this he will forgo showering.

The nurse pauses for a surprised moment, but then vaguely shakes her head. “I will ask– I will ask Doctor Anna and see what I can do.” She disappears before Illya can attempt to thank her.

Illya takes a deep breath and hisses at the ache that brings his ribs. He ignores the way his hands tremble when he reaches for his pudding, shaking almost too much to hold the plastic spoon. Illya manages to shovel the whole lot in his mouth, slowly. Chewing and swallowing his new focus, desperately ignoring everything else that there is. When he finishes pride flows through him, shortly followed after by humiliation; eating something is nothing to be proud of. He’s an S.O.P recruit–

Illya’s breath hitches.

He’s not.

He’s nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Violence, torture, sexual intimidation, nearing physical sexual abuse. Nothing is graphic and Illya gets away in time, but it can be heavy for some. There is also one more graphically violent nightmare, because Illya can't catch a break.

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Disclaimer: I know nothing about medical stuff, so please view the thousand mistakes I've probably made as creative liberty or something?

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Hey y'all! This update comes in two parts. Tomorrow or Friday will bring part two :) So technically 2 chapters for y'all this time! The second part is already written, and only has to go through the editing process.
After that is posted I'll need to take some time for chapter 18, the chapter that very well might be the last one of this story! I'm not gonna put it in the counter, because I could split it anyway if it gets too long, and it stresses me out if I have to change it lol.

Hope you survived this chapter and fear not, we'll get a certain lawyer and a certain mother to the rescue quite soon!
Another point goes to Doctor Anna when about an hour later; two new nurses arrive and announce they are going to help him get in and out of the shower.

Both women look severe and as if they could’ve been bodyguards as much as nurses. Illya nods along as they explain how they plan to help him, and they warn that it’s going to take longer than he thinks it will. That it will hurt more than the exam had.

They turn out to be right.

It’s only a few metres to the shower, barely a few paces, but the distance stretches farther every time Illya tries to take another step. He’s dizzy and exhausted from getting out of bed already, and although the painkillers smoothe over the sharpest pain like a woolen blanket, the dark ache beneath is still very present. Sweat pearls along Illya’s forehead as he persists, and it’s the duty of the nurses that keep him upright.

By the time he’s inside the bathroom, tears streak his cheeks. But he’s made it. One of the nurses steps inside to untie his gown and Illya holds a barrister with his right hand as he steps out of the cloth. He’s too tired to care too much about the nurse seeing his naked back, and after helping him sit down on the plastic chair under the spray she steps out with the strict orders he’ll call out for them when he needs it, or when he wants out.

The moment she leaves the tightly spaced room, the ceiling's showerheads start to spray. The first touch of water is overwhelming and Illya quakes beneath it. Slowly, he gets used to the sensation and after a while he sighs, sagging back in his chair. The water stings his wounds, but it also washes away the filth of an unnamable number of days and nights. Old, caked blood flakes off his skin and into the drain, and layers and layers of sweat and grime melt away. Illya tips his head up and the water flows over his face and through his oily hair. He doesn’t have the energy or coordination to grab soap, but only the gentle wash of water does wonders.

Illya looks down again and breathes through his nose. The condensation thick and heavy in his lungs, and Illya can’t remember feeling this human, this real, in a long time.

He swallows steels himself for his own inspection, carefully tracing the skin of his hips and thighs, but he finds no handprints or bruises that aren’t explained away by steel capped boots. The hope is a heady relief and Illya sobs through it. There is no definite proof, no surety, but for some reason Illya feels certain. Whoever saved him, they were on time. Valkov didn’t. God.

Illya pushes the thought away, and washes himself with his right hand as much as he’s able. When his fingers start to wrinkle and the hot water becomes a little too much, he turns the shower off and asks for a towel.

The more gentle nurse arrives with a towel and dries him off before Illya can protest, though he also knows there is no way he could’ve done himself. Still the touch makes him tremble again, and when she finally offers him his clothes and helps him cover up, Illya’s never been more grateful for fabric. Hiding away the most vulnerable parts, and forming a barrier to others at the same time. The fact that Illya doesn’t have to look at every bruise is a bonus.
Despite being thoroughly exhausted, the way back is almost easier. The stress of one unknown off his shoulders, Illya can breathe through physical pain more easily. The worst hasn’t happened, he’ll survive the rest.

The bed has been remade, and Illya lays in his fresh blankets blissfully. The gentle nurse pushes a plastic cup of water in his hands, along with a few pills. Illya swallows them at once, shivering at the cold rushing through him.

“You’ll have to rest for a little while, but after an hour or so, two visitors have been patiently waiting to see you. So make sure you catch some rest, so you can handle their presence.”

Illya stomach drops and heart quickens as his mind goes through the option of who might be waiting. From the Deputy to Losev to Valkov. He keeps his lips tight, but internally he screams.

“Don’t worry, nothing bad,” the nurse hurry to add. “Just your lawyer and your mother. Breathe calmly, Illya. One at the time.”

Illya’s stomach swoops again, but now the other direction. Tatiana. An immediate crest of emotion engulfs him, guilt and something close to happiness war for dominance.

Illya pushes his mouth to move. “I don’t want her to see me like this.” He would give everything to see his mother’s smile, but he would give his life before she’ll need to see his suffering.

The nurse huffs, amused. “She’s seen you in a much worse state, I imagine she’ll be delighted to see you like this.”

Ice digs into Illya’s skin at the thought of Tatiana having seen him unresponsive, maybe close to death. “Tell her I’m okay.”

The nurse smiles genuinely now. “I will. Now, take a nap. Doctor Anna will pop in to check we didn’t kill you in the shower, and you’ll see your mother soon.”

And with that, she leaves after her colleague, who Illya already had forgotten was there.

Bone–deep fatigue gives Illya no choice, and after the silence takes over the room, his mind doesn’t wait long before falling into slumber. His dreams are less aggressive than usual.

This one cuts differently than Vincenzo’s bloody smile.

Illya dreams of his mother mourning him. He follows her as a phantom, unable to comfort, unable to apologize for failing. Unable to do anything but watch as she shatters. Fire burns their house down, and Illya can’t find her in the flames. He screams, but his voice is nothing but smoke, another source of burning. The ashes take him.

Illya wakes and feels a strange sense of safety. Strange because Illya can’t remember the feeling. He opens his eyes, and his mother is watching him. Smiling.

“Welcome back, sleeping beauty.”

Safety is a genuine smile when none are expected. Safety is a person who believes in you to come home, always.

“Mama.”
“Ilyusha,” Tatiana replies warmly. “I’m so happy to see you awake, talking again. You got me worried.”

“You’re here,” Illya says. He can’t help the surprise, the amazement. Despite knowing she’d come, seeing it is an whole other experience.

Tatiana carefully holds his hands, and Illya notes with satisfaction that they aren’t shaking. Her thumb rubs unharmed skin. “Of course I am, my son.”

Illya takes another moment, and then shoots forward to bury her in a hug. The elation of it quickly is sabotaged by the stab of pain the movement caused, Illya clenches his teeth together to suppress a reaction to the pain.

Tatiana notices anyway, her face pinched in concern as she gently pushes him back onto the bed, shaking her head. “Whatever happens, they can’t get away with this.”

“Don’t bother them,” Illya pleads. “I don’t want you to anger them. They’ve done enough. Not you too.”

Tatiana presses her lips together, and doesn’t respond. Her tense shoulders deflate a bit, and she’s holding onto Illya’s hand like a lifeline. “The important thing is that you’re okay, whatever okay is at the moment. The second important thing is that you’re not alone anymore. I’m here, and your lawyer will make sure you’ll be treated right from now on. She’s been amazing these last ten hours. I’ve never seen anyone do professional competence with such furious conviction.”

Illya frowns. “But the costs–”

“We live in a world where people have it out for us based on our history, Illya, of course I made preparations for when we needed legal support. Financial or otherwise,” Tatiana interrupts him deftly. “Don’t waste your energy thinking about that– Oh, that must be her.”

The door opens and lets in a woman of small posture, but carrying herself as if she’s able to hold the world up with ease. Her blonde hair is tied in a tight bun at the back of her head, and the strong lines continue in her black pant–suit. The only dabble of colour is the blue blouse underneath her jacket.

Doctor Anna follows her with a plastic chair and sets it down beside the bed before turning her focus onto Illya. “You survived the shower, good. Any complications?” She takes a note when Illya shakes his head. “I need your consent to allow your lawyer the details of your injuries and medical history.”

“That’s alright,” Illya says when his mother inclines her head, wordlessly encouraging him to say yes. He doesn’t much care one way or another. By now, the whole base must know.

“Thank you,” the lawyer says nonetheless. “That makes my job a lot easier.” She steps forward and holds her hand out. Illya shakes it, glad that she doesn’t pinch his fingers too hard.

“I’m Olga Novitch, you can call me Olga. I became your family's lawyer after your father was prosecuted and tried, so I have a certain insight into the discrimination you will face in this process.”

Instead of sitting down, she paces in front of Illya’s hospital bed. She opens her leather bound folder and nods. “Officially, you’re not charged with anything,” she begins. “Unofficially, you’re standing a silent trail for being an accomplice in treason. You aided and abetted a criminal who stole classified information from Russia.”
Olga looks up and declares solemnly, “We’re in a legal limbo. We can’t fight against a charge that officially doesn’t exist. The only bargaining chip you have is the personal insight with the main perpetrator of the crime. Vincenzo White.”

“Everything he said to me was a lie,” Illya bites out.

“You must not repeat that thought ever again. Their belief in the worth of your information is the only thing that might keep you out of jail for life.” Olga holds eye contact for a long second. Illya looks away.

“You’ll need to make a list of those who harmed, assaulted or threatened you since you’ve been arrested,” Olga continues. “If you don’t know their names, try to give as much details in their description as possible.”

She lays a pen and paper on Illya’s bedside table. “You also need to tell me which of those people you have assaulted, harmed or threatened in anyway.”

“That is self-defence,” Tatiana interjects. Her knuckles are white where she clenches them around the bed’s railing.

“That may be so, but I have an inkling our opponents won’t feel that way. We can only argue with the ones that were not fought back against.”

Tatiana looks like she wants to argue further, but she holds her tongue after Olga places a comforting hand on her shoulder. Only for a second, but it’s the first sign of compassion under the professional posture. Illya mentally takes a step back to few the women before him, and realises that his mother has known this woman for a long time. They might be even friends.

Olga flicks her arm out to view her watch. “I need to make some calls, and your doctor told me you need a minimal amount of stimulation so this will be enough for now. I’ll be back tonight if you’re still awake by then. If you manage to finish the list around that time, that would be much obliged.”

Tatiana gives her a quick smile of thanks, and then Olga stalks out of the room, phone already in hand.

Illya’s biting the inside of his cheek. Hard. Whispers of panic grapple for him. He tries to fight back.

“Illya? Illya, tell me what’s going on. Take deep breaths,” his mother’s voice is far away.

“Tell me, Illya. How can I help?”

“My watch–” Illya wheezes thickly. “My watch is gone.”

Illya doesn’t know how he’s not noticed before. He doesn’t remember when it was taken. The strange sensation of emptiness around his wrist as much a part of him as the pain. How didn’t he realise?

“Oh, darling,” Tatiana sighs. She’s never understood why he’d held onto it. How he could detest his father but covet the watch that he left behind. “I’ll ask the doctors if they’ve seen it, okay? If they don’t, I’ll talk to Olga. If they stole it from you, it’s another offence we need to handle.

“I just want it back.”

“I know,” Tatiana says. “I’m going to do my best.”
Illya nods. He can’t ask for more than that. The panic melts away into a new crest of exhaustion and despite himself he yawns, hissing at the pain that shoots through his jaw after.

Tatiana smiles and pats his hand. “Go get some sleep. I’ll talk to the nurses and handle Olga until you’ve rested.”

Illya tries to say something along the lines of agreement, but before his first breath passes his lungs, he’s already out cold.

The over next week, Illya slowly makes his way, through his room.

He’s not allowed to walk the halls, and despite Anna’s reassurance that it’s because he can’t handle such distances yet, Illya cannot help but feel like a prisoner again. There are no beatings this time though, only physical therapy. Which Illya prefers even in his more bitter moments.

When he’s not stretching the limits of his recovery, he’s in conversation with Olga and Tatiana. The subject matter is anything but peaceful. Illya has to retrace every moment with Vincenzo, explain everything his life was for months and months, and leave it for Olga to analyse for criminal activity.

Olga listens passively, making no sounds, the only indication of her presence is the ticking of her ‘screens keyboard as she transcribes important details.

Tatiana on the other hand is the face of compassion and rage. She’s heard her son happy. Illya’d called a few times with anecdotes that at the time were exhilarating to be able to share. Illya knows that no one can quite understand how ruined he feels, but he imagines Tatiana comes close. It’s hard. Talking about things that only makes her angry, or at times frighteningly sad. The moment Illya had his lists done will be forever etched into his mind.

Olga had scanned them both, before noting, “The list match except for the last six, is that correct Illya?”

The last six came in later, replacements for the guards Illya’d send to the hospital. Young and frightened, they kicked harder than the rest. Fear is a powerful motivator. Illya hadn’t touched them. “I was tired.”

Tatiana had to leave for a moment to compose herself. When she came back, her face was red and tear–streaked, and her right hand’s knuckles were bruised.

They are family after all.

Rediscovering the existence of days and chronological passage of time is almost novel. A nurse get’s Illya a calendar with kitten pictures – she apologized for the theme, but honestly Illya doesn’t mind at all – and for the first time in weeks Illya knows what happens on certain days. He crosses them off. He’s not counting towards anything, but the visual representation of moving forward drags him through the molasses of recovery, and keeps his mind off the uncertain future.

The hospital feels like a temporary hitch in the system, a bubble of boring serenity that will disappear the moment Illya can function again. In some weird way, the pain is what saves him.

The calendar has a Maine Coon posing on a velvet sofa when Olga and Tatiana enter the room arguing. It’s a Saturday morning, Illya knows, and he’s only just started with his arm exercises.
“I don’t like it,” Tatiana says tightly. “We don’t know which way he’s leaning. If we’re unlucky, we could get into a lot more trouble. Illya could be sent to—”

Illya clears his throat. “Anything I should know about?”

Olga holds out an impatient hand, indicating he should wait a moment. Illya puts his weights away as he listens to Olga’s response.

“Oleg always had a neutral, practical stance on a multitude of issues. I might not have known him personally, but I have contacts who I trust to give a correct character reference. I recognize the risk, but it’s our best chance to get them from Illya’s back, and have them focus on something bigger instead.”

Tatiana huffs, and sits down on a chair in the corner of the room, arms crossed.

Illya raises an eyebrow and looks between them.

“Ultimately the decision is yours, of course,” Olga adds, directed at Illya.

“Okay,” Illya says slowly. “It would help if I knew what that decision was.”

From her corner, Tatiana snorts.

Olga nods as if she didn’t notice the slight within Illya’s statements and begins to explain.

“Your Deputy is treating this as a political attack. The theft of classified documents sometimes is politically motivated, but from your intel, he didn’t strike me as the rogue activist, and no one has publicly claimed responsibility for the heist. This makes me think it’s not politically driven, but rather has a financial motive.

“When I realised this, I dug a little deeper. The name Vincenzo White is a fake, and his papers were good, but not perfect. Which is also why the Deputy is frantically trying to sweep this all under the rug, using you as a distraction. They let in an intruder, a professional con–man most likely, and they’re trying to keep their failure under wraps.”

“Olga wants to break it open,” Tatiana says. “She wants the Marshal of Moscow to know about this, in the hope he’ll direct his investigation towards the man pretending to be Vincenzo White. To us it’s clear that you’ve been manipulated, but we don’t know if the Marshal will see it that way.” She sighs and presses her hands in her eyes. “Besides, we also have no idea if he has some sort of grudge for us. Your Father angered many people, and I started with a list too late.”

Illya sits down heavily on the bed, and shakes his head. “Is there another option?”

“If I can be upfront, no,” Olga says. “We could try and sue the Deputy and the Defender’s program for abuse and neglect, but in this environment we have no allies that would side with our story.”

“I’m the traitor and nothing more,” Illya sums up bitterly.

“Sadly, many don’t have the capability to see the difference between rumor and fact or father and son. Nuance is a step to great,” Olga says.

Illya sighs. “If we don’t have another option, we might as well try.”

Tatiana huffs.

Illya looks up in question.
“There is another option,” Tatiana says. “Olga, if you could leave the room, please. I need to talk to my son.”

Olga makes a sound that would be a long-suffering sigh if she were another person. She stalks out of the room sharply, but doesn’t slam the door. The quiet click feels more impactful somehow.

Tatiana walks towards the bed, but instead of speaking, she takes Illya’s notepad and starts writing. Illya waits… She passes him the notepad.

This room might be bugged. Talk normally. I'll write the second option.

“I’m just worried,” Tatiana says as she takes the notepad back. Illya nods to show he’s understood.

“I know, but I think it’s the best chance we got.”

Tatiana hums non-comitantly as she quickly writes.

“I trust Olga,” Tatiana says. “I don’t trust the Marshal.”

I have resources. I can get you out. We’ll have to run, but I’ll do anything to keep you safe. I won’t let you go through that again, Illya. I won’t let anyone harm you. They’ll need to get through me first. If we decide to escape, I have contacts in Germany and France. They could get us the safe house we need to lie low.

Illya’s breath hitches, and he forces himself to sound casual as he responds back. “Trust, no, but do we need to? Can’t we just see how it goes and work our way from there? I know the danger, but if it’s a way out of this…”

Illya trails off. The temptation of fleeing is strong, but the risks are too great. His mother would be dragged into the front line head first, they’d be running for the rest of their lives. Russia wouldn’t let two relatives of a known traitor just disappear, only when they’re ones behind it. Illya quickly writes a reply.

Too dangerous. Oleg first. If that goes wrong, we can revisit the idea.

Tatiana shakes her head, disapproving. She knows just as well as Illya does that the closer they get to Moscow and the Russian Jaeger Initiative, their chance of escape trickles away. But Illya’s sure. Whatever happens, Tatiana needs to stay out of harm’s way.

Tatiana sighs, but then finally takes Illya’s hand, making clear she won’t fight him on it for now. Then she leans forward and whispers into Illya’s ear, “If I see you hurt again, I’ll get you out of there no matter what. Okay?”

Illya closes his eyes as Tatiana moves away. His mother loves him. That has been the foundation of his childhood and beyond ever since his first breath. And Illya’s never forgotten it, but sometimes, moments like this, spark the steadfast belief into view again. Allows him to lean on her for support. Vincenzo – or whatever his real name was – broke Illya in more ways than one, but Illya isn’t as alone as he thought he was. Tatiana will be there, Olga too.

He’s not alone.

Illya wraps his arms around his mother, and believes.
Illya arrives at Moscow Jaeger–Base a criminal.

He’s snuck in deep into the night, sparing him from too many eyes on his orange jumpsuit. The cuffs around his wrists are too tight, but Anna had tied bandages around them to prevent the steel from cutting in.

Tatiana and Olga will fly in with a separate plane, and without them near, Illya feels very small in the great gaping expanse that is the Jaeger Base. It’s concrete and steel walls make for an imposing sights in the slick dark of the night. Only large white lamps scattered alongside the edge of the building make it seem like anything less than a monster that decided to reside on earth.

Inside the design is sleek. Modern but impersonal. Illya shivers. The guards rotate out, the men Illya had shared a base with for over four years walk away, never to be seen again. They’re replaced by taller, more organized, counterparts. Dressed in full black, Moscow’s base logo contrasts visibly on their back. A blue ring and a white bird. Illya never understood the meaning of it, but it proves a decent distraction to ponder. They don’t speak to Illya as they direct him through the maze of halls and tunnels snaking through everywhere. Illya muses that he couldn’t even escape if he tried. The allegory of having entered a monster’s intestines only expands as they walk along. Illya sinks into the sensation of being swallowed whole. He can only hope Oleg is not the head of the beast.

They lead him to a small room, with one window looking out into the parking lot outside. The occasional car drives along the roadway and their headlights beam into the room, painting it in stark shadows. The presence of this far–off witness calms Illya a little. Not many dare to hurt people where anyone could see. The room has a round table in the middle of it, and it’s wooden legs aren’t bolted on the floor. Two seats stand alongside it, their old brown leather betraying its use. Illya can’t decide if it’s an interrogation room disguised as a small conference corner, or if it’s a bit of both.

