It was two o’clock in the morning and Napoleon Solo was nursing a glass of exorbitantly expensive scotch when he came to the unfortunate conclusion that he was in love with a volatile Russian giant who had a penchant for smashing furniture.

This was obviously a problem and one that would need to be remedied immediately.

Alternate summary: 25 000 words of requited pining, or as Gaby would say, "stupid boys."

Notes

This is an admittedly self-indulgent fic with heavy doses of pining and sexual tension featuring attractive spies in love.

On another note, I owe a large debt of gratitude to the immeasurably lovely Antiquity for her continuous support and patience as she listened to me ramble about this story for the longest time. Thank you again! <3

See the end of the work for more notes.

It was two o’clock in the morning and Napoleon Solo was nursing a glass of exorbitantly expensive scotch when he came to the unfortunate conclusion that he was in love with a volatile Russian giant who had a penchant for smashing furniture.
This was obviously a problem and one that would need to be remedied immediately.

If Napoleon weren’t so horribly drunk then perhaps he would get up and do something about it. But as it was, he was slouched in their opulent hotel suite in Vienna on the embroidered chaise longue. His long legs stretched out in front of him with the nearly empty bottle of scotch dangling loosely from his fingertips and dragging onto the carpet.

U.N.C.L.E. had indulged their little trio by accommodating them in an upscale boutique hotel for this mission, which was a far cry from the dilapidated hovel they had stayed in for the past week while undercover in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. Napoleon shuddered, distracted by the memory of the rats scuttling in the walls and the putrid smell of urine that seemed to invade every room in their apartment and cling to his clothes. Illya had scoffed at him, claiming that Napoleon wouldn’t last a day in the KGB but Napoleon refused to apologise for having standards.

Gaby had passed out on the floor beside him several hours ago and Illya had scooped her up like a limp porcelain doll and carried her to her room, turning her on her side and pulling the blankets around her small frame. He was always so gentle with her and so patient and attentive despite the fact that Gaby was arguably the most dangerous member of their little group and was more than capable of fending for herself.

Napoleon started to ponder what it would be like to have Illya Kuryakin care for him in such a way. He wondered what it would be like to feel Illya’s large hands sweep gently over his body, treating Napoleon as if he were something precious and something to be protected. He emitted a groan of dismay. Napoleon really was smarter than this. Years of slipping through bedroom doors before the sun loomed over the horizon had ensured that Napoleon had never let his heart go unguarded. After all, he practiced deception on a daily basis. He was a spy but first and foremost he was a thief. He was an expert in taking from others without ever relinquishing anything in return.

Napoleon had never intended to fall in love. His first mistake was assuming he was incapable of doing so. In Napoleon’s experience people who shared his proclivity for other men were resigned to exploring their options behind closed doors and living a life in the shadows. Although he had come a long way from his days as a young soldier, exchanging hurried hand jobs and unpractised kisses with other teenage boys in the heavy darkness of the army barracks, Napoleon had never allowed himself to grow close to anyone. He was unaccustomed to feeling something for anyone other than himself. Life was much simpler that way and Napoleon had never had any inclination to change until he met Illya.

It had been seven months since Waverly fashioned their band of misfits and named them U.N.C.L.E. and for every day since that moment Napoleon had felt himself slipping towards a perilous precipice, dragged towards a fall from which any hope of recovery seemed doubtful.

Illya was already far too interesting to be benign with his uncanny yet undeniably impressive ability to halt moving cars with his bare hands, but the first sign of trouble was just how easy he was to bait. Napoleon had never been capable of resisting temptation when it presented itself and within minutes of their first official meeting Napoleon had calculated exactly what to say to push his Russian adversary over the edge. The topic of his parents was clearly a sore spot.

But then Napoleon started to notice seemingly inconsequential things about Illya, such as the way he would glance down at his bare wrist only to twist his mouth into a flat line of regret when he recalled the absence of his father’s watch.

Napoleon acted on impulse while racing through the passageways of the Vinceguerra’s hideaway when he paused to reclaim Illya’s father’s watch from a debilitated crony. He was so distracted by thoughts of chasing after Illya and Gaby that Napoleon forgot about the burdensome weight of the
watch in his trouser pocket.