One of the guards motions for Illya to sit in a chair, and unlocks Illya’s cuffs. Illya doesn’t know if he’s surprised or not. The guard moves away then, and they close the door behind him. There is no sound of a lock, but Illya isn’t enough of a fool to believe he can just run out. So he sits, and waits, again. There is a clock above the door, but it takes Illya a while to realise it’s stuck, the seconds ticking along but the hour hand not moving. This too could have sinister motives, trying to confuse the suspect, lose their hold on time.

By the time Illya is bored enough to start pacing around the room, stretching his legs and going through his hand exercises half–heartedly, two hours must have passed. Another hour ticks away before the door opens.

Marshal Oleg steps inside, holding a thick yellow file and a bored expression. Illya recognizes his light brown coat from news interviews and propaganda spots. Oleg lays his gaze upon Illya, taking him in.

Illya remembers himself a beat too late and salutes stiffly. “Sir.”

Oleg raises an eyebrow and after a pause he says, “At ease.”

Illya falls out of position, and sits when Oleg does. A silence ensues. Illya tries not to fidget in his seat. Oleg stares at him openly with a look in his eye that indicates he can see right through him. It reminds Illya of Vincenzo, but different. Illya can’t explain how.

Oleg then calmly opens the file, flicks through it, while occasionally looking up again, watching Illya. No questions come. The tick–tock of the broken clock is interrupted by the rumble of a truck,
driving in and out of earshot. Oleg says nothing. Illya starts to feel like his breathing cuts through the room, beating of his heart loud and harsh. He swears Oleg can hear it.

“Those beneath me believe you to be a traitor, because of your history, and even those who accept the scarcity of the evidence of your involvement, they see your inability to have spotted the thief and prevented the theft as proof enough. To them, you’re useless to the country, and a good scapegoat. They want you stripped of your privileges and thrown in jail, where traitors and traitor sons belong.”

Illya jumps at the sudden breach of silence. He swallows his surprise and mentally retraces what Oleg had said in a disinterested voice, and then swallows again. A bead of sweat forming on his forehead.

“I don’t believe this,” Oleg continues. “I believe you’re a promising pilot and a young man who was tricked by a talented conman. Napoleon Solo has a history of making people do his bidding, and you fell for his charm as any other. As isolated as you were, I imagine you were an easy target to convince of his good intentions.”

At the end of his speech, he pushes the file opened towards Illya.

“Napoleon Solo?” Illya says, the name strange on his tongue. He takes the file and the fire inside him grows bigger as he reads, licking flames curl into his tongue. “He was named after a narcissistic, traitorous and tyrannical general.”

Oleg makes a vaguely approving sound, and Illya looks up to see a hint of amusement in his eyes. “His mother must have had a sense of what was coming.”

Illya scans the mugshot. Napoleon Solo. A man wearing another’s face. Illya can’t help but recognize Vincenzo in the sparkle of mischief in his eyes, or the sly smile playing on his face. Then he almost laughs at himself for thinking it. It’s the other way around. Vincenzo must have been comprised of hints of Napoleon Solo, the true man – thief – underneath. He knows nothing about this man, Illya reminds himself harshly, and pushes his memories away. Buried underneath ash. Solo is a man to despise. A man to hate.

“I heard you were close,” Oleg says.

Illya is careful not to show emotion in his expression.

“Were you drift compatible?” Oleg asks the question as if he’s inquiring the weather. As if such an admission is inconsequential.

“No,” Illya says. It’s a lie. He buries that knowledge too. “We were not.”

Oleg watches again, and with a sick realisation Illya knows he isn’t fooled. But Oleg doesn’t press on about it. There is another pause.

“Did you know the codename for the Nuclear Processor, while it was being developed, was The Masterpiece?”

Illya frowns. “Why are you telling me this.”

“Vincenzo Peruggia was an art thief that stole the Mona Lisa in 1911. The Mona Lisa is also known as The Masterpiece… I’ve seen it once, the frame is disappointingly small, relative to the crowds around it.” Oleg sighs. “Napoleon Solo has a reputation as an art lover, or art-thieves
relatively, it apparently influenced his chosen name.”

“Why are you telling me this,” Illya repeats. There is nothing in him that wants to more know about Solo. There is no hint of curiosity. Solo is dead to him, and Illya will not mourn Vincenzo. He won’t let himself.

“To Solo, this is all a game,” Oleg says. “We believe him to be a career criminal, but from the way he acts, we know he enjoys his work more than most. You have an intelligent lawyer, Kuryakin, and I agree with her hunch. Solo manipulated you for money, but he also did it just because he could. I believe Americans would call it ‘cocky’.”

Illya pretends desperately that the heavy pain in his chest is his ribs acting up. The trembling takes hold again, and Illya tells himself it’s anger. After a few deep breaths, he believes it. He stands. Growls. Takes the file and tears Solo’s picture in two, destroying his cocky grin. Illya stalks to the wall and throws a punch. Then another. His knuckles are bleeding. His hands still. The red hot anger pulses slowly.

Oleg hasn’t moved an inch. Illya sits back in his chair and clenches his teeth. “What now?”

“That is the question indeed,” Oleg says, nodding. He staples his hands together on the table. His face twitches when he sees the extent of the ravage Illya’s made of the file, paper pieces scattered all over the floor.

“I, of course, could ask you to tell me everything you know about Napoleon Solo, or at least give me the details on your experience with Vincenzo White, but as I’ve said before, you’re lawyer is quite exceptional, and already has provided me with extensive notes and documentation based on your conversations with her. So if there isn’t anything else you have remembered…”

Oleg trails off when Illya shakes his head.

“Hmm,” Oleg says. “Then I only need you to verify two facts. You have heard Solo speak German to someone unknown to you, on two occasions– and when asked Solo referred to this person as Uncle?”

Illya nods. “He told me his Uncle was funding his education, and was impatient with his results. I don’t believe it anymore, but at the time I did.”

“I think there is more truth to that than you think,” Oleg says, and adds, almost to himself. “He’s becoming too lax.” Oleg stands. “Well, it’s been interesting meeting you, Illya Kuryakin. I imagine I’ll be seeing you soon.”

Illya blinks as Oleg walks to the door, and finally splutters, “But what about me? What happens to me now?”

Oleg nods sagely. “That remains to be seen, S.O.P Kuryakin. That remains to be seen.”

Oleg closes the door behind him, and Illya stares. Moments later, guards are escorting him back into the belly of the maze. He’s granted a one person bedroom, with adjacent bathroom facilities. They do lock the door behind him this time.

Illya sags into the stiff military issued mattress, and huffs into the sharp and cheap detergent used to wash the bedding. And despite everything, a sense of belonging takes a small kernel in his mind, because Marshal Oleg called him S.O.P.

So maybe, he might belong here after all.
The next day, Illya feels the consequences of travel harshly. His whole body aches and it takes him almost as long to get to the bathroom as that first day in the hospital, only there is no one to support him when he stumbles.

As he had hoped, underneath the sink a small medicinal kit is hidden, and he swallows two painkillers gratefully. Then he looks into the round mirror and grimaces at the sight of his own face. He might have been avoiding mirrors for this exact reason. His skin is still taut over his cheekbones, it’s pasty hue doing nothing to hide the last markings of bruising on his jaw. There are scars all along his hairline and if he twists in the light, long lines appear along his throat. Illya doesn’t remember the origin of most of them, and of those he does–

Illya shakes his head harshly, pushing the memories away. It’s becoming slightly easier, the more he does it. His mind slowly turning into a maze itself, with trails blocked and others erased. There is only one path to walk on if he doesn’t want to lose his sanity, and that is forward, wherever it brings him.

A knock makes Illya tense, but a moment later the voice of his mother sounds through the door. “Let me in, Illya.”

“Coming,” Illya says. He gradually makes his way to the door, and presses into the wall heavily after he’s opened it.

Tatiana strides inside looking triumphant but when she sees Illya, her smile slides off her face. Olga and her help get Illya back on the bed, but Illya shushes his mother’s worried face with reassurances. He’s really just tired, he’ll be fine after a few days of rest.

It takes a while before Illya gets them to talk about what they were so happy about, earlier.

Tatiana flickers a look at Olga, who nods and then speaks up. “We made a deal with Oleg. You’ll be pardoned for your unbeknownst participation in a theft.”

Illya takes a deep, long suffering, sigh. He can hear the ‘but’ from a mile away. “...But?”

“You’ll have to become a Pilot here.”

Illya frowns. “How am I going to do that without a drift partner?”

Tatiana takes a breath. “You have one. I’ll be your partner.”

Illya’s stomach drops. “What?”

Tatiana takes his hand, but her mouth is set, stubborn. “We’re compatible. You know that.”

He does. It makes sense that they are. But that isn’t the problem here– “You’re supposed to stay safe!” It’s belted out of his lungs, desperation and frustration mix in a raised voice and harsh glare. “No. You can’t– No.”

“That’s not your choice, Illya,” Tatiana says.

Illya moves his glare from his mother to Olga, who allowed Tatiana to attach herself to this ridiculous idea.

“It’s the clean way out,” Olga says. “With you both tied to Marshal’s Oleg side, no one will try to
touch you ever again, for treason or otherwise.”

“But—”

“I’ll train alongside you,” Tatiana interrupts him. “You have a long way to go before you can be in
the field, Illya, and I’ll be there every step of the way. You know my background too. There is no
coincidence I met your father during my own training.”

No. It wasn’t. A military romance. The couple of the 27th quadrant. His father had turned down a
Sergeant’s position for Tatiana, because their relationship wouldn’t be allowed if their status
separated. Illya considered it the last good decision his father had ever made.

The more Illya thought about it, the more he knew he wouldn’t be able to convince his mother
otherwise. She had decided on this, and Illya could only do everything to make sure they became
the most successful team in Jaeger history, because success in their field usually meant survival.

That night, they sign the papers and Oleg shakes their hands.

“Welcome to the service, Kuryakin. Any request for the name of your Jaeger?”

And Illya thinks of betrayal, of heartbreak, thinks of Napoleon Solo living his life somewhere rich
and filthy. He thinks of rising from the ashes.

“Red Peril,” Illya says, and he chooses anger again, and again, and again.

“I want it to be called The Red Peril.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you Brooke for beta'ing this despite literally having double the workload this
week. You're great!

So I hope you liked the Drift ya'll! I'd been looking forward to write all this for a long
ass time. Next chapter is gonna pick Present back up, and is gonna wrap the story until
it's end.

LAST CHAPTER UPDATE: It's going to take me longer than a week to write. I'm
hoping Sunday in two weeks, but it again really depends on how long it will be and if I
might split it or not. (If so, it will be like this again, first part and then second part a
few days later.)

In preparation of finishing all this, I have a lil request for those who want to help me
out :) Writing this has taught me so much about building and maintaining a story, but
due to the fast posting format I couldn't edit very much. When this is all done, and I
have some time left, I'm gonna use this as writer-editing practice. Just for myself mind.
The story posted here will stay as is.

But if you want to help me with my little project, sending me a quick tumblr ask or
email with your favorite scene(s)/most impact full scene(s) and try to explain to me
why it impacted you. I don't want to accidentally cut good scenes! If you want to help
me out message me on tumblr for my email :D or just send it in there.
Somedrunkpirate just as here! It would help me out a ton! (And if you're interested, I'd
could send you the neatly edited one, whenever the hell I'd get it done lol)

Well that's it for the long ramble, and I'll see you all next time!
Hi Y'all, some news before we begin. This is not the last chapter. As I had thought, wrapping this all up needs a lot of words, so I had to cut the outline in half. Sadly, I'm busy as hell so I couldn't write the second part to all this just yet. For now, we have this one and hopefully next week the last one, but we will see.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And the sea takes him again. History washes in waves.

Red becomes blue becomes bright white light and a terrified face. Desperate and mourning. A thousand years old. Sobs follow, wrenched out of an invisible chest.

“Illya, Illya, Illya, Peril–”


Loving?

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

_Guilt._

Another sob. Broken glass. There is no bleeding smile now.


“I’m- I’m losing him again.”

“No- No! Please! Illya! I’m losing him. I’m losing him. I’m losing–”

Darkness takes him.

Illya sleeps.

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Illya wakes with a strong sense of deja-vu, layers and layers placed on top of each other. The fabric of experience laced together, barely able to see through the ruse. But there is no doctor standing beside him, or Alexei slumped in a chair, or his mother smiling over him. Illya is in yet another hospital and this time the person sitting close is–

“Vincenzo?” The moment Illya utters the name he knows it's wrong. The spike of anger that follows too.

“No,” Napoleon says, shakely. He doesn’t cover the way his expression shatters. “I’m sorry.”
“Napoleon,” Illya says to himself, tasting the sound, fluttering it through his mind. Napoleon sags into himself as if he’s receiving a death sentence, and he opens his mouth as if to say something, but before he can utter a word, it’s drowned out by Illya’s heavy sigh of relief.

“Thank God.”

The anger pulled in by the fake name quickly subsides when Illya cherishes the incoming rush of memories of the true man before him. He remembers Napoleon’s dedication to the drift, his motivation to make things right. Vincenzo is a lie from a times past but Napoleon... Napoleon is the man that claims to love him still. Illya believes him. They have the time to figure the rest out, eventually.

A throbbing headache makes itself known and Illya groans. Napoleon’s face flickers from pale to sheet white and he quickly reaches over to a button on Illya’s bed.

“Illya, do you know where you are?”

Illya grits his teeth and tries to make sense of the sloppy well of thoughts in his mind. But Napoleon is here, and he recognizes the shore outside. He swallows and licks his dry lips before croaking out, “Shatterdome base, Medbay.”

Napoleon freezes. His eyes grow wide and his breath quickens. “You’re awake.”

Another ache between Illya’s eyes makes him flinch, but Illya manages to raise an eyebrow. “I thought that was obvious, Cowboy. Have you grown stupid in the drift?”

Napoleon splutters something nonsensical. Illya’s heart races. The drift. The rabbithole. Napoleon.

“Napoleon,” Illya says slowly, ignoring his headache as he tries to lean forward, tries to see if those piercing eyes have lost their brightness, their life. “Are you okay?”

“Am I okay?” Napoleon snaps. “You’re asking me?”

Illya breathes a little easier. If Napoleon can still be a stubborn asshole, he should be okay. He scans Napoleon’s face for anything wrong, and then narrows his eyes when he spots a sickly yellow splash of colour on Napoleon’s jaw. An old bruise.

“Cowboy, what happened to your jaw?”

Napoleon sags into the chair, hands his hair. “God fucking—Illya.”

Before Illya can inquire why he deserves the insults, a nurse rushes into the room with a harried expression.

“How long has he been active?” she asks, a ginger nurse Illya vaguely recognizes.

“Four minutes. Full conversation. He knows where he is, who I am.” Napoleon takes a ragged breath. “I think he’s awake for real this time.”

The nurse huffs, sceptical. “With your track record? I’ll believe it when I see it, Solo.”

Napoleon looks up from his hands and glares. “No—”

Illya’s head throbs even more, and the sense of deja-vu is back too. “Can someone give me painkillers and stop talking like I’m not here?”
The nurse leaning over him blinks dramatically, and then moves her gaze from Napoleon to Illya slowly, before jumping up. “I’m going to get a doctor.”

“Thank you,” Napoleon breathes.

The nurse disappears through the door, leaving it slightly ajar. An icy breeze makes Illya shiver, tugging his thin blanket around himself. The movement makes him hiss. His wrists ache and ribs sting, but the pain feels far off, an echo. Nothing like the very real torture inside of the confines of his skull. “Napoleon.”

Napoleon stares at him with haunted features, tense and pale as if he’s seeing a ghost.

Illya repeats himself until he surfaces out of his frozen state.

“Napole-”


Illya swallows. “I’m thirsty.”

Napoleon nods and looks at his hands. They’re shaking.

“Napoleon,” Illya says again. A slow, worried, thought curls into the bottom of his stomach; maybe Napoleon hasn’t come through unscathed after all. “May I have some water?”

Napoleon’s breath catches. “You’re really back, aren’t you? You’re-” He stops, and trembles all over. His eyes are rimmed red, and he drags a palm through his eyes roughly.

Illya slowly tries to sit up, ignoring the protests of his head, and reaches over, reminding himself that the pain in his ribs isn’t real- not anymore. Napoleon is still shuddering, still hunched into himself, by the time Illya touches his shoulder.

Napoleon breaks.

He grabs Illya’s hand in one quick movement Illya’s too exhausted to track, and wraps his hands around it, doubling over, hanging over the bed railing, like a marionette suddenly cut loose of his strings. His head is pressed against Illya’s thigh and his hands so tight around Illya’s wrist, as if he’s worried Illya will disappear again. But Illya never left and-

Oh.

Napoleon is so quiet, but Illya can feel his pulsing heart through his hands, and feel his gasping breathes trembling through the mattress.

“How long was I…” Illya trails off. Napoleon squeezes harder. “How long was I out?”

“Eleven days,” Napoleon chokes out. “Eleven- days.”

He seems to want to say more, but another wave of hurried breaths takes over and Illya realises this is what a panic attack looks like from the outside. Illya’s at a loss. He doesn’t know what to do. Doesn’t know how to help.

“Napoleon,” Illya says, slowly. “Napoleon, I need you to breathe for me.”

That was the wrong thing to say, because Napoleon makes a soft and broken sound that cuts through Illya’s throat. He takes a slow breath and ignores the tightness in his chest. Focus on
Napoleon. Be there. It wouldn’t help anyone to lose himself now too. One panic attack at the time, please.

Napoleon is frantically shaking his head. “No– you’re not supposed to– I’m not.”

He lets Illya’s hand go at once and flinches away.

Illya’s side is ice cold.

“I almost killed you,” Napoleon says. His voice wrong and twisted and so so sad. “I almost killed you.”

Illya tries to reach for him, tries to help. “No, no. Napoleon. Please. Breathe. Calm down. The drift was my fault, it’s my mind that’s untrustworthy– Napoleon.”

But Napoleon doesn’t listen, stumbles out of his chair and backs away, almost collapsing over a coffee table. The magazines stacked on top of it slide to the ground with a smack.

“Cowboy,” Illya says. “Sit down, please.”

Napoleon shivers. “I almost lost you. I–”

“You didn’t,” Illya says. “Napoleon–”

But with one final shake, Napoleon slips away as if hellhounds are chasing him out of the room.

Illya takes a moment, and then sighs, very deeply, and back drops onto the mattress with a groan.

After being flung back into reality after visiting his more darker moments, he’s more than grateful for how his life has grown. There still is a part of him stuck in his old mindset, but it’s already fading, degrading. Only now, Illya can recognize how much he’s let go over the past months, how much less anger runs through him on a daily basis, compared to the years before. It’s freeing, as it is strange and disorientating. He feels stuck between two shades of people, and– Illya sighs again. Napoleon must have felt like that too.

But without the never ending rage, Illya has enough energy left to be thoroughly confused by Napoleon’s fractured behavior, and becomes worried a second later. He doesn’t know what the effects of the drift have had on Napoleon, he doesn’t know what damage he might have done.

Illya can’t follow that thought-spiral for long, because the door is quite literally thrown open by Gaby. She stops running, holds up a hand and leans over until she catches her breath.

Illya raises an eyebrow at her.

“Fuck, you’re awake then,” Gaby says.

“Did you run?” Illya asks, slightly amused to see Gaby out of breath. A smear of oil is in her hair; she looks like she’d been in the middle of a car repair.

Gaby glares at him. “Ekko saw Napoleon storm outside, which could mean a regular break down, or actual bad news- or good news, apparently.” She shakes her head. “You never know with Solo.”

Illya nods. It makes sense that he’s not the only one confused by Napoleon's behavior. Illya hesitates for a second and then blurts, “Is he okay?”

“Is he–” Gaby repeats incredulously. “No, Illya. He’s not okay. None of us are. You were in a
fucking coma. Has an actual doctor checked you out already?”

“No?” Illya says, and is reminded of his headache again and winces.

Gaby’s expression goes furious and turns around. “Just a moment.”

And then Illya is alone again.

Not for long, though, because Gaby marches back in with a small man in a labcoat and ugly yellow rimmed glasses a few seconds later. Gaby barks at him to get on with it, and Illya prepares himself for yet another exam, reminding himself it’s been awhile since the last hospital stay, despite feeling like it’s only been a few days.

The doctor gives him a short rundown of his symptoms and the last eleven days, and though he speaks diplomatically, Illya can read between the lines as Gaby grows more tense with every word. Illya can’t remember anything after signing the Red Peril contract for the second time, and in the missing eleven days, he’s been in and out of consciousness almost once a day, with enough people witnessing the episodes, and no one knew if he’d ever come back for real.

Illya understands Napoleon’s frantic state a little more now.

Illya’s head throbs harder and his heart races. Processing yet another dance with death proves to be a little too much, and it doesn’t take long before he drifts away, floating towards something more quiet and warm.

“Illya.” That’s Gaby. “Illya, wake up. You can’t fall asleep now, you’re giving me a heartattack.”

Illya tries to say something, but it comes out as garbled murmurs. Something cold touches his lips, and Illya drinks gratefully when he realises it’s waterbottle.

“He’s overtaxed, but the preliminary results are very positive,” a voice says to the right of him. Illya can’t be bothered to open his eyes, but he squeezes back when he feels Gaby grip his hand.

“I don’t know how he did it,” the voice continues, “and we’ll need more thorough scans to be sure, but so far, there seems to be no permanent damage. Physically, that is. Some rest should do him good.”

“Thank you.” The vice around his hand grows tighter.

“Will you—”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Gaby says.

“Good. I’ll get a nurse to bring some more water and maybe some solid food. We’ll want him off the machines as soon as possible.”

When Illya wakes again, two people are snoring in the room.

It’s dark out, the window shows the thin line of a new moon, and other than the snoring, it’s dead silent. Illya identifies the closest as Gaby, still with her hands around his arm, draped over the bed railing like Napoleon had. She sniffsle in her sleep before falling away again with a soft sigh. Illya slowly raises his hand and brushes her hair out of her face. To think that if anything of his past had changed, he’d very well might not have met her. Her life only narrowly passing his own, and just a
fraction could have changed that direction. Gaby smacks her lips together and snores some more, and Illya has to suppress a sudden and almost hysterical giggle. He leaves his hand petting her hair carefully, giving no heed to the strain on his back and the ache in his arm from holding it in the same position for so long.

A cough reminds Illya of the second visitor, and he looks up to find Alexei buried in another chair, his bulky boots on the coffee table. He’s stuffed his hands deep in his hoodie's pockets and his head leans against the wall. In the little light the moon allows him, Illya sees that Alexei’s let his scruff grow thicker, a very tangible proof of the time that has passed. He’d either forgot to shave or didn’t care. Illya shivers when he remembers why Alexei might not have thought about his appearance the last two weeks.

Alexei twitches suddenly, and then dark eyes are looking back at Illya. He takes a few deep breathes, and Illya doesn’t dare and move.

Then Alexei grins widely, before whispering, “I knew you’d come back.”

Illya huffs with a smile. “It seems like you’re the only one.” He looks down at Gaby again, remembers the fear in her eyes when Illya hadn’t reacted to his name quick enough.

Alexei shakes his head. “I knew you wouldn’t leave us,” he says, and he sounds so sure. “You’re not like that.”

Illya bristles.

“How do you know that?” Illya says, forgetting to lower his voice. Gaby stirs.

Alexei laughs bitterly. “Napoleon didn’t make much sense after he dragged you out of your own mind, but after a few days we realised what he was rambling about. Gaby got the story out of him and I got enough. I know enough.” Alexei takes a deep breath, grits his teeth and then suddenly deflates. “Why didn’t you tell me, Illya. Why didn’t you tell us? We could have helped. We could have–”

It takes a second for Illya to realise Alexei is talking about the B-Squad. Not Gaby or anyone else in the Shatterdome. Illya drops his head and tells the truth. “I didn't know there was anyone, Alexei. I didn’t think you would care.”

Alexei lets out a stream of Russian curses, enough to almost make Illya smile.

Alexei stands and grabs Illya by the shoulder, looks him straight in the eye. “Illya, from now on, please. Believe me when I say I’ve got your back, and that we did truly care about you. You were one of us. You still are one of us.” Alexei squeezes his shoulder. “Remind me, when you’re all better, I’m going to organize a video call with them, okay? They’d be glad to hear from you.”
Alexei looks at him expectantly and Illya can’t do anything else but nod. If he’s honest, he’s missed them. Truly missed them. He’s never known that about himself, but now the floodgates have opened. Lying to yourself is hard when the subject of your deception feels like only weeks in the past. The raw sense of belonging he’d felt in the B-squad isn’t a faraway phantom anymore, something so vague and fantastical it was easy to pretend it hadn’t been real. Or that Illya hadn’t wanted or needed it. He misses them. Illya nods again, feeling more sure this time.

Alexei’s grin is blinding. “Great.” He lets go and steps away, motioning towards the door. “I’m going to try and sleep some more in a real bed. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Okay,” Illya says, still stuck to one word sentences. “Thank you.” Two then.

“No problem,” Alexei says, and lingers for a moment. “I’m really glad you’re okay, Kuryakin.”

And then he’s gone.

Gaby rises now that the coast is clear, and opens her mouth for what’s probably going to be a sarcastic but fond remark. Illya doesn’t let her.

“Napoleon stayed in the drift,” Illya says. He doesn’t know if he’s angry or terrified. “He went through the rabbithole with me. Gaby. He could have been lost. He could have—” Illya takes a shaking breath. “Why didn’t you disconnect him?”

“You think I didn’t want you?” Gaby snaps. “Nothing is better than losing both your pilots. Of course. Why didn’t I think of that before.”

“Gaby…”

“No!” Gaby says. “You asked, now listen. Napoleon demanded me to let him go after you, because he’d rather lose himself than lose you, Illya. He’d rather be dead than live in a world where you’ve reverted to brain pudding. What do you think we’ve all been doing this past week? We’ve had to ban alcohol from the premises and organise a Solo-Patrol to make sure he didn’t drink himself to death or throw himself off a cliff. Even Alexei made sure he didn’t, because even he could see you wouldn’t be happy if Napoleon destroyed his liver by the time you woke.”

Gaby shakes all over and continues. “He’s told me about what happened to you. About what he saw. About what he now blames himself for. And yes, he made horrible, horrible choices, with terrible fucking consequences, but Illya—” Gaby looks up, tears in her eyes. “It was bad. He was really bad. And I’m so fucking worried—” She cuts herself off and shakes her head. “At least you’re back. God. He can’t blame himself for murdering you anymore.”

Gaby sits up straight and wipes her face with Illya’s blanket. Illya stares outside in the silence that follows. Thoughts upon thoughts war inside of him, but one horrible idea slithers through them all. What if he’d woken up, and Napoleon had–

Illya swallows bile down. It didn’t happen like that. It won’t.

“I just need to know, honestly,” Gaby says. “Do you blame him for it?”

Illya lets the question hang in the air. He knows, if asked years ago, he’d have said yes before the sentence had ended. He’d blamed Napoleon wholeheartedly for everything and meant it, because that was so much easier. Anger above grief, rage above reason. But the Napoleon he knows now doesn’t deserve blind blame. Napoleon hadn’t known. Napoleon had not left him to the wolves, had not thought Illya’d been nothing more than a means to an end. He’d loved and chosen wrong. Vincenzo had manipulated and lied, but Napoleon had realised his mistakes, and now that he’s
learned the consequences of his actions, taken the guilt to heart.

Illya’s torn between heavy relief that Napoleon hadn’t meant any of it to happen, to have that confirmed more than ever, and deep terror that the onslaught of guilt would lead Napoleon to do something very, very stupid.

“I don’t blame him for what Valkov did,” Illya says finally. “Or what the Deputy did. Or any of the other guards. I do blame him for the mistake he made, and the pain his betrayal caused me. But,” Illya sighs. “There is more than just blame there. More than just betrayal, and more than only his choices. He knows my experience now, and I hope– I think, it’s going to be better.”

Gaby lets out a harsh sigh of relief, and Illya takes a deep breath as well; saying the words out loud feels like releasing a noose around his neck. There will always be a fire burning for Valkov and his crew, but that doesn’t mean that anger has to poison any potential future Napoleon and he have. It doesn’t have to ruin anything. Just–

“Where is Napoleon now?” Illya can’t keep the tremble out of his voice, the worry.

Gaby smiles and pats his arm. “I don’t think he’s going to do anything stupid now that you’re back, but we’re keeping an eye on him. He’s sleeping in the cafeteria, according to Ekko.”

Illya nods, bites his lip.

“...but I’ll check on him for you,” Gaby continues in a not-quite question.

“Thank you,” Illya says.

Gaby hugs him then, quick and tight, over before Illya can react. “I’m so fucking glad you’re okay.”

Illya hums. “People keep saying that.”

“Then you better start believing it,” Gaby quips back, rolling her eyes. “Now, I’m going to check on your other half, and you’re going sleep, is that clear?”

Something tugs at Illya’s heart, and he isn’t quite sure what part of Gaby’s statement did it. Maybe all of it did. He nods obediently, and lays back on his pillow.

“Goodnight, Illya.”

Illya drops off before the door closes.

Sunlight hits his eyelids, projecting shapes and colours behind his eyes. Illya yawns, blinks his eyes open and realises he’s alone. Panic grapples around his throat. He sucks in a breath. His ribs hurt. Deserted. Lost. There is no sound over the throbbing in his head. Illya tries to get out of the bed but he’s frozen and–

“I still maintain that pancakes are dessert, not breakfast. I mean, I don’t mind eating it either way, but it’s just the principle of the thing,” Gaby says as she suddenly enters the room.

“I can agree with that– Oh Illya, it’s so good to see you awake,” Ekko says. Gaby holds the door open for her, and closes it after. “I’m sorry I didn’t come earlier,” Ekko continues, placing a box on the coffee table, “Sanders had me busy.”
She looks at him then, smiling still, before throwing an inquisitive frown his way. “Are you okay?”

“Yes- just,” Illya clenches his teeth. “I was alone.” He feels like he’s been running a marathon, his heartrate still too high. Gaby pulls a face and Illya swallows the following embarrassment. “That isn’t usually a problem.”

“The first time I ever drifted, I was scared shitless for the next week,” Ekko says, a mysterious twinkle in her eyes. She sits next to Illya, leaning forward in a way that makes him feel like he’s being let into a secret of the highest order. “You see, my partner at the time had a pet-snake. So when I, as new to drifting as a tiny baby, synced up for the first time, I got the pleasure of experiencing the cherished memories of his snake, trailing over his shoulders and wrapping around his arms. It was an unnecessarily long creature, by the way.”

Gaby chuckles in the corner of the room, shuffling plates around. Ekko pays her no mind and continues. “So I’d been gifted the sensation of a slimy legless reptile all over me for six to seven days. Normally that wouldn’t be much of a problem, everyone has stories like this, but I’m sadly very scared of snakes, so you can imagine how much fun that was.”

Ekko ends her story with an airy, self-deprecating laugh and shakes her head. Illya can sense her intention, trading something embarrassing to level the playing field. He appreciates it. So he says, “After my first drift, my partner’s favorite song got stuck in my head for over a month.”

Ekko winces in sympathy.

“I got only headaches,” Gaby says. “You guys are lucky.”

“Well, the Shatterdome is lucky to have you, Gaby. So I guess you’re right,” Ekko replies without hesitation.

Gaby only rolls her eyes at her, but Illya suspects her cheeks are a little more red then they were before. Illya flickers his gaze between them. Gaby is slightly turned towards Ekko at all times, despite walking around the room doing god knows what, and Ekko… Ekko is just smiling. Interesting.

Illya’s muses are interrupted by Gaby, who appears next to him and shoves a plate in his hands. “It’s not breakfast,” she only says, before moving away again. Illya puts the plate of pancakes - liberally doused with syrup - on his lap and raises an eyebrow.

“We checked with your doctor,” Ekko answers the unasked question. “As long you’re not feeling nauseous, you can eat in small portions.”

“I can cut the pancake in bite-size pieces for you if–” Gaby begins, but Illya silences her with a glare. Gaby shrugs, smiling in a way that reminds Illya of a little child poking out their tongue.

Illya eats while Gaby and Ekko maintain the conversation, or rather, Ekko talks and Gaby asks questions endlessly. Illya guesses she knows more answers than she’s letting on, but from the way she watches Ekko talk, it seems like that isn’t quite the point.

“It would be interesting to test, yes,” Ekko agrees with another Gaby-originated inquiry. “I’m definitely sensitive to touch-related memories. Sound is more common, like Illya had, and some people even have smell as their echo’s.”

“So in Headspace, you’d be able to feel Alexei?” Gaby asks.
“Maybe.” Ekko shudders dramatically. “However creepy that might be, it definitely has some scientific merit. If both our consciousness and unconsciousness overlap precisely enough to enter Headspace, with my touch sensitivity and his movement sensitivity, we’d maybe even feel like one person. One body.” Ekko pauses meaningfully, mesmerised by the idea.

Gaby laughs. “Yikes.”

Ekko resurfaces from her mind and chuckles. “Yes, that too.”

Illya finishes his plate and pushes it away. Ekko takes it and puts it on the coffee table. “Sorry to bore you with all this, Illya,” she says apologetically. “I always end up talking in tangents. What I meant to ask was, how are you? Truly?”

“Interesting tangents,” Illya says, and then pauses before adding, “I’m tired, I think, but okay.”

“Good to hear that.” Ekko stands. “I’m sorry to leave so soon, but I have an appointment with Sanders to keep. I’ll see you around.”

Illya nods, and Gaby lets her out. The click clack of Ekko’s heels fade into the distance and the silence that falls is only broken by the steady beeping of medical equipment. Gaby lingers by the door for a moment, looking into the hall as if she’s waiting for someone, and a moment later that someone appears.

Napoleon.

Gaby moves aside to make space for him, but he doesn’t step inside. He’s wearing a suit that has seen better days, and his jaw is still bruised, but he looks a little better than he did yesterday. His hands are stuffed in his trouser pockets, appearing almost casual and relaxed, but the tense look in his eyes betrays him, and his lips twitch as if he’s got something to say, but can’t find the words. Illya waits. Gaby takes one look between them and leaves.

It takes another minute of slow time passing before Napoleon looks up from his staring contest with the linoleum floor. His eyes flicker up to meet Illya’s, and then fall away again.

“I know I have no right to be here- I just. I just wanted to know if you were still awake. If you’re okay.”

The words rush with such a speed Illya barely hears them. Blinking, Illya tries to process what was said, but he’s too slow, because Napoleon takes a step back and murmurs, “I’ll just leave.”

“Napoleon,” Illya grunts. “Stay. Sit.”

Napoleon freezes, moves his gaze to the window. One breath. He takes his hands out of his pockets and walks slowly towards the chair next to Illya, before stopping, turning around, and sitting on the one next to the door instead.

Illya suppresses a sigh.

With his hands on his knees and his back curled over, it doesn’t look like Napoleon’s slept much. Illya can barely see his eyes now that locks of hair are hanging in front of his face, but he knows beneath them will be dark bruises made by exhaustion alone.

Illya doesn’t smell alcohol. Gaby took her task seriously.
Napoleon doesn’t say anything, so he gives Illya the time to contemplate; make sense of the nonsensical.

Napoleon was in the drift. This is a fact. He’s seen what Illya’s seen. This makes his reaction to Illya waking up make more sense too.

Illya shivers as he watches Napoleon do the same.

Napoleon knows. Napoleon knows about Russia, about the interrogation room. He knows about how Valkov broke him. And how he was too weak—

No. That’s not true. Illya pushes the thoughts away, banning the swirls of hatred to the edges of his consciousness. He’s done with that. It took years, but he’s done with that. He’s trying to be.

A seagull screeches in front of the window, making Napoleon jump and look up, showing the side of his face he’s been turning away ever since he came in the room.

“What happened to your jaw.”

Napoleon flinches but then straightens, a dark smile forming. “Alexei punched me. I deserved it.”

“Why?” Illya says at the end of a long breath, drawn in to stay calm.

“He learned about...” Napoleon trails off and his face twitches into something sharp and pained. “Valkov.”

Illya takes another breath. There is ice in the pit of his stomach. “How many people know?”

Napoleon flickers again, expression twisting and turning. With wide eyes, he looks up at Illya and holds eye contact for the first time. “I’m sorry, fuck.” He pulls a hand through his hair, hard, and shakes his head. “Gaby knows most, Alexei a little, who must have told Ekko. I- I think it ends there.” Napoleon recounts and continues softly. “I wasn’t thinking clearly, those first few days. I’m sorry. I should have kept my mouth shut.”

Illya nods. “Stop apologizing, Cowboy.”

“What?” Napoleon says, surprised.

“I’ll have to talk to Alexei,” Illya continues, ignoring him. Disappointed anger makes him clench his teeth. Alexei should have known better. “He can’t just hurt you. You didn’t know.”

“Illya,” Napoleon says darkly. “That is no excuse for what I did to you. I deserved that and more.”

“You didn’t know.”

Illya wishes Napoleon was closer, wishes he could make him understand, but Napoleon only pulls away without moving, shrinking back in his chair as if he wishes to disappear.

“You didn’t know,” Illya repeats, infusing it with as much he can say.

Napoleon goes blank, looks outside again, lips twitching. “What is that worth?”

Illya watches him watch the sea and says, “Everything.”
Silence falls over them, but Illya can see Napoleon listen, change, just a little. The masks of wrong
smiles and blank faces shatter slowly, piece by piece. He looks afraid.

Illya closes his eyes.

“That’s worth everything to me, Cowboy.”

There is a hitch of breath and then nothing. Illya keeps his own breathing calm. Something moves,
someone stands, footsteps.

Illya counts the seconds.

When he opens his eyes he expects Napoleon to be gone, but he isn’t. He stands in front of the
window, hands clasped behind his back. If Illya reaches out his arm, he could touch him.

Illya tries to find something to say, to break this uncertainty within the silence, but then the door
opens to reveal a disapproving face.

“Good to see you well, Kuryakin,” Oleg drawls.

Napoleon twists around in a flash and spits, “Get. Out.”

Oleg only smiles serenely, pretending like Napoleon is but a mere phantom. Illya, on the other
hand, is distracted by the venom in Napoleon’s voice.

Napoleon is furious.

Chapter End Notes

A little earlier because I have a busy day tomorrow too, guess you guys don't mind :) 
Sorry for the cliffhanger, we'll pick it up next week, featuring Yelling At Oleg, and 
Illya having to make a Decision.

I made it worse now, didn't I? Sorry about that...

Due to my programming course killing me, and also french killing me, and just life in
general having it out for me, I'm feeling a little... how do you say it.. dead tired. I
really hope I can get my enthusiasm back up this weekend and produce something
amazing for you guys, but also forgive me if it all takes a little longer/is a little
shorter/is a little less amazing than people try to convince me it has been.

You guys have me pushed through a lot of shit so thank you so much for the support.
Imma gonna be rereading all the amazing things you have commented over these past
months to get me through this week semi alive. Love y'all <3 See you guys hopefully
next week.

And don't worry, I still love this story and I'm going to finish it. Outlines are made,
emotional moments noted down. It's gonna be done, and y'all get the happy ending
you deserve. Just... I hope yall can be a lil patient with me :)
“Oleg, say anything and I will kill you.”

“Solo,” Sanders barks, appearing in the doorway. “Stay down.”

“I’m not a dog,” Napoleon snaps, and he takes two steps toward Oleg, positioning himself in front of Illya’s bed. Illya can’t see well over Napoleon’s shoulders, but footsteps in the hallway alert him to the arrival of more people.

“Oleg, leave Illya alone,” Alexei’s voice booms into the room, sliding between Sanders who had been half–heartedly blocking the doorway. He takes a place beside Illya’s bed. Ekko follows him without a word, and they flank the hospital bed side to side, arms crossed.

“He’s recovering,” Gaby adds, joining the group with a pinched expression. “This can wait.”

“This cannot wait miss Teller–” Sanders starts hauntingly, but he’s interrupted by literally everyone. Gaby argues right back in rapid–fire German, Ekko and Alexei begin a monologue about something Illya can’t follow, and Napoleon only snaps “Shut the fuck up,” once and loudly.

“What can wait?” Illya asks through the noise; convinced that no one will hear him, but his words fall like a spell of silence, and miraculously, everyone quiets down.

“We will tell you when you feel better, Illya,” Alexei says after a moment. “Trust us, this can wait.”

Illya raises an eyebrow in the hope it conveys his disagreement without having to swear or shout. He scans around the room and sees everything from worry to a hint of fear, and his stomach drops. Illya swallows and finds Gaby’s reluctant gaze. “Tell me what’s going on.”

It’s Oleg who answers, because he can never let an opportunity to bring bad news lie. “As I said, I’m glad you’ve come back to us, Illya. But what your compatriots have neglected to mention was what we were dealing with, while you were recovering in your slumber.”

“He was in a coma—”

“This can wait!”

“Don’t say another word—”

Illya takes a deep breath and bellows, “Tell me!”
The air is sucked out of the room again and Illya glares at each and every one of them. “I need to know what is going on. I’m not going to do whatever you–” he looks from Alexei and Napoleon, to Gaby, “–are afraid of, but you can’t keep me in the dark like this. Tell me, or get out of here.”