He was stupid to stop, stupid to even care about the fate of such a sentimental token. But after they successfully completed their first mission and the flotsam that was once Victoria Vinceguerra floated atop the Mediterranean Sea, Napoleon fished the watch from his pocket and contemplated the battered face. It was plain white with twelve black markings. The glass was scratched and the leather band was starting to crack slightly from age. But despite its imperfections the watch was clearly significant to the strange Russian agent who had unexpectedly become an ally.

The pure relief on Illya’s face when he was reunited with the old watch most likely saved Napoleon’s life, as they both knew what their orders from their respective governments were. Napoleon found himself startled by the unexpected pleasure it gave him to reunite the prickly Russian spy with something that was clearly of immeasurable value to him. Napoleon turned the memory of Illya’s face in that moment, vulnerable with gratitude, over and over in his mind until he had worn down the edges like a stone in the sea. That should have been Napoleon’s next forewarning.

Their time spent together as an international espionage division did nothing to appease the situation.

Alongside developing inconvenient feelings of affection and respect for Gaby, their little chop shop girl, Napoleon also became acutely aware of the discomfiting tightness that compressed his chest whenever Illya gave him one of those rare smiles that transformed his entire face. He learned that underneath Illya’s stoic façade existed a wry sense of humour and a fierce sense of loyalty that was unlike anything Napoleon had ever encountered in anybody else.

Somewhere in the last seven months the itching need to provoke a reaction from Illya had morphed into something considerably more dangerous and Napoleon didn’t have the good sense to notice until it was far too late to do anything about it. The damage was already done. The fuse had already been lit. Napoleon was desperate to crawl underneath Illya’s skin, to infiltrate his dreams and hijack his train of thought. He wanted to be the person Illya thought of in the hazy darkness while his hands skimmed beneath his boxers and Napoleon wanted to be the first thought on Illya’s mind when he opened his eyes in the morning.

Napoleon was mad with longing, sick with it even, and he didn’t know how to stop it.

It was certainly quite the predicament.

Napoleon glanced down at his own pristine Rolex watch that he had pilfered from a drunken earl while on a reconnaissance mission in Sussex two years ago. It was now three o’clock and he felt considerably alarmed now that he had pieced together his feelings.

‘Are you still awake, Cowboy?’

The door behind Napoleon creaked as Illya moved through the doorway of his adjoining bedroom, casting a long shadow across the carpet.

Illya flicked on the light switch as he approached the chaise longue. The opulent suite they occupied contained three bedrooms that were furnished with plush, exquisitely wrought antique furniture. This was an exceptional circumstance as Napoleon normally shared a room with Illya on missions, condemned to sleep rigidly in a single bed in an inconspicuously bland hotel while he forced himself to stop drawing his eyes along the smooth muscled lines of Illya’s back as he slept on the other side of the room. It was the worst and best kind of torture.

‘Just in time, Peril,’ Napoleon said smoothly as he closed his eyes against the light. ‘Have you come
to scoop me up and tuck me in too? I don’t think Gaby would appreciate getting special treatment.’

‘You are drunk. You should go to bed, Cowboy,’ Illya murmured softly.

Napoleon felt strong hands grip the lapels of his crumpled sports jacket and he swatted them away gracelessly.

‘Go away, Peril. Leave me here to wallow in self-pity for a while. I was making excellent progress before you disturbed me.’

Napoleon knew that he was slurring his words and he wasn’t making any sense.

He did not need to open his eyes to know that Illya was staring down at him with the bemused half-smile that he so often directed towards Napoleon. It was the smile that said Illya Kuryakin didn’t quite know what to make of Napoleon Solo. Napoleon had been so diligent in cataloguing all of Illya’s expressions, curating smiles and sidelong glances like a particularly dedicated anthropologist. When Napoleon made a particularly well-timed quip Illya’s lips would twitch upwards; not quite a smile but rather the impression of one, like a Monet painting. Illya’s half-smiles were characterised by the slight upwards tilt of his lips and the subtle furrow of his brow. They were among Napoleon’s favourite smiles, second only to the golden blaze of Illya’s grin that alwayspreceded the paralysing phenomenon that was his laughter.