Alexei lets out a huff, but there is a small quirking smile underneath his frustration. “You’re a stubborn asshole, Kuryakin.”

“I think there is something to be said about pots and kettles,” Ekko interjects.

Illya suppresses a sigh and starts to repeat the question, but Napoleon answers before he has to.

“There was a Kaiju attack, while you were–” Napoleon swallows. “Cat 3. They got it eventually, but–”

“The Starshooter cannot take another hit,” Oleg says, walking around Napoleon to look Illya in the eye. “We’re out of options, we need UNCLE in action. We need you to drift again.”

“How can you say that,” Napoleon says through clenched teeth, “when our recent test was an unmitigated disaster.”

Oleg looks at Napoleon for the first time since he’s entered the room, his face condescending. "Oh no, this was a very successful test Solo"


Oleg answers anyway. "You didn't follow the rabbit."

"What does that matter?" Napoleon shouts. “He did! We almost lost him.”

"Kuryakin drives people to madness, Solo. This is the first time he attacked his own mind. You are able to handle him, and now he needs to learn how to handle himself.”

Napoleon turns to Illya, rage coursing through clenched teeth, madness in his eyes. “He knew. He knew you would lose in the drift. He knew it would affect you and he didn’t stop it. You can’t listen to him. You can’t trust a word he says.”

“I’m not syncing Illya into the drift until I’ve got the full report of the doctors. We’re not doing this again,” Gaby says. “We’re not risking him again.”

“That might be so, Ms Teller, but Illya has the right to risk himself. For the good of the cause, to save people.” Oleg pauses and makes eye–contact.

The Marshal of Moscow isn’t smiling anymore.

Illya feels frozen, something in him loathes the bed. He needs to stand. Illya suppresses the urge to salute.

“Remember your duty, S.O.P Kuryakin. Remember your mother.”

Illya flinches, and nods automatically.

“Leave,” Alexei says, very slowly, walking towards Oleg as if he’s ready to punch him in the jaw. Judging from Napoleon’s expression, he is thinking about doing the same thing.

“At ease, recruit,” Oleg says calmly to Illya, ignoring the threatening displays. “You’re dismissed.”
He turns around and walks away, Sanders follows.

Illya unravels. He pushes a hand through his hair and winches. His wrists ache.

Gaby hurries closer, her jaw tight and fists clenched. “You can’t listen to him, Illya. Your health is more important. It would help exactly no one if you collapse in the drift again.”

“Manipulative bastard,” Napoleon spits.

Alexei stops glaring at the doorway and throws a bitter laugh at Napoleon. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“This is not the time, Alexei,” Napoleon snaps.

“Since when do you get to decide that?”

Illya wants shout. He wants to push Alexei against a wall and make him understand that he can’t treat Napoleon like this. But his mind is still reeling from Oleg’s appearance and even in his confusion, he knows Alexei won’t listen to anger. He’ll only listen to trust.

“Stop this,” Ekko snaps, saving Illya from having to say anything.

“Fighting now doesn’t help guys,” Gaby says.

Napoleon and Alexei continue to glare at each other.

“Why did you let him get in here?” Napoleon asks Alexei, his eyes narrow. “You should have stopped him.


Gaby makes a move as if to yell at the both of them, but Illya is done with this.

“Can everyone just leave,” Illya says softly. He drops his head, stares at his hands before looking up again. He doesn’t care if he needs to beg. “Please. I need to think about this and you’re not helping.”

Napoleon stares at him for a second before stomping out of the room, slamming the door closed. Gaby opens it again and leaves with a heavy sigh, presumably following Napoleon to wherever he’s going. Alexei hesitates, but obeys Illya’s request when Illya closes his eyes momentarily, overrun by sudden exhaustion.

The only one remaining is Ekko. She’s left her professional outfits elsewhere and stands in the corner of the room in casual clothing. She looks tired too, worried, and Illya wishes she would just leave.

“I’m leaving in a sec, don’t worry,” Ekko says with a half–hearted smile. “I couldn’t get a word in with everyone yelling, so I’ll say my piece now and leave you to it. You’ll be making a decision that impacts a whole lot of people. If you’re successful in drifting again, piloting again, we know you’ll prevent the deaths of many. Maybe even contribute to saving the world.” She sighs then. “But, remember that that impact goes both ways. Deciding to put yourself at such a high risk, higher than any other pilot, will hurt the people around you. The people that love you.”

Her expression is so sympathetic it hurts. “You’ve already had a good run, Illya,” she says, “don’t let them trick you into thinking you owe them more. You deserve a good, happy life.”
With that, she turns away and walks out of the room, leaving Illya reeling alone.

Alone is quiet with his own thoughts.

Alone is having to face every facet of the decision without a leading hand, beckoning him to safety. He misses his mother more than ever now. The voyage into the past both a blessing and a curse. He feels closer to her than he has in a months, but that same year had brought fading to the pain. The wounds have reopened, and she’s not here to help him through it.

He’ll have to decide alone.

Illya tries to sit up straighter in his bed, but he winces when his ribs sting. The proximity of memories aren’t the only traces the drift left behind. Illya finds himself rubbing his wrists, the skin feels raw and irritated but they look silky and smooth. Now that there are no distractions Illya can feel the aches coming in flashes, flickering through his body like a record needle stuck in position. He wants to climb out of bed, but he doesn’t know if his knees will hold him. Illya wonders how long it will take for the echoes to leave. But the longer he fusses with his wrists, the more the aches fade, just a little. Like touch is the connection between reality and past. His wrists have healed. They made it through red lines and bloody cuts. They remember even though Illya’s mind isn’t sure yet.

Illya swallows. It feels strange to have a catalogue of his old wounds back into his mind again. To feel them without the fear and anger that he had held onto then. Only the pain is what’s left. It’s a lot, but he can handle it. Illya pushes through a few wrists exercises, hissing, but he knows he can do them. He knows because he’s done them for months, trying to chase his former dexterity. The drift is still on the forefront of his mind, but he can also remember what happened afterwards. He remembers training with his mother, working so hard to get to where he wanted to be. Ignoring the destruction in his mind to go forward, to prepare himself for the fight. The first time in the field with his mother had been a revelation. He had felt like he was a part of something bigger. A half of a whole. The second piece of a team.

A partnership.

Illya stills his wrists, stares out of the window.

He wants it back.

Ekko is right. He doesn’t owe anyone anything. But God, he wants it. He wants to look through his visor and see Napoleon grinning back. He wants to push himself through the grit of combat, have his aches come from determination and resistance, relieve his pain through the thrill of victory. He wants to join his friends in celebration after a win. Music and too much alcohol in the cafeteria, see Gaby and Napoleon dance the night away. He wants to sense Napoleon in the periphery of his mind. Feel the love Illya sees in the depths of his eyes all around him. Drown in it. Breathe it in. He wants to put an end to the eternal loneliness. He wants to show Napoleon how much he loves him, how anger isn’t something he feels towards him anymore, without having to use words. He wants Napoleon to feel that, too.

Oleg is also right. Napoleon can handle him. Napoleon can support him and carry the other half. Illya just has to carry his own half too, and he has been. He’s made it to this point. He’s survived months and years of torture, emotional and otherwise.

Illya wrists stop aching. He breathes deeply through his lungs. There are no echoes. He feels alive.
Something light and tingling flows through Illya’s body, a sense of certainty he last felt when he saw Napoleon staring back at him in the showers and had known what Napoleon had wanted and had tried to resist. A confidence that drove Illya to run after him. A confidence that will drive him to pilot again. Chase what he wants.

Napoleon will not like it. Gaby won’t either. Alexei and Ekko will protest.

Illya decides to leave them be, for now. They have something to work through too. By the time the test results are in and he’s released from the hospital, they’ll find their trust again. He’s not going to let the drift take him twice.

Illya lets out another harsh breath and smiles to himself, burying his face in his hands.

He’ll fight alongside Napoleon. Soon.

He’s spent so long running from his past; it’s exhilarating to see his future unfold before his eyes. To know where he came from and where he will go to. It’s time to stop running away. Start moving forward again.

The thought gives Illya an idea, and after a quick search he finds his phone in his bedside table drawer.

Illya dials, and waits with bated breath.

There is a click and murmur coming through the receiver.

“Olga.”

“Illya?” Olga’s voice comes soft with surprise, undercut by a yawn.

“I forgot about timezones,” Illya realizes belatedly. “I’m sorry for waking you up.”

“It’s okay, you wouldn’t have called if it wasn’t important.” The rustle of blankets sounds in the background.

“I’m sorry I hadn’t called earlier,” Illya says, and he is. He’d seen her last when she had been busy organising the funeral when he couldn’t. His doctors had eventually forbidden him to attend and Illya had been given another burden of shame, because in truth; he hadn’t wanted to go anyway.

There had been extensive media coverage of the event. Illya had watched dozens of journalists and thousands of strangers send his mother off, lowered into the ground, before throwing the tv out of his window. The funeral had become a publicity stunt despite Olga’s efforts to the contrary. Tatiana had deserved so much more respect.

Olga had been easy to blame for it.


“Yes,” Illya agrees. “About that… could you do me a favor?”

“Anything within my power,” Olga replies immediately, and it makes Illya smile. That same fierce practicality had saved his life more than once.

“Thank you, Olga. For everything.”

Olga huffs. “Of course, I consider you family by now. Remember that.”
“I will.”

“Now, what do you need?”

The boxes are scheduled to come Sunday. When Waverly got wind of it, he promptly informed Illya he’d been assigned to another room, 61–b.

Still with a seaside view, mind.

After all the tests have been completed and it’s concluded that Illya is no more damaged than before the drift, he’s released from Medbay custody and walked to his new room by a still slightly worried looking nurse.

Rose – Illya had learned her name the day after he woke up – has her hair in a messy ponytail and her lab coat is covered in old coffee stains. Illya hopes his absence in the critical care unit will result in Rose finally getting some sleep.

Rose taps in the code of 61–b’s security system and swipes the keycard over the laser.

“5859,” she says as she passes the keycard to Illya, “and remember you’re not done with treatment yet. No alcohol, no overexhaustion through excessive exercise or other strenuous activity. You can always call us when you need help and—”

“And I have an appointment with Dr Kellman tomorrow morning at nine,” Illya recites dutifully, but he softens the frustration with a reassuring smile. “I’m good here, Rose. You can go back to work. I’m not your patient anymore.”

Rose sniffs, turning her nose high in the air. “A few days of prowling around the Medbay and Mister thinks he’s on top of the world. I’ve spent almost two weeks with a frantic vegetable version of you, can’t help to be a little invested now that you’re walking and talking again.”

“I’ll let you know if I need you,” Illya says, laughing a little at the comparison.

“Be sure you do,” Rose orders. “And you can also reward my excellent care by inviting me for coffee in the cafeteria some time. I consent to being paid off in caffeine, specifically. You don’t have to keep the calls to when you can’t shit by yourself.”

Illya snorts. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good.”

“Bye, Rose.”

“See you, Illya,” Rose replies hauntingly and she marches off.

Illya steps into his new room with a sense of awe.

The room is bigger, for a start. The other one would fit in twice, and his old bedroom three times. It’s the largest room he’s ever got to call his own.

A large pane of glass that almost stretches from floor to ceiling replaces the small window he had had. The remaining walls are broken up by wooden paneling, with empty planks scattered around for books and trinkets. The floor consists of lightwood planks and a brown and fluffy rug in the middle makes it feel almost homely. There is a green, comfortable looking chair in the corner of
the room, with a tall industrial lamp beside it. The remaining space is mostly empty, only a dirty blue drawer with splatters of white paint all over it, giving it a used but artistic look.

Illya’s first thought is that Waverly pulled one hell of a bribe with this one, the manipulative Brit trying to tip Illya’s decision with an offence of comfort and luxury – compared to military standards anyway.

It’s a change of pace compared the threats and appeals to duty that came from the Despicable Twins. It would almost be impressive if it had any influence on his decision at all. In the end, he chose for himself.

Illya’s second thought is that a double bed would fit in the room easily.

Illya bites his lip and shakes his head to himself. Besides a bed, he’ll need other pieces of furniture too. He can imagine putting a sofa in so Gaby can come over and hide herself in the crease as she does some designing in her notebook. A desk against a wall would draw Ekko in, who seems to prefer quiet social settings above her lab. Illya’s even considering getting a television for the sole purpose of watching Russian reruns in the middle of the night with Alexei. It’s been awhile since he’s laughed at something trivial, instead of grinning through the worst of circumstances.

And Napoleon…

Besides the bed, if he’s patient and careful, Illya can see him sitting stretched out in the chair, reading a book while forgetting his cooling coffee.

Illya nods to himself. He can make a home out of this. He’ll have to thank Waverly somehow.

As Illya’s forbidden to carry anything heavy, he enlists Alexei and Ekko to help him move the missing pieces over the following days.

“You’re enjoying this,” Alexei accuses while huffing underneath the weight of a sleek brown desk they found in an office. Waverly had given them permission to get what they needed as long they didn’t steal anything from him, and the desk had been underneath a thick layer of dust, so Illya assumed no one would be missing it.

“Only a little,” Illya says. “You do kind of deserve it.”

Alexei drops the desk with a loud bang in front of Illya’s door and frowns at him. “What did I do now?”

“You need to stop treating Napoleon like he’s a criminal,” Illya says, keeping his tone light but firm.

Alexei huffs. “Illya, in every sense of the word, Napoleon is a criminal.”

“Push the desk inside or else I’m going to,” Illya says instead of punching Alexei, which he counts as progress.

“Yes, sir,” Alexei says, rolling his eyes. Illya holds the door open for him.

“Wait a minute,” Ekko calls out. “Just a second, I’m almost done with this wall and you don’t want that desk to get dirty.”
Illya leans against the doorframe as Ekko jumps off the drawer. There is white and grey paint all over her overalls. “Is there any place we can put it?”

“Yes,” she says as she puts her paintbrush in a bucket filled with water and snaps her gloves off. “The white walls are dry. Only the feature wall is wet.”

Illya hadn’t been sure why his room needed to have a wall painted, but now that Ekko has done her magic, he understands. The grey she chose has a certain green undertone that is only visible under the direct light of the window. The room feels more natural now, more lively, in balance with a little contrast and colour.

Ekko and Alexei move the desk against the wall without much trouble, and precisely when they’re done, Gaby walks in rolling a desk chair in front of her. “I found this beauty in the warehouse, and guess what, Napoleon convinced the cafeteria manager that you needed a couch for medical reasons and you’re allowed to choose which one.”

“Does he get to keep it?” Ekko asks curiously.

Gaby grins. “Yes.”

“Impressive,” Alexei says, sounding like he means the opposite, reminding Illya there is still a conversation to be had.

“I don’t know how I feel about tricking a couch out of someone,” Illya says pensively. “But I do want one.”

“Pick the green one in the back then,” Ekko says. “It will match your chair and it isn’t used often.”

Gaby raises an eyebrow at Illya and smiles brightly when he nods. “Great, I’m going to let them know. We’ll get someone to bring it in later.”

Illya huffs, watching her hurry away with a confused shake of his head. “Is it just me or are you all way too excited about decorating my room.”

Ekko tilts her head. “I suppose we just want to help our friend feel comfortable after having had to endure the horrific experience of hospital beds and medical design.”

“Or it’s more fun to do than think about the fact a Kaiju attack is calculated to come next week and we are running low on functioning Jaegers,” Alexei adds, sagging into the chair.

Illya nods. They make good arguments. He thinks about telling them about his decision, but decides to keep it for himself just a little bit longer. They need to see he can do it before they know.

Something beeps and they all look around to see Ekko’s phone lighting up. She takes it and sighs. “Sanders wants me. I’ve got to go.”

“Go do science,” Alexei says, mock–encouraging. “Amaze them with your magic.”

“Will do,” Ekko says and then turns to Illya. “Leave the window open for another few hours so the stench won’t be too bad. The paint should dry fairly quickly, but I’d recommend sleeping in your old room for tonight still.”

“It’s not like he has much of an option, Ekko.” Alexei grins. “There is still no bed here.”

“I’m going. You’re being too much of a smartass.”
“I live to serve.”

Ekko closes the door behind her, and the moment she leaves Alexei drops out of his slouch. He raises an eyebrow, wordlessly inviting the conversation in.

Illya leans against a dry wall and crosses his arms. “You have the right to begrudge him, you don’t even have to like him. But my life is my decision, and you have to stop actively interfering.”

Alexei starts to say something but Illya shakes his head, continuing. “I know he hurt you too, but I hope we can all work peacefully together. I’m not asking you to be friends with him Alexei. It’s the aggression that has to stop.”

Alexei shifts in his seat, clapping his hands together and looking at Illya seriously. His eyes are dark. “Illya, the first day I was here, you had a panic attack and begged me to get Napoleon away from you. I’m keeping that promise. I might be dense, but I’m not blind. You love him, and you’re not objective about this. He hurt you, he did horrible things, and deep inside you know it’s a bad idea. It’s not about me, it’s about you.”

Illya blinks. This isn’t what he was expecting. Alexei has been acting protective around him since the incident in the Shatterdome, something he hadn’t done during their time together in their base. Illya had never quite understood what had changed. But maybe it was because Alexei hadn’t seen Illya as someone who needed protecting then, while when he came here– He had been weak. He had needed help.

Illya sighs and drops his arms to his side. Alexei watches him warily, but everything about him radiates confidence. Alexei has always been loyal, always took his tasks seriously. Alexei had been protecting him and Illya almost smiles at the thought. But he has to put a stop to it anyway, however well intentioned, it isn’t necessary. “I’m not the same person that came here, Alexei. I’m better. I’m happier. Let me make my own decisions. I’m not going in blind, and Napoleon knows that too.”

Illya steps towards him, his tone firm but keeping his body language light. “This is my life, and I don’t need you to protect me anymore.”

Alexei sets his jaw but takes him in. Illya holds eye-contact. The moment stretches, but after a while Alexei nods. “Okay.”

“I’ll ask, when I need help,” Illya says genuinely, squeezing Alexei’s shoulder in a silent thank you. He had been there when he needed it, without even knowing.

Alexei looks up and grins a little, seeming more like himself already. Illya’s glad.

Napoleon has been keeping himself away.

The few times he comes by it almost seems accidental. Dragged in by Gaby to help her carry cups of coffee, or passing along a message from Waverly, or maybe Ekko needs a hand with the painting? He always has an excuse at hand. Illya lets him be, for the moment. He learns to watch. Napoleon is putting himself back together in his own way, and Illya doesn’t want to pressure him. Touch at the wrong time, the wrong juncture, and see him crumble under his own hands. Napoleon needs to get used to the idea that Illya isn’t fading away, it seems. Once, he had caught Illya falling asleep during dinner– he hadn’t wanted to go back to his own room, the cafeteria boisterous and companionable late into the night. Illya’s eyes had only barely closed his eyes before a rough
squeeze of his hand roused him. Illya had blinked blearily, and a moment later Napoleon had stormed off.

Gaby had followed and told Illya later she’d had to talk Napoleon out of a panic attack that night.

It’s Friday by the time Napoleon seems to be a little more solid, no more blurring around the edges. He joins them for breakfast looking almost put together. He’s wearing a suit like usual, but this time it’s washed and neatly pressed. The jacket has no stains and his socks match. The smile he gives Ekko when she passes him a cup of coffee is stronger now that his jaw is shaved. Even the bruise is almost gone, and Illya feels calmer looking at him now than he has done since he woke up.

Napoleon doesn’t avoid his gaze, and doesn’t lose the smile as he catches Illya watching. He stills though, his hands trembling around his mug. Illya recognizes his expression as guilt. He’s still not lost the guilt, and Illya decides it’s time to take another step.

After breakfast, Illya follows Napoleon to the combat area. It’s a routine. Every morning, Napoleon fights no one, alone. He doesn’t comment when Illya slips through the door behind him, doesn’t speak as they change.

They train in silence. Illya flexes first, going through a warm up and keeping a steady pace, while Napoleon immediately goes for the boxing bag. He kicks and punches and grits his teeth, and Illya wants to know who he’s fighting. What deserves such anger. But he thinks he already knows the answer Napoleon will give. The same answer he had held onto for years.

It doesn’t take long for Napoleon’s knuckles to start bleeding. There is a cut in his lip from where he bit into it, and a trickle of blood running down his chin. After a while Illya can’t take more of it, and he finds ice and bandages in a small closet next to the entrance.

“Come, Napoleon,” Illya says, catching a fist that was going for the harsh surface of the bag.

Napoleon says nothing, spits blood on the ground. His whole body is trembling, there is hate in his eyes, but Illya knows it’s directed at himself, not Illya.

Illya leads him to a bench and pushes him onto it, sitting beside him. He places Napoleon’s right hand between his, rubs around the wrist, and narrows his eyes when Napoleon winces. The knuckles are the only outward injury, and the wrist could have taken a hit from the masochistic boxing, but Illya’s had a suspicion for some time now and–

Napoleon pulls his hands away, staring stubbornly at the wall.

“Let me, Cowboy,” Illya says softly. A shudder passes through Napoleon, but he gives the hand back. Illya takes an icepack and presses gently against Napoleon’s knuckles to prevent the bruising from worsening. With his free hand, he gently reaches closer. Napoleon watches but doesn’t move away. Illya fits his hand against his ribs and presses in carefully. Napoleon shudders again, but this time it’s different; sharper. He’s straight and stiff, as if moving an inch would make him fall apart.

“Knees too?” Illya asks, mentally going through the catalogue. God, if he has the thighs–

Napoleon nods, once.

Illya closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Somewhere, anger is burning again, but most of all he’s exhausted. Even when he’s freed of it, it always finds a way back. And it has been two weeks since Napoleon left the drift. The echoes shouldn’t be this persistent. They should fade. But Napoleon hisses through his teeth when Illya touches his knee and Illya swallows. “How bad is it?”
“Enough to know you barely survived it.” Napoleon sounds dark. Bitter. He doesn’t move away.

“I’m getting better,” Illya says, pulling his hand, but holding Napoleon’s right between his. “Why aren’t you?”

Napoleon shrugs. “It’s a good reminder of what I did to you.”

Illya wants to feel surprised, but he knows Napoleon too well to be. “Napoleon, stop torturing yourself.”

“Why?” Napoleon twists around harshly to face him. He flinches when his ribs protest, but it’s almost like he revels in the pain. Like he thinks he deserves it. Illya wants to scream, wants to punch his way through a wall and have Napoleon never feel pain again.

“Why should I be saved from this,” Napoleon continues through clenched teeth, “when you weren’t.”

He says it as if it’s final. As if he’s planning on carrying the pain for the rest of his life. Why doesn’t he understand the pain isn’t his to carry? It’s for neither of them. But Illya knows no arguments will budge Napoleon from his self–righteous, self–loathing, self–hating position, so he deflates and goes for honesty. “Because I don’t want to see you hurt, Cowboy.”

Illya takes Napoleon’s hand to his lips and presses a kiss in the palm, gently. Pleading. “It hurts me when you are in pain. So please. Let it go.”

“God.” Napoleon’s voice is ragged. “I always find a way to hurt you, don’t I. I always–”

Illya interrupts him with a quick shake of his head. Napoleon is unraveling and he needs to go, give him some space to breathe. But first–

“Help me unpack, Sunday,” Illya says, voicing it between a question and a statement.

Napoleon frowns, the subject change almost shocking him out of his mental turmoil. “What?”

“Sunday,” Illya repeats. “I called Olga to send me the contents of my storage box. Childhood possessions, the things my mother left behind.” Illya takes a breath and looks Napoleon in the eye. “Our stuff, from base.”

Something flickers in Napoleon’s expression. Something light in all the dark. His eyes are wide and says, “Oh.”

Illya gives him a smile and pats his hand as he moves away. “I’ll see you then.”

He doesn’t expect Napoleon to respond, but just before he exists the arena, he hears him mumble, confused but hopeful, “Okay, Peril. You win. I’ll be there.”

Illya grins all the way back to his room.

Chapter End Notes

We’re so close! I promise the next chapter is the one y’all been waiting for. For those who were wondering where I was: it turned out I had been walking around with an eye
infection for a week, which I discovered right after the update three weeks ago. But when I got better I had suddenly a 3 chapter outline and not a lot of time. Thank you all for waiting on silly me, and thank you so much for those that commented in the mean time. You all motivated me so much :D

The plan/update schedule/pray for me and my beta.
Sunday: This chapter.
Tuesday evening: Chapter 20.
Thursday evening: Chapter 21.

Chapter 20 only has to go through the editing/beta'ing process. And Chapter 21 is going in the right direction, but still needs some (a lot of) work, so that's going to be the most tricky one. If I'm late on anything, it will be that one. Sorry in advance if so, but I'm really hoping I'll get it done in time!

If any of you feel like writing long comments, now it the time to do so ;p I've missed y'all a lot these past few weeks and every comment will help me finish The Actual Last Chapter.

Love, someone who's going to both cherish and loathe to see the end of this project.
Chapter Notes

The moment you have been waiting for has arrived. I'm honestly so happy to finally get here :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Illya might have been underestimating the quantity of belongings his life has amounted to until now.

He’s used to traveling light. No more than a military back filled with tightly wrapped clothing and maybe a snack. After the loss of his watch, there were no personal items to take with him at all. When Illya left for the Moscow, he had left all his possessions behind. And when the Deputy had released everything from evidence, Illya had wanted to go back to that. He didn’t want to deal with the record player and the drawings and the collection of music that had rotted away with meaning by then. Illya had told his mother to throw it all away; burn it to the ground, but she’d refused. It all ended up in a storage facility instead.

After his mother died, their house was sold with furniture included, everything that remained—everything the new tenants deemed worthless – joined the boxes in Illya’s storage. Once again, Illya had wanted to throw it all away, and it had been Olga who had refused that time.

The men that came with the company groan as they carry box after box through the hallways of the Shatterdome. Illya watches carefully, arms crossed. He still isn’t allowed to help and watching strangers handle what he now deems to be prized possessions irks him.

Napoleon isn’t banned from the heavy work, but he stays with Illya as they wait until the van is empty and the movers are gone.

What remains is a room. A room where the walls are barely visible and the floor has almost disappeared. Boxes upon boxes are stacked upon each other, pushed against the desk and drawer, standing in the space a bed should fit. Illya cracks his neck, and huffs. They have a deadline, and they should get to work.

Napoleon starts off to the side, as far away from Illya as possible. Illya pretends not to notice, but he can’t help but flicker his eyes to Napoleon every few seconds as he takes out the pots and pans from one box into another. Illya established a system before they began, and a big plastic container in the middle of the room becomes the end station of all kinds of things. The kitchen supplies will be brought to the cafeteria – Illya likes the idea that they’ll be in use still – but after years in storage, some boxes didn’t quite make it through. Within the first hour, Napoleon and Illya throw away about two dozen books and stacks of old magazines; mold and wet pages prove their demise.

Rain pounds against the window but for Illya nothing is louder than Napoleon’s breathing and the heavy thud of his own heart. Surrounded by relics from the past, something close to anticipation runs through him, a sense of foreboding, excitement or fear. The boxes aren’t labeled, but Illya knows it won’t be long before one of them finds something significant, something important to them both.
It’s like a treasure hunt, but instead of gold the reward is a confrontation with a past neither of them is sure how to handle. But Illya knows they want to try, so he keeps searching, for however long it takes.

“Illya.” Napoleon breaks the silence tentatively, like he isn’t sure he’s allowed to.

Illya untangles his hands from a collection of scarves and turns to meet Napoleon’s gaze. “What is it, Cowboy?”

Napoleon is kneeling on the floor, leaning over an iron case with his hands clenched around the edges. Illya nears when it’s clear Napoleon isn’t answering. Napoleon tenses at first, but then relaxes a little when Illya stands beside him, releasing the sharp edge of the cage. Illya makes a note to check for cuts later, and looks into the box just as Napoleon murmurs, “Found it.”

The first thing Illya sees is the horn, it’s gold paint glittering in the light despite the layer of dust covering it. It looks like it’s been shaken in transport, all pieces jumbled together.

“Do you think we can fix it?”

Napoleon shakes himself out of it and nods quickly, looking up at Illya with a shuddering breath. “Yes, I’m going to.”

Illya doesn’t know if he wants to smile or sigh at the reverence in Napoleon’s voice. In the end, he does both, and lets his hand drop onto his shoulder for just a second, squeezing. “If it doesn’t work, we can buy a new one, Cowboy.”

Napoleon lets out something that might have been a laugh if it wasn’t for—everything. He sounds a little hollow, tired, and it cuts through Illya’s heart. Illya drops to his knees next to him and grasps Napoleon’s hands. Napoleon turns to face him slowly, eyes closed as if he’s expecting an attack.

“Are you okay?” Illya asks instead of the thousand reasurances, pleads, promises; words and sentences that fight their way into his throat. They’ll talk soon. They have to talk soon. But Napoleon’s hands are shaking and they have time to take this one step at the time.

Napoleon takes another slow breath and nods. He twines his fingers through Illya’s and squeezes back. When he opens his eyes Illya almost drowns in the depth of them. He wants to touch the fragile smile that slowly grows on Napoleon’s face but he’s afraid that doing so will break it, that moving, breathing, talking, will be too much and make Napoleon run away. Illya swears to never move again, as long as he can stay in this moment with Napoleon watching him with eyes filled with love.

“Just,” Napoleon says eventually, “A lot of memories.”

Illya’s chest rises and falls. “Yes.”

“I can fix it, though,” Napoleon adds, and it sounds so hopeful that Illya doesn’t have it in him to argue that he doesn’t have to. That it doesn’t matter. What matters is them and their future and the Shatterdome and their ragtag family of companions and who they will become.

But if who they were matters to Napoleon, he’s not going to protest, so Illya says, “I know you can.”

Napoleon smiles sunlight and when he lets go Illya doesn’t feel like he’s lost something. His hands are still warm.
While Napoleon busies himself with the record player, Illya sorts through the remaining boxes to find the collection of records they had accumulated over those months at base. He pushes a few smaller boxes away to get to one of the first the movers had brought in. It’s a monstrosity that reaches to Illya’s knees and all sides are heavily duct taped and sealed with plastic foil. When Illya pushes the box away from the wall, he can see something written on the side of it, and a lump forms in his throat when he recognizes Tatiana’s handwriting.

*I’ve taught you well, I see. Maybe, once you’ve healed, we can listen to these together some time. They’re too good to waste, my boy.*

Something heavy washes over him and Illya must have let out a sound, because at once Napoleon is by his side, talking to him in a low gentle voice.

“Deep breath, Peril. It’s okay. You can let it out, but keep breathing, keep breathing Peril.”

Illya fights his way through hiccups and sobs and it feels like he’s burning from the inside out. “I miss her.”

Napoleon wraps his arms around him, kisses his forehead. Illya closes his eyes and sobs into his shoulder. Napoleon lets him. Napoleon holds him. “We’re not going to let them go to waste, Peril. We’re not. I promise.”

Slowly the vice around his heart recedes and Illya finds his breath back again. Napoleon doesn’t move away and Illya listen to his heartbeat until the world stops spinning and his mother becomes a warm memory again, instead of a burning wound.

“You’re okay?” Napoleon’s voice rumbles in his chest and Illya nods.

He leans away to wipe his wet face with the sleeve of his sweater and opens his mouth to say–

“Don’t you dare apologize or thank me,” Napoleon interrupts him with narrowed eyes. “I mean it.” His tone is stern but his hand is gentle on Illya’s back, so Illya nods and says nothing.

Napoleon seems to remember himself then and he pulls his hands away, a little shocked, and a flush takes over his face. “I’m–”

“Don’t you dare apologize for being there for me, Cowboy,” Illya says quickly but he makes sure to smile. “I appreciate it.”

Napoleon pulls a hand through his hair, looking a bit bashful, and then laughs. “You thanked me just now, you cheating bastard.”

“Did I?” Illya says innocently, and the long suffering but thoroughly fond look he gets from Napoleon for that vanishes all remaining sorrow. His mother was right, they won’t let these records go to waste. It’s too good to ever waste this.

Illya relocates his box cutter under a stack of paper and Napoleon gives him a pair of scissors from his tool kit just in case. As Napoleon continues with the record player – looking high and low for tiny bolts and pieces – Illya faces the challenge of what seems to be seven layers of duct tape. Have it never be said that his mother wasn’t a determined woman. Illya is almost sure all records have made it through the years of neglect, but there is only one way to find out.

His hands ache when he finally hits the cardboard underneath the tape. Illya presses in carefully, afraid the knife will damage the content within, and he saws through the tapes edges until he can open the box and inspect the damage.
The first record he sees is the Reinhart collection, because of course Tatiana would have put that somewhere easy to reach. Illya smiles as he carefully takes it out and scans the object for any visible damage. He takes the record out of it’s sleeve when he’s satisfied, and gently flips it into the light so see if there are any scratches standing out. The record seems almost pristine, but he’ll need to test it before he knows for sure.

“Illya?”

Illya glances over to Napoleon, who’s looking at the now whole record player with a carefully satisfied smile. “I think it’s done,” Napoleon says. “I won’t know for sure until we try it but—”

Napoleon stills when Illya joins him and presses the record into his hands.

“Let’s try it then, Cowboy,” Illya says, and he can’t help to feel a rush of excitement through his body. He’s not listened to real records since Napoleon had left, and he’s always preferred the sound to the digital versions. Those little nicks and scratches that make the record just that tiny bit more real, less perfect. Used. The way the audio dies out when you’re not alert enough to change it on time. His ‘screen has served him well, but the record player always had felt more active, more engaging, and Illya secretly looks forward to fully listening again, without the heavy associations clouding his mind anymore.

Or maybe it’s not that secret, because Napoleon takes one look at his face and rolls his eyes, almost automatically. A habit that apparently still remained through the years. Napoleon had always been amused with Illya’s preoccupation with music.

Napoleon swipes a little dust away from the plate before gently placing the record in place. His face is concentrated and a little tight with nerves, and Illya hopes the old thing works just for him. Just to make him smile again.

Napoleon places the needle on the record and the seconds seem to stretch impossibly long until music splutters into the room. The first notes follow up with the next and then Illya recognizes every single beat within the melody and can’t help but grin. “You did it, Cowboy.”

Napoleon huffs, dropping his shoulders and closing his eyes.

“I did,” he says finally, relief colouring his voice. He looks up and suddenly they’re standing very close, very warm and Napoleon’s gentle smile is tantalizing. The world stops. Napoleon flickers his gaze from Illya’s eyes to his lips and Illya starts to lean forward and—

A sound makes them jump apart. The record player jolts momentarily before continuing again and Illya’s heart restarts too. Napoleon steps around him and takes his phone out of his pocket, what Illya realises to be the source of their interruption. Illya takes a moment to silently curse everything and anything that exist within this world.

“Can it wait?” Napoleon asks. He paces through the room, slaloming expertly through the mess on the floor. His face is a picture of frustration. “Okay, I’m coming. You have five minutes. I have more important things to do.” He hangs up with finality and then freezes when he sees Illya watching.

“Sanders?” Illya asks.

Napoleon shakes his head. “Waverly.”

Illya turns away from him, watches the record spin and spin. “Ah.”
There is some rummaging behind him and someone touches his hand, fingers grazing. “I’ll be back soon, okay?” Napoleon says softly. “We can– I’ll be back soon.”

Illya nods, but he still feels like all the air has left the room. It’s too easy to see this as fleeing, as Napoleon’s last chance to get away from whatever they’re doing. But he has to trust Napoleon to want this, so he needs to have faith.

“Five minutes, Peril,” Napoleon says, sounding farther away already. “Don’t move an inch.”

Illya doesn’t turn around to see him go, only moves when his hurried steps fade into the distance. The record player has gotten itself stuck in the commotion and Illya takes the record out; not in the mood for music when he’s alone. In an effort to have time pass faster, Illya repositions himself in front of the record box, taking out records and inspecting them for mold or visible damage. He tries not to think about the memories that each and every one of them draws within him. He’ll save that for when Napoleon is here to talk about it, share his experiences. They’ll have so many moments where this music played on the background, they’ll have years to talk endlessly about it all. So Illya tries to keep him mind silent as he works, and it’s almost successful until he finds–

*Che Vuole Questa Musica Stasera*

Illya swallows down a sob and suppresses the urge to look at the door where Napoleon must, should, will come through any moment now. He ignores the all encompassing desire to run out into the halls with the record tucked against his chest and find Napoleon and tell them that this is who they were and are and will be soon so if he’ll just please never leave him again, that would be appreciated.

But Illya doesn’t do any of that because he knows Napoleon will come back in one, two, three minutes and in the meantime, Illya will test the record for him. Make sure it sounds exactly the same as it did when Napoleon had explained the lyrics, half drunk and blushing red and Illya had interrupted to kiss him halfway through the second verse.

Illya takes the record out with shaking fingers. The dark surface glints in the light and Illya walks to the record player when a soft sound of something falling shakes him out of his revery.

On the floor, a paper lies. Illya looks at it in confusion until he realizes he’s holding the record–sleeve upside down in his other hand, so it must have been in there, underneath the record. Something heavy rolls around in Illya’s stomach and his heart pounces as he takes the paper from the ground, as carefully as he can. The paper has been written on and Illya takes a deep breath before turning it around so he can read the written side.

Illya almost drops it when he reads the first sentence.

Illya closes his eyes, holding the letter in his hands tightly because he cannot bear to lose; this is important. So he puts the record and it’s sleeve on top of a box so that he can’t accidentally damage them, and starts to read while trying not to shake apart.

*I’m sorry, Peril.*

*I know that doesn’t matter. I know you’ll never forgive me. First your father and now me. You deserve so much better. Someone better.*

*I’m too much of a coward to confess this in person, it seems, and I apologize for that too. Had I been someone deserving of you, I would have woken you up and told you right now, face to face. Instead, I’m writing and planning my escape while you sleep peacefully by my side. You should*
never have trusted me, and I’m so sorry I made you. I’ve been selfish. I’ve loved you selfishly, and now I’m leaving you selfishly because I don’t think I’ll survive your anger and rejection upon discovering what I did. But I’m none of the good person I pretended to be. I wish I was. Thank you for making me believe I could be a better man than I am, even if it only was for a little while. I will cherish the memory for as long as I can.

You deserve someone better, and you’ll find them. The star S.O.P recruit. You’ve proven yourself and I’m so fucking proud of you, even if that sentiment isn’t worth much now. You’ll end up in Moscow, far removed from recruits with childishly dangerous grudges. You’ll become the most successful pilot in history, and I’ll be only a tiny speck in the history of your life. I wish for that. I hope you’ll forget me, and the pain I have caused you won’t matter in the grand scheme of things. I did love you, and I don’t think I’ll ever stop. I might be the thief, but you stole me first.

You’ll be better off without me. You’ll be happier without me. I know you will.

I’ve included what you need in your first birthday present. I hope it’s enough to make you hate me a little less, but I won’t blame you if it doesn’t.

I’m going to miss you. I don’t even think I know how much. You were a kind of happiness I never expected to experience in my life.

Thank you.

Napoleon Solo.

Illya realises he stopped breathing when his body hacks into a prolonged cough, desperately trying to get oxygen in. Everything is spinning and Illya is almost sure he had been standing before but he’s collapsed on the ground and the only thing keeping him together is rereading the letter again, and again, and again.

It becomes crumpled and wet spots make the ink streak into the page as slowly the puzzle pieces fall into place in Illya’s mind, the sound of them reverberating through his head and he’s shaking and doesn’t think he’ll ever know how it is to live without his vision clouded over, tears streaking his face.

There is no date on the letter, but Illya’s first fear that it’s a goodbye for now is contradicted by the contents and the wear and tear of the paper; folded and hidden for years. It must have been the night when Napoleon left. Just before everything went so horribly wrong. Illya reads it until every sentence is etched into the inside of his skull, until he can rasp the words along through his throat, raw and pained. Eventually, a passage sticks out to him, and he wrecks his mind for what it means.

I’ve included what you need in your first birthday present. I hope it’s enough to make you hate me a little less, but I won’t blame you if it doesn’t.

The first birthday present. Illya doesn’t know what it means but he needs to know. The Reinhart record had been a birthday present, an early birthday present, but there is nothing in the sleeve but a dead spider. Napoleon hadn’t given him anything else but–

Illya’s breath catches as he twist around to the record player. He takes the tiniest screwdriver he can find and spares a moment to feel guilty about ruining Napoleon’s hard work before opening up the wooden case. The plate gives away easily and Illya slides the side out, ignoring the tremble in his fingers. Illya sees it at once, the edge of another piece of paper clearly visible, folded into an empty crease within the machinery. Illya takes it out and chokes out a sob when he realises what it is.
It’s a confession.