Napoleon nauseated himself thinking like this. Who knew that he was capable of such maudlin sentimentality? *So this is love,* Napoleon thought to himself morosely.

Napoleon drifted in a drunken haze, aware of his consciousness ebbing and fading. He felt the phantom presence of fingers softly threading through his hair, tracing the line of his jaw and draping his body in fabric. When he woke up again it was five in the morning and pale morning light was beginning to seep through the gap in the curtains.

He blinked against the soft light. Napoleon’s head throbbed, his mouth was dry, and the dark, sour taste of combined liquors coated his tongue. He subscribed to a rather Epicurean philosophy and was consequently very skilled at combating the after effects of excessive drinking but today he felt disgruntled and unsettled. He glanced down and saw that Illya had covered Napoleon’s body in a soft, grey wool blanket while he slept. Napoleon’s heart lurched traitorously at the realisation.

The unwelcome longing he felt for Illya had woven itself through his body, settling deep in the pit of his stomach. Napoleon sighed and stared up at the elegant moulded ceiling while he absently wondered whether such an affliction would prove terminal.

* * *

Before he met Napoleon Solo, Illya had not realised that men could be beautiful.

He had known that they could be cruel, vicious and ruthless, all of the words which added up to something secretly monstrous much like Illya himself, but never beautiful. Illya knew that beneath the façade Solo was made up of muscle, blood, sinew and bone just like him. But there was something in the way that Solo carried himself that made Illya sometimes forget that Solo was a killer too, albeit one with a better disguise. Solo was deceptively beautiful in the same way that predators often were. He wielded his good looks like a weapon, using his classically handsome features to ensnare hearts and lure unsuspecting marks to their own demise.

Only a fool would fall for such a trap.
Illya had hated Solo at first. He was everything that Illya had always pictured Americans to be: smug, self-assured and entitled. Napoleon Solo was the mascot for capitalist decadence with his crisp designer suits and the careless way he treated everything—as if life were a game designed for his own personal amusement. Illya did not play games. Solo would probably say that Illya had also never been amused in his entire life. What Illya hated the most about Napoleon Solo was the effortless way that he was able to crawl under his skin, provoking reactions from him like a child baiting a hungry dog and causing fissures to form in the ice that Illya had carefully raised around his chest.

Illya hated not being able to control himself and could not bear to be rendered someone else’s amusement. It seemed as if Napoleon’s composure and his infinite reserve of witticisms were specifically designed to mock Illya and emphasise just how difficult it was for him to maintain control when his hands quivered and his vision became tinged red with rage.

Illya felt himself begin to thaw when Napoleon returned his watch after that first mission with a cautious stare that belied the cavalier nature of his tone.

That day Illya realised that Napoleon’s trademark self-assurance was merely a thief’s mask and not a true indicator of the man underneath. Every spy wore a mask. Napoleon just happened to be remarkably good at pretending that there was nothing else concealed underneath.

After that it was impossible to hate Napoleon Solo, no matter how desperately Illya wished he could clutch onto the dark sweep of fury that once coursed through his body whenever he looked at Napoleon. Illya gradually became immune to Napoleon’s attempts to rile him, quickly recognising that any reaction was tantamount to encouragement.

The formation of their trio meant that Illya spent an inordinate amount of time studying Napoleon Solo. He learnt his mannerisms, measured the varying tones of his voice (ranging from conceited to seductive) and calculated all of the ways in which Napoleon wielded his thief’s mask. He tried to discern exactly where the libertine agent ended and the real man emerged.

Illya decidedly did not analyse why he spent so much time studying Napoleon Solo while he neglected to similarly scrutinise Gaby who was also beautiful, brilliant, and dangerous. She was lovely but she was softer and less jaded than Napoleon. Perhaps she and Illya could have formed something together. Perhaps it would have been...no, not easy exactly, but conventional certainly. Easier than pursuing impossible dreams of things which Illya had long since learned to repress.

But nonetheless Gaby did not fascinate Illya so he let the moments between them slip through his fingers and together they settled into a complacent, almost familial fondness.