A confession to each and every crime Napoleon had committed as Vincenzo. Lists and details only the perpetrator of the crime could have known. Even Uncle is mentioned; his aliases named and his role in the complot explained. The confession reads like a boast, implying that the reason for writing it was pure egomania. Like Napoleon had been so proud of what he had been accomplished he wanted to make sure Illya wouldn’t get credit for it. Like he had been so full of himself that he still would be able to get away even though they had every detail of what he did.

It contradicts everything in the letter he had left to Illya.

It’s exactly what Olga would have wanted. What she could have used to get him freed.

The confessional is signed with: Napoleon Solo. Also known as: Vincenzo White.

Illya’s knees give in, and he’s lost within a sea of grief, despair and a heavy, sweet relief that chokes his throat and whitens his vision. In a fit of panic he searches frantically for the letter only to find it in his breast pocket. His hands tremble too much to make any sense of the words, but Illya doesn’t need to read them anymore. He knows every single syllable. He knows everything.

He’s still frozen and his eyes are still burning by the time the door opens behind him.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Peril.” Napoleon rushes into the room, sounding out of breath. “Waverly didn’t let me go until I– Peril? What is it? Are you okay? What’s going on–” Napoleon takes carefully measured steps toward him, as if he’s approaching a scared animal, and then must see what Illya’s holding because he stops and says, “Oh–”

Illya drags his eyes away from the paper and turns around to see Napoleon staring at him, face pale and flickering through too many emotions to name. Illya tries to say something—anything, but his jaws aren’t working the way he wants to and his tongue lies dead in his mouth. Illya takes a shuddering breath and tries again. “Cowboy–” His voice cuts out and Napoleon moves towards him, slowly, tentative, and Illya wants nothing more than bury his head into his shoulder and have him as close as possible. Illya needs him.

“Peril?” Napoleon’s voice is hushed and paper thin. There is a pool of fear in his eyes and Illya can’t take it anymore. He stands and drops the letter, slides his hand to Napoleon’s nape and draws him in without hesitation. Illya kisses him once, twice and after one unending moment Napoleon responds, deepening the kiss until Illya doesn’t have to think anymore, until the slide of Napoleon’s tongue against his is the only thing that matters. Napoleon’s hands grip around his hips and Illya pushes in closer, drawing a hand through the dark strands. He pulls back for a short breath and it’s Napoleon that follows after him, almost tripping over his feet to continue the kiss. Illya sighs into it and gives him what he wants until his lungs strain and his cheeks hurt from trying not to smile.

Napoleon draws back after a time and takes a few deep breaths with his forehead pressed against Illya’s shoulder. Illya caresses the back of Napoleon’s head, tangling his fingers through his hair and reveling in the small content sounds Napoleon can’t help but make.

Illya’s body feels too light. Napoleon leans heavily against him but Illya’s soaring. He presses another kiss to Napoleon’s head, and smiles when Napoleon looks up at him, eyes wide with confusion and hope and Illya can’t help but kiss him again. Just once. Before he’ll have to find his words.

Napoleon lets him; kisses back like he’s afraid it’s the last time. He clenches his hands into Illya’s
sweater as if he’s sure Illya will push him away any moment now and Illya gentles his movements in the hope Napoleon will get it, will understand. There is nothing to worry about.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Illya asks finally, when he is warm and tired and has Napoleon flush against him on the sofa, his head pillowed on his chest. “Cowboy,” Illya says softly when he doesn’t answer. “I’m not angry at you. I just need to know why you didn’t tell me about the letter. It meant–” Illya huffs wryly to himself. “Well, you were there for my reaction.”

Napoleon stays silent for another few breaths, but he doesn’t move away, only twines his fingers through Illya’s. “I didn’t know it hadn’t worked until after the drift and I didn’t want to make excuses. It didn't work anyway, the consequences did not change, so it doesn't matter. It isn't worth anything.”

“It matters to me,” Illya says. He tilts Napoleon’s chin up so he can look him in the eyes. “It matters to me than you tried.”

Napoleon just sighs and lays back down, but not quickly enough for Illya to miss the frustration in his expression, still that slight bit of hate towards himself. “It didn’t work. You got hurt because I didn’t do enough. What do you want me to say, Illya.”

“If my father hadn’t delivered me an inheritance of hate, if Valkov had been stationed on another post, if the Deputy had let Olga through my stuff just once and found it. And even then, we couldn’t have know what they’d get me on instead,” Illya sighs. “There are so many ‘what if’s’, so many ways it could have gone different. It matters to me that you tried and that you didn’t leave me with nothing at all.”

“I just should have told you,” Napoleon says finally, and he’s lost his defiance, he sounds tired. Resigned. “I should have told you, instead of writing that fucking letter. I was a coward.”

Illya imagines it, Napoleon – then still Vincenzo – waking him deep in the night, wringing his hands on the edge of the bed while he confesses to the whole operation. Uncle, the plan, the lies. \textit{Illya would have run with him}. The realisation is stark and real and it consumes him. Illya would have tried to get Napoleon out from under Rudi’s thumb, find some other way to keep them both safe and in service, but if there was no other choice, Illya would have left Russia and his mother behind, and ran with Napoleon. Maybe Tatiana would have joined them anyway, with her plans of escape already in place. Maybe she would have lived then, thrived even. But it hadn’t happened like that. Napoleon had made a choice with unforeseen consequences neither of them ever could have predicted, and hearing this romanticized hypothetical will not help them move on.

So Illya says instead, “Yes, you should have, but you didn’t and I forgive you. We have a second chance, Cowboy, to make this work.”

Illya can feel Napoleon’s breath hitch against him and continues, “You have another choice to make, right now. Either you try or you let anger and guilt consume you. I tried the the latter and I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Napoleon laughs softly in a way that says he doesn’t think Illya is being funny, but he becomes a little less tense and stops facing away. He looks at Illya for a moment before his half–smile fades and his expression turns as serious as Illya has ever seen him.

“I need you to be certain about this, Illya,” Napoleon says. “I– There–” Napoleon sighs, dropping his head while shaking it. “I can’t ask you to forgive me, I don’t want that. I’m scared though, that in a few months, or a year, your rightful anger will resurface again and that–” Napoleon stops, closes his eyes. “I have no right to ask for promises or guarantees, but please be sure about this. If
you need more time—"

Illya interrupts him by placing his hand against his jaw, gently drawing him closer. He waits until Napoleon opens his eyes, and murmurs against his lips, “I’m sure, Cowboy. I love you.”

“God, Peril,” Napoleon breathes, and kisses him once again. Even without a voiced reply, Illya can feel his response in the clasp of his hands around Illya’s jaw, and the push of his lips against his. The pace slows down and Napoleon becomes soft, gentle and it makes Illya’s head spin even more. He feels cherished.

After a little while, Napoleon lies back down on Illya’s chest and just breathes, exhausted and seemingly run out of words. Illya moves his gaze from Napoleon, worried he might be staring slightly too much – it’s just so good to have him close again – and chuckles when he realises how little they actually got done. The room is a chaos, and Illya can’t help but look forward to making it theirs.

“I’ll have to fix the record player again,” Napoleon murmurs apropos to nothing. “You hurt it.”

Illya chuckles. “I only took out one of the sides.”

“A disgrace.”

“I’m sorry, Cowboy,” Illya says mock–apologetic. “Worry about it later.”

Napoleon murmurs something else but it’s inaudible against Illya’s sweater and a second later his breathing evens out. Illya watches the last slivers of tension melt out of him, languid and peaceful in his sleep. Illya doesn’t want to move ever again.

Illya doesn’t know how much time passes. He divides his time between watching Napoleon sleep and closing his eyes and thinking about nothing at all. His whole body feels in balance. There is nothing pulling him apart. Illya breathes and tries to commit every detail of this moment to his memory. Their turning point. The start of something new and old again. Better. They’ll have to learn to talk, communicate like Gaby is praising all the time. But for the first time since she suggested it, Illya feels like it might be easy. He wants to know everything, and wants Napoleon to know everything in return, so that they can have the best possible chance to hold on to this forever.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the door opens to reveal Gaby walking in.

Illya shushes her before she can say a word, motioning to Napoleon fast asleep. She snaps her lips shut and after a split second of confusion her whole face softens. She nears carefully, avoiding making sound, and smiles. “He’s actually sleeping,” she whispers with real wonder in her voice. “Since the drift he hasn’t slept much, rather just passed out whenever his body couldn’t take any more. You’re magic, Illya.”

Illya allows himself to smile and caresses a thumb across Napoleon’s nape almost mindlessly. Gaby tracks the movement with an amused glint in her eye and she grins when Napoleon buries in closer at the touch.

“You two made progress, I see,” Gaby says softly.

“We talked, sort of,” Illya says, nodding. “We sorted some things out.”

“I’m glad.” Gaby moves her gaze from Napoleon to Illya. Illya sees her sincerity and he doesn’t know how to thank her for everything she’s done for them. But it almost seems like for Gaby, them being happy is a reward in itself. He still makes a note to himself to find some way to show
his gratitude. Maybe Napoleon would like help with brainstorming ideas too.

“Did you need me for something?” Illya says, hoping it doesn’t sound like he wants her to go away. Which he doesn’t, not really, but he also doesn’t want to move away from Napoleon and prays that whatever she came for can wait another century.

Gaby rolls her eyes. She sees right through him. “I wanted to tell you to hurry up because your bed is coming in an hour, but,” she makes a show of looking around the messy room, “It appears we need a miracle to get this done on time.”

Illya isn’t sure if he cares all that much about being timely, his priorities lie elsewhere, but before he can voice these non–concerns, Gaby pushes up her sleeves and says, “I’ll save you the trouble, Illya. Stay where you are.”

“Thank you,” Illya says.

Gaby is true to her word and works quick and efficient.

Occasionally she takes something and makes a hushed comment on it, “I didn’t know you drew, Illya,” or, “How many records does someone need?” but despite the dry whispers, she gets more done by herself than Napoleon and Illya had in an hour. But they’d been distracted at the time, Illya argues when Gaby mentions it.

There are only three boxes left when a book falls on the floor and Napoleon rouses awake, blinking slowly into the light. Illya smiles as he watches Napoleon slowly register his position, and then gradually remember the events prior to his mid–day nap. Napoleon’s face goes from sleepy confusion to an endearing smile and Illya’s heart clenches. He kisses him softly, because he can now. Because Napoleon wants him to.

“Morning breath,” Napoleon murmurs pulling back half heartedly. There is a twinkle in his eye.

Illya keeps him in place with a gentle hand and kisses his jaw. “It isn’t morning, so that isn’t true.”

Napoleon laughs and rolls his eyes, he seems to prepare himself to snap something clever back, but he’s interrupted by a giggle.

Gaby covers her mouth almost in shock, and then loses it again when Napoleon raises an eyebrow at her, and Illya does the same.

“God, you two are disgusting,” Gaby says between bouts of giggles. “This is going to be horrible.” She smiles wide. “I love it. I’m happy for you two.”

Despite her teasing, Illya knows she means it. Napoleon does too, because he says, “Thank you for everything, Gaby.”

Gaby tuts, waving the gratitude away and then zeroes in on Illya. “Now that you’re not needed as a human pillow anymore, are you going to help or not?”

“Of course.”

Napoleon moves away to let Illya off the couch and Illya stands, stretching his back into place. Napoleon tries to sit up too, but he’s interrupted by a yawn, and Illya frowns at him.

“You’re still tired, Cowboy,” Illya says and gives Napoleon a slight push. “Go rest some more, Gaby and I will take care of this.”
Napoleon rolls his eyes again, but he complies, sagging into the cushions.

Illya spies the sketchbook Gaby had unpacked on the coffee table and gives it to Napoleon. “Here, if you get bored.”

“Oh,” Napoleon’s face lights up. “Thank you, Peril.”

“Gross,” Gaby coughs in the background, and Illya takes that as his cue to help her with the remaining boxes.

The door is pushed open again when Illya puts the last book on a plank. Illya turns around to see Ekko tugging on something large and white— the mattress.

“If anyone can help us!” Alexei shouts from the hall, hidden behind the thing. “Would be nice.”

Illya helps get the heavy mattress inside with Napoleon watching the proceedings as if it’s an amusing reality tv–show. Illya tries not to be distracted by the potential uses the mattress might have in the future, besides sleeping. When he catches Napoleon looking, he’s sure they’re thinking the same thing.

After the mattress Ekko gets the remaining pieces needed to put the bed together. Gab and Napoleon take turns bickering with Alexei about what bolt needs to go where and Illya hurts his stomach from laughing when a lost screw turns out to be stuck in Napoleon’s shoe.

They end up with a functioning bed when it’s almost dark out and they sprawl on the thing together— all four of them, Alexei having disappeared a few minutes earlier with the vague explanation that he’s getting something important. It’s Ekko’s turn to laugh when Alexei returns carrying a chessboard with the pieces balanced precariously on it. Alexei walks slowly, very focused to keep everything balanced, but just before he puts the board down he trips over an empty box and the chess pieces fly everywhere.

Accompanied by a chorus of laughter, Illya helps Alexei find all the pieces.

“I have a suggestion,” Gaby says eventually, playing with the white queen in her hand. “The chance of an attack gets greater everyday, so I think tonight might be the last time we’re allowed off base for a while.”

That puts a slight damper on the mood, and everyone stops for a moment to remember that there is still a threat. Illya sighs. It’s easy to forget sometimes, but the fact that they can tells him a lot about what they have built here. If he had been alone, he’d never be able to forget for a moment.

“So,” Gaby continues. “Let’s eat out tonight. I know a good place.” She smiles. “Let’s have some fun, we deserve it.”

“I’m in,” Ekko says. Alexei follows soon after.

Illya looks at Napoleon for a moment. He likes the sound of spending some time with his friends, but the temptation of staying home with Napoleon is strong too. Napoleon motions to the rest and Illya knows what he means. They can’t miss this. Their time will come later.

“Sure,” Illya says finally. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes
There we go y'all. The idiots have kissed for realsies now, huzzah. It depends on your response, but barring the chance everyone hates it, this might be my favorite chapter of the whole thing. Let me know how it made you feel <3

Schedule Hell/Update
I hoped to get further with chapter 21 than I am now, which means I have to write pretty much everything tomorrow to make it. We will see if that happens. Just know that if it's late, me and my beta are working really hard to get it to you asap, and maybe the fluff of this chapter helps to heal the pain of the wait. I hope I see you thursday night <3 And as always, comments are my fuel. It would really help for a writing marathon tomorrow if I can read through a few new ones :D

For those interested in helping me out with the rewrite project after this is all done. You can reach me at somedrunkpirate@gmail.com if you want to let me know what details/scenes/whatever really worked for you and mostly -> Why. It would help me a Fuck Ton when I review/reflect this thing :D

I'm gonna go back to writing. Love!
After dinner, Illya and Napoleon decide to stay out for another moment.

While Gaby and the rest hurry for warmth back in the Shatterdome, Illya and Napoleon walk leisurely along the darkened docks, watching the waves come and go. They talk about anything that comes to mind, condensation forming white clouds in the air. Illya smiles when Napoleon takes his hand, continuing his running commentary without missing a beat. When they reach the end of the docks, Illya asks him to stay the night.

Napoleon says yes.

Illya closes the door behind him and Napoleon pushes him against it, face split in a grin. “I’ve wanted to do this for hours.”

Illya’s laugh is cut off by desperate lips and he grasps at Napoleon’s waist.

“Those long looks over the table,” Napoleon murmurs between kisses, “biting your lip. Peril, you tease.”

Illya might have taken a little too much pleasure in riling Napoleon up during dinner. But how can he not, when every gaze between them is laden with a giddy tension that Illya didn’t know he had missed this much. Where they had their aching longing before, the air between them now is alight with possibility. And Napoleon trying to glare at him while also suppressing the urge to drag him somewhere else had been Illya’s favorite look way back when. That stayed very much the same.

“You were having a conversation with Ekko,” Illya argues, ending his sentence with a hiss when Napoleon mouths along his jaw. “I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“I remember nothing of what she said,” Napoleon says, pulling back. He tries to glare again but the intention is hopelessly lost in his flushed cheeks and bright eyes. “I blame you.”

Illya decides he’s been gone for too long and tugs Napoleon close, pulling him in by his coat. Napoleon smiles before leaning in and it’s so easy. They click. They fall back into what they were supposed to be so quickly and Illya feels whole again. It’s so fucking easy.

“You were having a conversation with Ekko,” Illya says, trying to keep his mind on something else besides Napoleon. They’re going so fast, and Illya wants nothing more than to fall into it. But a small part of him protests. “The conversation with Ekko.” Illya sucks in a breath. “It could have been important.”

Illya feels Napoleon smiling into his skin. “More important than this?”

No, Illya wants to say. Nothing is more important than this. But as much as he’d like to fall into the
rhythm of their lips together, what they have is bigger than just this, and Illya wants to make sure they last this time. They can’t make the same mistake twice. They have to be better. So Illya takes a deep breath, gently pushes Napoleon back and says, “Napoleon, we have to talk, first.”

Napoleon lets go at once, stepping back. “Okay.”

Illya huffs and takes one of his hands, rubbing the knuckles with his thumb. Napoleon’s grin has faded, and he’s gone a little pale. Illya looks at him with what he hopes to be a reassuring expression. ‘Thank you.”

“Of course,” Napoleon says, and nods a little too fast.

Illya realises with a start that Napoleon is nervous, and he wants desperately to comfort him, but first, “I wanted to talk about the drift.”

Napoleon nods again, dragging his free hand through his hair. “What do you want to know? More about Uncle? Why I used your keycard- I had to Illya. I’m so sorry, but it was the only way to get out before they discovered me and I was too much of a coward to stay and–”

Illya shakes his head and Napoleon snaps his mouth shut. Illya presses a kiss to his hand. “We can talk about that later, if you want. I don’t have to know every detail.” Illya squeezes Napoleon’s hand, feels the frantic pulse on his wrist. “Our future is more important to me right now, and that’s why I wanted to talk about drifting again.” Illya holds Napoleon’s gaze and sees his face go blank. “I want to pilot with you. I’m going to drift again.”

“Illya.” Napoleon takes a step back, eyes wide. “No. You can’t. It’s too dangerous-”

Illya watches the fear grow and doesn’t say anything.

The blood drains from Napoleon’s face, realisation twists his expression, lines sharp and gaunt. “I won’t be able to change your mind, will I? Not without–” Napoleon looks away, clenches his fist. “Not without ruining us.” It comes out resigned, a heavy painful sigh.


Illya is at war. Ice covers his skin as he realises that he might be breaking them already. That his decision will ruin them before they could start again. Maybe it isn’t fair, asking this if Napoleon. Risking his life. But he can’t imagine staying behind, watching the world go to pieces while others fight.

The guilt would destroy him, before he can truly enjoy them.

Napoleon steps back, shaking his head frantically. His eyes are red. He walks backwards to the door and every footstep feels like the severing of a limb. Another and then another. Napoleon moves away and Illya doesn’t know how he’s still standing. A sob is stuck in his chest. He’s losing him already. He can’t-

“Illya, Peril. Look at me.” Napoleon is suddenly close again. A warm hand closes around clenched fist. There is only the dark and Napoleon’s soft voice. “I’m not running, okay? I’ll be back. I just– I just need some time to think about this and I want to get it right.”

His heart is a stone sinking, but Illya tries to nod to show he’s listening. Every word a lifeline.

“I’m only going to take a walk. I’ll be back, I promise.” Napoleon hesitates and adds, “I know that doesn’t mean much from m–”
Illya shakes his head for him to stop, opens his eyes and finds his breath back when Napoleon smiles wetly at him, encouraging. Honest.

Napoleon leans forward, touches the letter in Illya’s breast pocket. His breath warm against Illya’s lips.

“I love you,” Napoleon says, and kisses him gently. Barely there and then gone again. “I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

Illya sucks in a desperate breath when the door closes. The room feels dead, suddenly. They forgot to put on the lights and Illya only notices how dark it is now that Napoleon is gone. Illya shivers in the cold. The lightswitch seems to be miles away, so instead he collapses in the chair beside the window, blindly turning the reading lamp on. In the light, Illya can see his hands tremble. He clenches his fists and relaxes them again, stuck on the thought that only moments ago he had been holding Napoleon and now—

A movement in his peripheral vision shakes him out of his inner turmoil. There is someone standing by the edge of the water, smoking. The cigarette burns orange in the night; the reflection of the fire dancing in the waves. Illya’s breath catches and then calms when he recognizes Napoleon, looking out over the sea. He must have walked there specifically so that Illya could see him, could watch him if he needed to. The reassurance makes Illya’s heart flow with warmth and he lets out a relieved sigh. Despite his worst fears screaming otherwise, Napoleon isn’t leaving. He just needed a breath, a cigarette, a moment to think. Illya can give him that.

Illya picks up the book on the side table and tries to read a little as he waits. But his eyes keep dragging back to Napoleon’s dark silhouette and after a while Illya stops pretending. He keeps watch until Napoleon flicks the stub into the harbor, and disappears out of frame.

To come back.

The next minutes are the longest of Illya’s life.

When the door beeps to confirm a correct code and slides open, Illya shudders. He wipes his eyes, ignores the wetness on the back of his hands.

“Hey.” Napoleon walks inside slowly. “Peril?”

“Yes,” Illya says. “Here.”

Napoleon turns to to him and Illya can only just see the hint of a smile on Napoleon’s red, flushed face. He’s rubbing his hands together and hasn’t taken off his coat yet. If Illya had any energy left, he would have stood to get a blanket. As it is, Napoleon joins him next to the chair, squatting down so he can look Illya in the eye. He pulls Illya’s hands in his. They’re cold.

“Are you sure?”

For a split second, Illya considers lying. Pretending he doesn’t want it anymore as long as Napoleon just stays with him. It could be worth it. It should be worth it. But it wouldn’t be real. Illya closes his eyes. He can’t lie to Napoleon. He just can’t. “I want to help, I want to fight. I want to fight alongside you. I want to save people. I want to be useful, Cowboy, and piloting is my way.”

There is a silence and Illya opens his eyes, his heart is stuck in his throat as he waits on Napoleon’s response.

“Look,” Napoleon says suddenly, fierce. “This world can go to shit for my part. I don’t care. I
don’t want to risk losing you again, so the duty argument is not going to work with me.” He presses his lips together, flickering his eyes away and back again. “Your use– You’re not a fucking robot Illya, no one made you to do anything. You deserve to have a life. With me, or– or with anyone else. Anyone you want.”

Napoleon stills, drops his head. Illya forgets to breathe.

“But–” Napoleon says, “I know you will be miserable staying on the sidelines. I know you and you’re a fighter, a hero, and if you want this I’m not going to force you out.”

Napoleon looks up and Illya reaches out, tries to soothe his expression away with a gentle touch. It doesn’t work. Illya has never seen him like this. This–

“I’m just really scared, Peril,” Napoleon says, his voice breaking. “I’m okay with it, and I’ve made peace with it. But I’m really fucking scared to lose you again and that makes me scared that my emotional instability is going to put you in more risk during the drift, and that creates this never-ending cycle and then it will be my fault all over again.”

“It won’t–” Illya stops himself, realising reassurances aren’t going to help Napoleon with this. Illya knows how fear can destroy all rationale, consuming the mind until nothing but a trembling void is left. Napoleon has dropped his head, looking away and Illya belatedly realises he’s embarrassed. The red flush from cold replaced by painted shame and no- Napoleon should never feel ashamed of this. Illya fits his hand along Napoleon’s jaw and his breath catches when Napoleon leans into his hand, almost automatically, seeking support.

“Cowboy,” Illya says and waits until he looks up before continuing, “Thank you for telling me. Thank you for being honest.”

Confusion flashes fleetingly over Napoleon’s face. He huffs out a breath but doesn’t move away, keeps close, watching Illya carefully. “I’m not ready to lose you again, Peril. I don’t think I’ll ever be.”

Illya shudders. “I’m not going to get lost. Not this time. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that,” Napoleon says with a sad smile. “But I know there is no other choice.” His expression turns serious then. “One condition. I want to trust you that you know you can do this. I want nothing more than succeed with you, Illya. I want to drift with you. But you need to be honest with me too. If at any moment you have the slightest suspicion you’re not ready for this, you’ll tell me and we’ll call it off. Even if we’re already in the Jaeger. You have to tell the truth, when I ask. Yeah?”

Illya takes a deep breath and nods. He closes the distance between them and presses his forehead against Napoleon’s, so close he can see the different shades of blue in his eyes. “I will tell you. I promise.”

Napoleon closes his eyes for a moment. He swallows. The seconds tick by but when Napoleon opens his eyes again he looks a little stronger, a little less drained. It cuts Illya to know how much this weighs on Napoleon, but they’ll get better. After the first drift, the worries will cease, and it won’t be another burden on Napoleon’s back.

“Okay,” Napoleon says. “We’re doing this.”

Illya smiles, relief flows through him and he draws Napoleon close. They end up just breathing together, haphazardly squished together in the armchair, and Illya’s heart slows back to normal
realising that they made it through a difficult point, and Napoleon is still here. He’s not going to let anything happen to them for long as Napoleon wants him to.

The blinking red light of a plane flies across the darkened sky and Illya follows it’s path before watching the ocean stretch until the horizon’s edge. He’ll be there again soon, with Napoleon by his side, and Alexei and Ekko in their Jaeger. Illya has never put much stock in such beliefs, but the idea that his mother could be watching over him as he found his way back to duty again warms his heart. Illya knows he can do this. Napoleon twines their hands together and squeezes, following Illya’s gaze outside. They will do this together.

A yawn interrupts Illya’s musings, and Napoleon chuckles at him with a tired smile. Illya smiles back but notices the dark spots underneath Napoleon’s eyes.

“We should–” Another yawn cuts Illya off and Napoleon laughs.

“Yeah, we should.”

They shuffle to the ensuite bathroom together. Illya is too tired than do much more than brush his teeth and wash his face. Napoleon disappears a moment later with a mumbled comment to get ‘some new pants’ and Illya collapses into bed alone, his lethargic mind only realising he could be worried about Napoleon being gone by the time Napoleon comes back, wearing only a t-shirt and the aforementioned pants.

Napoleon turns the light off before walking to the bed, worrying his bottom lip as he lingers by the side. Illya suppresses a sigh as he makes room for him and motions for Napoleon to get in.

Napoleon hesitates for another second before complying, shaking his head to himself. He crawls under Illya’s arm, shuffling around until he finds a comfortable spot and Illya feels his smile grow. He hadn’t exactly forgot how physical Napoleon preferred to be at night, definitely when he is tired. But the memory is still a big difference to having Napoleon’s face pressed in the crook of his neck and one of his arms draped over his chest. Illya stretches a little so their legs are intertwined, and though the proceedings of this evening had been going to another direction, Illya can’t help but feel like nothing can ever be better than this. For years, he’d assumed he’ll never have this again, knowing somewhere deep inside him that Napoleon had been a rare exception of the general rule. Illya tightens his arm around Napoleon and presses his lips against Napoleon’s forehead, extracting a pleased hum from Napoleon. Illya feels safe and warm and secure almost falls asleep like that until a soft whisper interrupts path to unconsciousness.

“Peril?”

“Hmm,” Illya responds, trying to form a question with his uncooperating lips.

Napoleon huffs fondly. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to warn you.” He sighs and his voice goes so quiet Illya barely hears him. “I get nightmares, sometimes… Just shake me awake if I start to kick you.”

If Illya had been more awake, he might have said something more helpful, but as the pull of sleep is tugging him deeper and deeper, he just gathers Napoleon closer and murmurs, “Okay, Cowboy. It’s okay. I’m here. I’m here,” until he falls asleep.

The sunlight warms Illya’s eyelids until he blinks them open, momentarily lost in the bright light. It’s still early in the morning, but the window’s orientation grants them a perfect sight of the sun coming up, the sky still lightly dusted in orange and purple before the first rays touch the sea’s shimmering plane.
Napoleon is still fast asleep. He’s relocated more to the side of the bed in an effort to escape some heat, his blanket folded to his hips and his shirt is sticking to the skin of his back. Despite the slight distance between them there is no connection lost as Napoleon’s arm is a vice around Illya’s hips, latching them together as if his sleeping form is afraid Illya will float off if he doesn’t hold on.

Illya watches the light reflect through Napoleon’s messy strands and reaches out carefully to brush a hair out of Napoleon’s face. He looks peaceful, a world of difference between the expression that Napoleon had had when Illya had roused from choked off murmurs a few hours earlier. Napoleon had hands fisted in his pillow, his teeth clenched and his breathing interrupted by silent screams that had almost made Illya fall apart.

Illya had put a hand on Napoleon’s cheek in an effort to wake him up gently, but Napoleon had slapped the hand away out of reflex, his still sleeping body wracked in an emotion so dark Illya still can’t name it more awake. Eventually calling out his name had done the trick and Napoleon had resurfaced from the dream with a hiss, before realising it hadn’t been real. Illya can’t remember much of what had been said next, the memory muddy and almost dreamlike in the bright light of morning, but in his still vulnerable state Napoleon had apologized over and over again for leaving, not stopping until he fell asleep again, shuddering in Illya’s arms.

The episode had left no traces onto Napoleon now, sleeping deeply next to him, his breathing deep and calm. Illya feels his steady pulse and has to suppress the urge to kiss him awake; he needs a little more sleep than that. Illya tries to slowly detach himself from Napoleon’s grip. The morning is still young and he doesn’t exactly know what is ahead of them, but Illya assumes that the moment people are informed of their decision, they’ll be subjected to a whirlwind of activities without a break for showering. Illya plans to be a step in front of the proceedings. His first attempts to extract himself prove to be unsuccessful, Napoleon only tightens his hold, mumbling something that might have been a protest before dropping off again. Illya smiles at that, but he really needs a trip to the toilet too, so he keeps trying to escape until Napoleon lets go with a silent huff. Illya takes the opportunity and moves out of bed quickly.

Napoleon stretches out the second after he leaves, taking the whole mattress with a position that slightly resembles a stoned starfish. Illya cuts off his chuckle with a hand, and pads as quietly as he can to the bathroom and quickly goes through the motions until the hot spray of the shower stings his skin, the droplets turning it red and clean. Illya washes his hair and enjoys the sensation of water all around him, but cuts the stream sooner than usual; eager to return to where Napoleon waits for him. Illya steps out of the shower and it’s only then that he realises left his towel in the room, the only thing to cover up with is a hand towel and his dirty clothing which he doesn’t want to touch right now.

“Peril?” Napoleon’s sleepy voice comes out of the room, sounding confused and slightly worried, and Illya decides to get over himself and walks inside still dripping wet, the small towel barely hanging onto his hips

Napoleon turns around from the sound and his face goes from a little fear that cuts right through Illya’s heart to a wide-eyed and easy grin, his cheeks slightly blushing.

“Yes, Cowboy?” Illya tries his utmost best to remain calm and casual, grabbing the bigger towel from the desk where he had left it and turns away slightly to replace the smaller version. He ignores the slight catch of breath on the other side of the room. When the small remaining sliver of his modesty is safe, Illya faces Napoleon again while drying his hair.

“You were gone,” Napoleon answers the unspoken question. He looks away for a moment, smiling
Illya smiles back what he hopes to be reassuring and walks to Napoleon to press a gentle kiss to his lips, murmuring, “I’m here.” as he pulls away.

“Yes,” Napoleon says in a joking tone, but Illya sees relief in the corner of his mouth, “I can see that.” He’s not so subtly ogling, and Illya feels his gaze like lasers over his skin.

Slightly tingly, Illya moves away, digging through his drawers for a new sweater and some pants. Outfit chosen, he hesitates for a moment, staring the clothes down until Napoleon says, “Don’t mind me.”

Illya huffs to himself and drops the towel, hearing a choked off cough in the background to his great amusement. Illya is halfway in his turtleneck sweater when Napoleon speaks up again.

“Yes,” he says, “I have decided.”

Illya pulls his head through so he can see Napoleon’s face and asks, “What?”

Napoleon moves his gaze from Illya’s body to his eyes with seemingly great effort, his grin is halfway between his usual charming smile and something more hesitant; a little nervous almost. “I can wake up to this for the rest of my life. Preferably never leave this bed again.”

Illya laughs, and Napoleon’s eyes go brighter as he does. “That sounds like a good idea, Cowboy.”

“Isn’t it?” Napoleon asks, “I’ve always thought I was a genius. Glad you think so too.”

Illya huffs and rolls his eyes, but he knows he isn’t fooling anyone, his face splitting in a smile. “I never said that.”

Napoleon raises an eyebrow, his face forming into a mockery of a pout. “Didn’t you? I must have misheard then.”

Illya can’t stop himself anymore and crosses the room to wipe that expression from Napoleon’s smug, silly, happy face. The lines beside Napoleon’s eyes crinkle as he nears, looking at him as if Illya did something truly incredible and Illya can’t think about why Napoleon looks at him like that because Napoleon is kissing him, dragging him back into bed, and Illya doesn’t even pretend to resist.

Illya ends up straddling Napoleon’s thighs, receiving a pleased hum for his efforts, and deepens the kiss, pushing Napoleon back in the mattress. A rush flushes through Illya’s mind and he can feel Napoleon try not to smile against him. The kiss feels gentle and soft, so much so Illya doesn’t mind the slightly sour taste of it, morning breath a priority meaningless compared to Napoleon’s body flush against him, clearly wanting. Illya pulls back only to latch onto Napoleon’s jaw, previously bruised skin now fully healed, the scrape of a little stubble exactly what Illya wanted.

Napoleon’s amused chuckle is cut off sharply when Illya rediscovers that sensitive spot behind Napoleon’s ear and presses open mouth kisses onto it, leaving wet trails up and down his throat. A moan reverberates through Napoleon’s chest and suddenly Illya’s movements turn hungry. He wants every piece of Napoleon. It has been so long. Napoleon’s hands tug on Illya’s sweater and Illya leans up a little taking the hint. He pulls on the edge, taking the cursed thing off while Napoleon watches him with dark eyes, black pupils almost drowning out the blue. Napoleon takes a heavy breath when Illya leans over him again bare-chested and blinks a few times, biting his lips. Illya moves forward to kiss him, but a gentle hand hold him back.
Illya freezes.

“Cowboy?” Napoleon’s hand sears into his skin and Illya holds as still as he can. Napoleon closes his eyes for a moment and panicked thoughts fly through Illya’s mind. Did he go too far? Too fast? Napoleon says nothing, just breathes deeply for a moment and Illya is on the brink of jumping out of bed and licking his wounds in the bathroom when Napoleon opens his eyes again, a rueful smile growing on his face.

“I need a moment to get my brain back on track, Peril,” Napoleon says, a laugh in his tone. “You’re very good at distracting me—” Only then he looks up to see Illya’s face and the smile is replaced by something soft, his lips form a surprised oh as he takes in Illya’s expression. Illya doesn’t know what his features are exactly saying, but the worry must be clear because Napoleon reaches up and caresses his cheek in a sweet gesture.

“You did nothing wrong,” Napoleon says, and Illya can’t help but sag a little in relief, the movement reminding him again of his position. He’s not sure if he should move away, but as Napoleon isn’t asking him to leave, Illya stays where he is.

“I just thought it would be better if we talked about this before it got out of hand,” Napoleon adds. “A bit of a mood breaker, I know. But I need to know—” Napoleon stops for a moment, worrying his lip again, his hand cups Illya’s jaw and Illya leans into it to encourage Napoleon to keep talking. Anything. Illya wants to say. Anything you want to know is yours. But his throat is dry and the weight of the words might be a little too much for the moment.

“You had some experiences,” Napoleon tries again. “Some experiences sexual in nature that might have left something behind. I want to know what I shouldn’t do, what I should avoid.” Napoleon cuts off again and tries for a fragile smile. “I only want to make you feel good, Peril. So if there is anything… I’d rather know beforehand.”

Illya goes cold. His muscles tense and he looks away from Napoleon’s beautiful face because it’s too much warmth compared to the heavy ice in his stomach. Valkov. Napoleon is talking about Valkov. Illya had almost forgot in his excitement, and he almost wishes Napoleon hadn’t brought it up, ignorance much preferable than the stark reminder of what Valkov had done to him. The damage it did. But Napoleon is right, and a part of Illya less frozen is touched by his consideration, the thought he clearly put into this. There had been more than one reason Illya hadn’t indulged much in the physical after Napoleon. Beside the fact that no one seemed to compare, Illya had never lost the flashes of Valkov’s murmurs and the cutting pain of knives. A stranger’s flirtatious leer had only reminded him, so Illya hadn’t tried again after two rather disastrous attempts.

Napoleon watches carefully, concern clear in the ministrations of his fingers against Illya’s cheek. But he isn’t pushing Illya for answers, he’s just waiting, patient and willing to let Illya lead the pace. The thought releases something in Illya’s chest. He’d only be able to forget about his potential limitations because this is Napoleon and Napoleon is different. Maybe because Illya had experiences with him before Valkov or just maybe because Illya trusts him with this, his body in his most vulnerable moments. But now that Illya thinks it through, there might be a few things, small details that would make it easier to do this without touching that more damaged part of himself.

Realising this might not the best conversation to have while sitting on someone’s lap, Illya slides off of Napoleon, sitting on the mattress next to him. Napoleon lets him go easily, and Illya almost smiles at that. He grabs Napoleon’s hand to place it back against his cheek and leans against Napoleon’s shoulder, lining their bodies together while they sit straight up against the headboard.

"No kneeling," Illya says finally, clearing his throat. He feels Napoleon jump from the sudden
break of silence, but he says nothing, just nods once and quietly waiting on more. Illya feels his
cheeks burn and swallows. Talking about this, knowing Napoleon has seen everything he
experienced, makes for a strange mix of embarrassment, pain and a peculiar sensation of being
heard. "No cuffs," Illya continues, trying to keep his breathing calm as the words rush out of him.
"No pain on or around my throat and my thighs, pinching or biting." Illya suddenly remembers
sharp teeth and bloody lips, and hesitates for a moment to include a nightmare on his list, but even
thinking about it makes him feel sick so he adds, "No biting in general, rather. I'm sorry."

It’s a weird thing to feel guilty about, but Illya feels the familiar sensation flow through him all the
same. He tries to remind himself that Napoleon asked for this, he wanted to know his limits. It’s
not a failure to name them.

Napoleon presses a chaste kiss on Illya’s forehead and Illya’s thoughts disappear. “Don’t
apologize, Peril. That is exactly what I wanted to know. Thank you.”

Illya focuses for a moment on Napoleon warm around him and breathes until Valkov is back to
being a memory again, poisons but far enough that the old pain can’t touch him. Illya feels stronger
now that he knows that Napoleon respects his weaknesses, and the idea that Napoleon wants to
take them into consideration tears through him, an ecstasy sweet as it is dizzying. Napoleon kisses
him again, just beside his mouth where a smile had been forming. When he pulls back, Illya almost
drowns in the emotions dancing in his eyes, but a thought stops him from kissing Napoleon
outright. “What about you?”

“How?” Napoleon raises a slow eyebrow, distracted.

“Is there anything I should know about your limits?” Illya asks, now sure this is the right thing to
ask. He hopes there is nothing; his heart throbbing at the idea Napoleon had anything similar to go
through alone. But if there is, Illya doesn’t want to risk hurting him, ever. “I only want to make you
feel good too,” Illya says, stealing Napoleon’s argument shamelessly.

Napoleon blinks in surprise for a moment, and then smiles, affection tangible as he rakes through
Illya’s hair. "Well, I don't think electricity comes into play here but just in case," he says lightly, as
if it’s a joke.

Illya nods though, trying to keep his face blank while his mind takes that little piece of information
and runs with it. Imagining Napoleon screaming as currents run through him, the chair burning into
his flesh–

A flicker on Napoleon’s face pulls Illya out of his reverie. It’s there and gone again, too fast for
Illya to recognize, but when Napoleon finds his smile again it’s dimmer, a little strained. Illya
waits.

“And well…” Napoleon swallows, looking away. “I have scars, ones you don't know. Some are
from the CIA, some are from the time after I ran, before they caught me. I got reckless.” Napoleon
looks back when Illya takes his hand, and he smiles at the gesture. "Someday, I might be
comfortable with you touching them,” he adds hesitantly, “but– but not yet, I think."

Illya nods, dragging his thumb over Napoleon’s palm. "Can I see them?" Illya tries to show no
preference on his face. Only when Napoleon is ready. But Illya hopes that Napoleon isn’t hiding
them out of fear Illya would be horrified, or otherwise judgemental about them. Everyone has scars
in their business, and no matter what they look like, Illya can’t imagine not loving every inch of
him. Napoleon seems to think for a moment, hesitating. Then he shrugs, going for casual but
missing by a mile, and takes of his shirt. "Yeah, the most are on my back."
Napoleon takes a slow breath and twists around to give Illya a good view. The muscles of his back are trembling and Illya trails the line of his spine down until—Illya sees the ragged lines of healed flesh and has to push his lungs in and out to stay calm, to keep away from the war brewing. Napoleon twists around again and Illya knows there is no chance his expression is blank. Illya feels overrun by a red haze. He wants to gut the people responsible for this, but more than that he wants to reassure Napoleon, who's watching him like his judgement will break him. Illya schools his features into something less murderous and presses his forehead against Napoleon's shoulder. He presses a kiss there and feels Napoleon relaxing under his lips.