Several missions passed successfully and Illya formed a tentative friendship with Napoleon that was always tinged with something heavier, something unnamed and elusive that robbed Illya of his breath. Napoleon was still obnoxious and conceited and everything that Illya had been taught to despise, but Illya was beginning to recognise that it was possible for a person to be many things at once and Napoleon was not as transparent as he led people to believe.

There was much of Napoleon Solo’s personality that Illya had yet to unearth and Illya had never shied away from a challenge. Illya became so focused on their missions and the foreign warmth he felt for their peculiar team and the insufferable American agent that he failed to recognise that Napoleon was starting to slip through the gaps in Illya’s chest, sliding past his rib cage and wedging himself against his heart.

Illya first came to this horrific realisation two months after their first mission when Napoleon and Illya were racing through the narrow streets of Marrakesh, dodging bullet fire and weaving through...
the colourful market stalls of the souk. The leaders of an underground drug cartel had caught them trying to infiltrate their headquarters in an abandoned school. Upon realising that they were outnumbered, Illya and Napoleon were forced to flee into the streets, racing passed dazed school children and unperturbed stall owners who continued to advertise their wares with loudly enthusiastic entreaties.

‘Nine o’clock, Peril,’ Napoleon muttered before turning a sharp left, his smooth voice barely audible over the clamour of the souk.

Napoleon darted behind a cart selling richly embroidered Berber carpets and Illya swore under his breath, having no choice but to follow him. Napoleon pulled Illya close, his hand wrapped around Illya’s wrist and his thumb pressed against the thrum of Illya’s pulse. Illya’s breath hitched in his throat. He watched from between the gaps in the shade cloth draped stalls as three of the men who had been pursuing them sprinted past, vainly searching for them amongst the bustling crowd of stall owners and shoppers.

‘I think we’ve lost them,’ Napoleon grinned triumphantly.

Illya felt his lips twitch upwards in response, momentarily giving in to the heady feeling of bearing witness to Napoleon’s excitement. It was not quite a smile but he was coming dangerously close.

They spent the rest of the afternoon winding their way along the red sandstone walls of the city, taking their time to return to their own headquarters where Gaby and Waverly awaited their report. Illya tried to convince himself that he was extending their journey for the sake of ensuring that they weren’t being tailed by enemies, but it was hard to maintain this pretence while he allowed Napoleon to pilfer fresh oranges from fruit stalls and lead Illya into hidden art galleries filled with vibrant, distorted paintings that seemed to delight Napoleon as much as they confused Illya.

Illya would never be able to savour art in the same way that Napoleon did but he was coming to realise that he could appreciate the reverent, awestruck way Napoleon stared at art, temporarily stripped of all artifice, as if he was gazing at something holy.

Illya was not a thief but he found himself thinking that he would steal every artwork in the world in order to have Napoleon stare at him in such a way. The effect of such a realisation was not as wounding as it should have been. Illya should have known that he was not entirely immune to beautiful things.

*

In Cairo, Napoleon managed to get himself kidnapped.

U.N.C.L.E. had been charged with foiling the assassination plot of a local revolutionary group who had been targeting visiting foreign diplomats.

Normally such a task would prove fairly simple. Napoleon would begin by seducing a mark, Illya would charge in like a Russian bulldozer and incapacitate a few people, all the while Gaby would watch on and pull their strings like a puppet master, intervening when necessary. But the mission was a disaster from the very beginning. They had few leads to go on and every potential avenue of investigation fizzled out and proved to be as intangible as smoke.

One of the few joys Napoleon had been able to glean from the mission was watching Illya ride a camel.
The camel had spat and writhed while Illya struggled to keep his seat with an adorably disgruntled expression adorning his handsome face. In contrast, Napoleon’s camel had been perfectly placid. Of course it had grunted and spat as all camels do, but it was infinitely more reserved than the sullen animal charged with carrying Illya across the desert. Napoleon had grinned at Illya, delighting in his scowl and the flags of pink cresting his cheeks. He hoarded Illya’s expression and tucked it away for safekeeping, close to his heart.