The silence stretches for a moment and Illya breathes until he feels like his next words aren’t going to be a stream of curses.

"I'm never going to let anyone hurt you again," Illya says into Napoleon’s skin, low and serious. It's as much of a promise to Napoleon as it is a threat to the rest of the world.

Napoleon lets out something between a sigh, chuckle, and sob. "The feeling is mutual, Peril."

"Good," Illya says. "We'll protect each other."

"You say that as if it's simple," Napoleon says. He's still trembling a little, and Illya moves up to look him in the eye.

"It is."

Napoleon shakes his head with his eyes closed, but his hand covers Illya’s and he grasps tightly. “I love you, Peril. God. You’ll ever realise how much.”

The words wash over Illya and how does Napoleon keep surprising him with sensations and emotions Illya never thought he could feel again. He knows that Napoleon loves him, but to hear it from his lips, the sentiment coloured with the honesty of his heart, it melts Illya to pieces and he can’t do anything else but catch Napoleon’s jaw in a silent request.

Napoleon delivers.

Illya tastes the truth and the desire consumes him again like Napoleon’s lips are a key to something heavy and brewing inside him, brimming over the edge the moment their lips touch and hungry breaths mesh. Illya wants nothing more than to push Napoleon under him and kiss his skin until it’s red and flushed, but Napoleon’s movements are contrasting in their slowness. His hands are careful and hesitant like he’s afraid Illya is going to break, or run away, or do any other myriad of things Illya can’t imagine doing. The idea of moving away from Napoleon almost hurts so he stops thinking it, pressing in closer until Napoleon has to feel how much he wants this.

But Napoleon keeps asking wordlessly, as he touches and kisses and explores. He keeps looking at Illya, every few moments, asking with his eyes. *Is this okay?* And Illya nods or moans or rushes forward to chase the caution of his lips. Every kiss an argument, an answer and a reassurance in one. Napoleon turns ravenous, slowly, as his fear melts away; letting his hands slide over Illya's chest, through Illya's hair, along Illya's waist. He explores every inch of skin as if he wants to commit it to memory.

Illya feels the same way; mapping Napoleon's body like a sailor having found back his homeland after being lost at sea for too long. Illya almost forgot the way the spot beneath his third rib makes Napoleon shudder and smile, and how his eyes roll back when Illya tugs at his hair and tells him how beautiful he is. He learns and relearns Napoleon from the outside in.
They'll have more time later, but now Illya just wants to taste Napoleon, so he moves lower and lower, leaving trails of kisses until Napoleon lets out a breathless moan and Illya feels him buck up into his mouth. Napoleon's eyes follow him every move and a hand hovers over Illya's shoulder, asking another question.

Illya pauses to nod and Napoleon buries his hand in Illya's nape, caressing and encouraging. No pressure, just presence. Illya hums around him, and resumes his task. It doesn't take long then until Napoleon shudders, choking out his name.

Illya pulls away grinning. He hangs over Napoleon, delighted to have him flushed and languid underneath him. He places a hand over his heart and revels in the frantic beat, the heavy thudding.

"Smug," Napoleon says between breaths. He tugs Illya down, kissing him long and deep, licking into his mouth. "Your turn."

Napoleon's hand snakes between them and Illya swallows a moan.

"No," Napoleon scolds gently, reaching up and sliding his finger over Illya’s lips, pressed closed tightly. He coaxes them open and Illya shivers.

Napoleon murmurs, “I want to hear you.”

Illya nods and Napoleon smiles, and Illya is torn between kissing him and staying where he is, watching Napoleon watch him. Illya hisses when Napoleon does something that shoots up pleasure through his body, all the way to his fingertips. A hand brushes over Illya’s nipple and Illya moans like Napoleon told him to. Napoleon beams. Illya desperately tries to keep his eyes open, but the heat throbbing through him becomes too much. Napoleon's bright eyes become too much. He presses his face into Napoleon's shoulder and tries to hold on, just a bit longer; he doesn't want this to stop. But then Napoleon says, “Come on, love. I want to feel you,” and Illya is lost.

He comes back to himself a few moments later, leaning back a little to see Napoleon's face.

Napoleon wipes his hand clean against the mattress and smiles.

"You like 'love' don't you."

Illya feels himself blush a little, which is ridiculous seeing what they just did. "You used to call me that, a lot."

"Did I?" Napoleon’s question is so genuine Illya stifles a chuckle. He can see the wheels turning in Napoleon’s head as he goes through the memories

"God," Napoleon says alight with realisation. “I was so transparent.”

"Hmm," Illya agrees, and settles in next to him again. He feels vulnerable, not ready yet to face the real world when he can wrap himself around Napoleon and feel his heartbeat. Napoleon lets him cuddle in close, raking his hand through Illya’s hair as they slowly fall back into tranquility together. Heart beats receding, flush fading. Illya traces lines over Napoleon’s chest and vaguely muses what it would be like to paint onto his skin. Cover the angles and tight muscle with flowers; colourful and gentle.

"You don't know what you do to me," Napoleon murmurs suddenly, stopping his ministrations. Illya looks up, tilting his head to the side to indicate he’s listening.

"You don’t know what you do to me,” Napoleon repeats, “Did I say that too?”
"Yes," Illya answers, remembering the moment well. It almost seems like the memories Napoleon had relieved during the drift are becoming less vivid, fading in recency like they are naturally supposed to. It reassures Illya; that the drift is releasing it’s hold on Napoleon, that he’s found peace with it somewhere.

Napoleon hums, pensive.

"I didn't know either,” He says after a moment. “I had never felt that way before about anyone. I was terrified."

"And now?"

"I've learned that that was nothing compared to losing you,” Napoleon says plainly. “Sometimes it still scares me– You have such a hold on me. But living without you?” Napoleon shudders, flickering his gaze away. "Horrifying, absolutely horrifying. I don't want to ever do it again."

“The feeling is mutual,” Illya says after a moment, repeating Napoleon’s earlier comment. His throat is dry.

Napoleon smiles suddenly; sunlight blinding and mirth twinkling, “We’ll just never leave this room then. Simple solution.”

“Genius Cowboy,” Illya drawls after a breathless laugh. He presses his smile into Napoleon’s skin, kissing the ridge of his collarbone, just because he can. “How could I ever survive without your genius plans?”

“You couldn’t,” Napoleon quips.

Napoleon is joking, Illya knows, but he’s also telling the truth and Illya doesn’t know how to respond to that without breaking the lightness between them. So Illya stretches out instead, pressing a kiss to Napoleon’s jaw.

Napoleon smiles softly, and Illya knows Napoleon heard his answer anyway. They don’t need to say it anymore. Napoleon kisses him and Illya knows he’s not going to let go, not going to leave. They’re going to do this, and they won’t fail this time. They know better. They know how much it hurts to run.

Despite their best efforts, the time to face the rest of the world comes around when Napoleon’s stomach rumbles so loudly Illya almost giggles at the sound.

Almost.

They dress slowly, halted by light touches and lazy kisses. Neither of them mind the languid pace. The activities of their early morning only slightly pushes them to lateness. Illya is more used to the Shatterdome bathed in quiet while the early shift picks up their work, but when they walk into the cafeteria, the room is stockfull and noisy. People are everywhere, a hurry to their steps. Napoleon has to dodge a technician running through the hallway brandishing a screwdriver above his head and Illya only notices the chaos around them when Ekko walks into him, spilling tea everywhere.

“Shit, shit, sorry,” Ekko gushes. She disappears with a flurry of curses only to reappear a moment later with a towel, frantically dapping it over Illya’s shirt.

Illya ignores Napoleon’s laughter as he gently pushes Ekko away. “It’s okay, only a little. Don’t worry about it.”
Ekko blinks, seems to realise that she was the main victim of the collision and looks at her soaked jumpsuit in confusion. Illya frowns, Ekko has never been this out of sorts before, and notices dark lines under her eyes. Behind her, Alexei is sitting at the central table with a hand in his hair, staring at his toast like it’s telling him the secrets of the universe.

“What’s going on?” Napoleon asks, apparently noticing the strange vibe too.

“What?” Ekko looks between Illya and Napoleon and then scans around the room. “Oh that- Well, you can see for yourself.” She nods at the otherside of the Shatterdome, where Illya can only just see the feet of the Jaegers through long glass walls.

There is a great digital clock hanging on the Shatterdome south walls, counting down until the next attack is predicted; based on the estimates of their research departments. Napoleon sucks in a breath beside him and Illya realises why. Instead of the usual countdown, the red numbers are jumping from one point to another, time flashes red only to change again, and again. The only pattern in the numbers is that it’s going down.

62 hours and 32 minutes from now. 60 hours and 10 minutes. 41 hours. 34, 29, 10.

Napoleon drags his eyes away from the clock and catches Illya’s eye. Illya holds his gaze and recognises the fear in them, but also sees the strength when Napoleon nods at him with clenched teeth. They’re doing this.

“Ekko,” Illya says, clearing his throat. “Do you know where Gaby is? We need her.”

Ekko’s eyes widen with realisation and she opens her mouth, but the protest Illya had expected doesn’t come. Instead, she flickers her gaze to the clock again and her shoulders drop down a little. “She’s in the communications room,” Ekko says finally, her lips a thin line. “Are you sure?”

“I am,” Illya says.

Ekko lets out a deep sigh. “I hoped it wouldn’t been necessary, but- Thank you. The both of you. We could use some support out there.”

“We’ve got your back,” Napoleon says, charming smile in place. Illya sees the cracks in it, but doesn’t comment.

Napoleon doesn’t allow him to go without breakfast, so Illya grabs a tray full of random beverages and eats something mindlessly as he marches to the communications room.

Gaby turns to them immediately when Illya enters, conversation with her crew forgotten. She takes one look at his face and spits, “No.”

Illya throws his half eaten croissant away and crosses his arms. “Do you have the resources to refuse my offer?”

A silence falls in the room. Everyone looks from Gaby to Illya and back again. They all know they don’t. They all know they’re running themself ragged on half their capacity. One more Jaeger could make the difference. Gaby pales, her hands balled in fists, and Illya hates this, hates having to make Gaby choose between loyalty to a friend and loyalty to duty. But they don’t have a choice, she doesn’t have a choice. Illya had, and he made it.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Napoleon says suddenly, breaking the tension. He sounds almost flippant, but Illya knows he means it and Gaby knows it too. Gaby moves her glare to Napoleon but after a moment, her expression changes, and she draws a long breath.
“If any of you are showing signs of getting lost,” she threatens with narrowed eyes, “I’m disconnecting you. No argument.”

Illya pushes his gut reaction away – the idea of being the one left alive, left sane when Napoleon lost himself, makes him sick to his stomach – and nods. They need Gaby to work with them on this. Napoleon grits his teeth but nods too.

“Okay,” Gaby says, and then turns to her minions who are eagerly awaiting their orders. “We’re doing this. Go get these idiots prepared. I want someone to run another diagnostic in the meantime and Peter, how are the connectors doing?”

The plates of Illya’s exo-suit click and slide smoothly when he moves his arm around. He hadn’t been able to admire the technological precision of the suit the first time he wore it, but now he appreciates the complexity within the silver. The Red-Peril’s exo-suits used to be much heavier, pressing down onto his shoulders and joints. UNCLE’s suits snake around him like they’re made from fabric, despite being anything but. Illya stretches his arm out, watching the pieces whirr and shake and smiles to himself.

Napoleon stands on the other side of the room, clicking his boots into place, and Illya admires him for a moment– ready for battle, though maybe a little pale. Illya steps toward him and takes off his gloves so he can place a hand to Napoleon’s face. Napoleon sighs.

“Are you okay?” Illya asks, despite knowing the answer. He doesn’t quite know how to help here. It isn’t like the frantic behavior Napoleon portrayed after Illya just woke up, or the angry guilt he had carried around later.

Napoleon looks up with a tense expression but he doesn’t push Illya’s hand away. Illya barely sees the slight nod he gives, but he can feel it. I’m okay. Just scared, Napoleon’s features seem to say, and Illya leans down to kiss him chastely.

“How are you feeling?” Napoleon asks when Illya stands back again and pulls his hand away. Illya knows what Napoleon is asking and searches his mind for any doubt, any instability that could be a warning for potential disaster, and finds nothing. The first time preparing for a drift in UNCLE had been a constant fight for calm, a panic attack waiting to happen. Illya can only recognize how unstable he had been now, when his mind is quiet. It’s not like he feels nothing though, his heart is pounding and there is a slight tremble to his hands. But it’s more like anticipation rather than fear. Like the first time drifting all over again, or when he rushed after Napoleon on base, right before their first kiss.

“I’m a little nervous,” Illya says honestly, “but in an excited way. In the way I’m supposed to be before drifting.”

Napoleon watches his face for a moment, scanning for dishonesty, and Illya lets him, not a bit of him offended by Napoleon’s hesitation. He can’t imagine how Napoleon must have felt when Illya faded away right beside him, or how the uncertainty of Illya ever waking up again must have choked him. Illya doesn’t blame him for wanting to be sure.

Napoleon nods then, after a moment, and sucks in a breath. He wraps his fingers around Illya’s wrist, pressing his fingers to Illya’s pulse. Illya wonders if he’s counting the beats, the thought pains his heart.

“Do you miss it?”
“Hmm?” Illya raises an eyebrow for clarification.

“Your watch,” Napoleon says, “Your father’s watch.”

“Oh,” Illya says, looking at where Napoleon’s fingers are still latched around him; the place his watch used to be.

“I was surprised to see you without it, in the plane. Figured you left it in Russia for safety. Before that I’d only seen you in battle gear on the news, or those pictures of you in the hospital. Not places for watches.” Napoleon speaks a little too fast, maybe desperate for some sort of distraction.

But Illya considers his question seriously anyway. He hadn’t exactly forgotten about the watch, but the importance of it had faded when he never found it back, and he never consciously considered why, but the pieces slowly fall in place now. “I stopped missing it after a while,” Illya says. “I got used to the weight difference, and my wrist stopped feeling wrong. But that was more the physical aspect of it.”

Napoleon looks up, listening intently.

“I think I wore it as a reminder,” Illya says. “A reminder of what my father did. I think I thought I deserved to carry his mistake with me, so that I will never make it myself.” Illya shakes his head wryly, a slight smile forms. It sounds almost childish now, the idea he should pay for his father’s idiocy. But it had been more subconsciously than a conscious thought at the time. “I’m glad I lost it,” Illya realises suddenly, and smiles. “I’m glad it’s gone.”

Something flickers in Napoleon’s expression, but Illya can’t catch it before Napoleon stands and presses their lips together.

I’m glad I lost the watch and found you back. Illya thinks as he responds, trying to reassure Napoleon’s fears with gentle touches. Napoleon pulls back after a second, and he looks slightly less tense than before. Illya loves the way his eyes crinkle as he slowly finds a smile.

A knock interrupts their soft silence, and Gaby is standing by the door. Any stern expression she had gets lost when she notices their close position and she rolls her eyes, a slight bit of fondness mixing through the stress. “We’re ready for you.”

Illya quirks a smile at her. “We’ll be there in a moment.”

“Yeah, right.” The innuendo falls a little flat, Gaby’s tone shaky, but Illya appreciates the effort. Soon the worries of his friends will be over. Though that fact that they do makes Illya’s heart soar.

“You heard her,” Napoleon says. “Suit up.”

“Aye, Captain,” Illya quips back, grabbing his gloves from the bench and clicking them on. He helps Napoleon with the latches on his back and they linger in front of the exit together. The door leading to UNCLE’s cockpit.

Napoleon turns to him and traces a cold, gloved hand against Illya’s cheek, and says, “We can do this.”

Illya shivers at the hope in his tone and smiles wide. “We can.”

“Are you sure about this, Kuryakin.” Gaby’s voice comes forcefully over the comms. It’s not even
a question. A young woman wearing the UNCLE jacket helps Illya into his harness and clicks the spine into place.

“I’m good,” Illya says calmly. He can hear Gaby huff, back in the communication’s room.

“And you, Solo?”

That is a question, and Napoleon waits to answer for a moment, until he’s also latched into the system. The Jaeger buzzes around them, and Illya feels the machine sing through his mind, almost alive.

Napoleon closes his eyes for a moment and Illya sees him smile, reluctant but true. No matter what, they’ll always have this. They both love this feeling. They’re not legendary Pilots by accident, and Illya knows that together they’ll only be better.

“I’m sure.”

At Napoleon’s words the crew shuffle out of the cockpit, closing the door behind them. The dashboards around them light up and the screen in front of them flicker to life, revealing Gaby’s pinched face.

“Synch in 3, 2, 1.”

Illya breathes in. Once. Twice.

And there it is. His mind pushing and pulsing, reaching for something outside of himself. Illya closes his eyes and falls into it, setting the sensation free, searching until light blinds him.

Napoleon.

“67% and stable. Keep it going.”

Their bond feels like a question, Napoleon’s light dancing around and around. Illya smiles and welcomes him home.

Everything goes quiet.

Normally Illya’s mind is pulsing, coursing.

But Napoleon is calm, structured.

Strong. So strong.

Strong enough to carry him.

Carry the other half.

Normally Illya's emotions run havoc and Illya spends all his efforts not to be sucked into the stream. But now, there is only one thing filling every edge of his mind.

Illya would call it love, if it wasn’t much more.

Something tells him that Napoleon is smiling, and Illya opens his eyes because he wants to see that in more ways than one. He blinks, slowly the white light makes way for vision, but Illya realises
that they’re not in the cockpit anymore.

Napoleon is standing beside him though, so Illya doesn’t feel scared.

Illya looks around and sees that they’re standing on a still sea as far as the eye can see. The water a deep blue mirror, the sun reflects light onto the surface. The sky clear, no clouds anywhere.

“How could anyone have a memory of walking on water, Peril?”

Illya asks, turning to Napoleon. “Are we lost?”

Napoleon shakes his head, slowly. “It could be a dream,” Illya replies, tasting the idea in his mind. Everything feels sluggish and safe. Illya knows that they’re not supposed to be here, they’re supposed to be in their Jaeger, but everything feels too right. He can’t be worried when he fundamentally believes that they belong here. That this is theirs.

“It’s not mine.” Napoleon comes closer and only now Illya notices his lips aren’t moving as he speaks. “I think it’s Headspace.”

“We’re in Headspace already?” Illya asks with surprise, but he’s not really asking either. They’re not speaking. They’re thinking. It’s Headspace. They are of one mind.

Napoleon smiles and steps closer, carefully reaching out and fitting his hand over Illya’s jaw. It doesn’t feel like he’s really there, touching him. He feels like a liquid warmth, calm but pulsing with light.

Illya places his hand over his and shivers.

“You’re cold,” Napoleon says, it isn’t a question and he doesn’t sound concerned.

“Yeah,” Illya says. A chill passes over his body pleasantly. Like a cold shower on a hot summer day. Relief, cleansing and clarity all at once.

Napoleon smiles down at him, his piercing eyes bright.

“I love you.”

Illya doesn’t know which one of them thinks it. Maybe they both did.

“Ready to fight?” Napoleon says, audibly this time. His voice reverberates through their space like another sun. Illya’s sun. Behind the flow of his voice thoughts whisper. Illya reaches out with his mind and listens.

Ready to go back? Ready to try, with me? Ready? I am. I want you. I love you.

“I’m ready,” Illya says. It’s the truth. It’s a promise.

They’re ready.
We're done. Finished. Quick cursing interlude: What the fucking fuck I wrote a fucking 100k story what the fuck.

I digress. I want to start with thanking my beta Brookebond, who is an amazing writer in her own right but still suffered through my highs and lows throughout this project, despite being busy as fuck. I could have never done it without her.

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I've learned so much through writing this. I've found a passion I didn't even know I had the ability to hold, and I'm eternally grateful for the support I got. I hope to see you around later. Be it on a prequel of Napoleon's POV I'm planning to write somewhere in 2018, or something outside of this AU. I will miss you and this story either way <3.

If you have any questions about the story, the world or the characters (OC or otherwise), or want to help me with my rewrite project. (I'm not changing the posted story, but I'm using my draft to see how rewriting works, and knowing your favorite parts and why they work for you would really help me out). You can reach me through my email, somedrunkpirate@gmail.com
Or reach me through tumblr: Somedrunkpirate.

If your questions aren't spoilers for potential stories I want to post, I could answer them :D

Thank you again. Just thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!