Napoleon found himself recalling the image as he wandered through the narrow lanes of Khan el-Khalili. The hectic and crammed marketplace was filled with endless stalls offering everything from jewel bright lamps, powdered soap, ceramic jugs in varying sizes and a limitless array of “authentic” Egyptian artefacts. He was supposed to be observing a stall owner who had a possible connection to their elusive assassins, but Napoleon kept finding himself distracted by the vivid colours and the sounds of the khan and by the memory of Illya on that goddamned camel.

Why did people want to fall in love? All it had given Napoleon so far was distraction and misery.

Napoleon meandered through the gold district and evaded the persistent calls of the spice dealers as he half-heartedly searched for the merchant Gaby had described.

Gaby had provided Napoleon with a photograph for reference and had shoved Napoleon out of his hotel suite with the stern mandate that he shouldn’t return without some useful information to help them with the mission. Napoleon had been distracted ever since his sad little epiphany in Vienna. It was making him a bad spy. He had spent the past two weeks trying to regain his focus.

Napoleon was posing as a gullible American tourist, image complete with a pair of cheap sunglasses and a worn travel guide in hand. He had spent the last hour sidestepping enthusiastic merchants who were trying to lure him toward their stalls, promising jewels and ancient relics in halting English.

Napoleon caught sight of his mark in the gleaming confines of the copper district. He was a nondescript little man in his early fifties with grey hair creeping along his temples and gold rings flashing on his fingers. His back was turned to Napoleon who had paused at a nearby toy stall, seemingly absorbed in the carved wooden figures spread out on a red satin cloth before him. The mark was conversing with the two British expats turned criminals whom Gaby and Waverly suspected to be coordinating the assassination plots.

Napoleon reached for the handle of his gun, just in case, when something caught his eye. On a makeshift shelf made out of emptied, overturned boxes sat a small wooden toy, which was crudely carved to resemble a camel. Napoleon felt an absurd rush of fondness flare in his chest and he curled his fingers around the toy, appreciating how it fit just so in the palm of his hand. He glanced up and pocketed the toy once he saw that the stall was unattended. Napoleon’s instincts should have prickled upon realising this but he was so delighted with the prospect of giving the stupid little toy to Illya and anticipating the wonderfully petulant way Illya would huff and roll his eyes, a small smile quirking his lips, that Napoleon didn’t sense the presence of the men behind him or have any way of defending himself against the sharp blow to his temple that rendered him unconscious.

*  

Napoleon had been missing for four hours and Illya was suffocating under the weight of his panic.

He was pacing the length of their hotel suite as Gaby talked to Waverly on the phone in worried, hushed tones. She hummed a few times in affirmation of something Waverly was saying to her and twisted the phone’s plastic cord around her fingers. Gaby sighed as she placed the phone back on its
Illya, stop pacing and sit for a minute,’ Gaby commanded. ‘Waverly is trying to contact his sources to determine where Napoleon was last seen. He’s going to be okay. We will find him.’

‘It has been four hours now,’ Illya said tersely, barely sparing Gaby a glance as he continued to pace. Gaby’s nails tapped a staccato, impatient rhythm against the glass-topped side table next to her.

‘Do you think I cannot count, Illya? As I said, we are working on it. Now sit down and try not to break anything.’

But Illya couldn’t sit. The familiar rush of fear that he had spent more than a decade trying to defeat was coiling in his stomach, spreading through his chest and wrapping itself around his throat. Napoleon’s trackers were not transmitting any feedback and Waverly’s sources reported that Napoleon had last been seen in the middle of the frenetic marketplace before he disappeared. Nobody knew where Napoleon was and Illya could not stop his hands from shaking.

He could not prevent himself from picturing what might have happened. Illya’s mind supplied fragmented images of Napoleon bleeding, broken and in pain.

The treacherous part of his brain that always whispered terrible things and worst-case scenarios cruelly suggested that Napoleon might already be dead. Illya’s hands continued to shake. He was worried that he would never be able to get them to stop. Illya desperately wanted to rip the room apart, to feel wood and glass break and shatter under his hands, to feel some form of release from the desperate terror that was consuming him.

Time unfurled slowly and it felt as though several hours had passed when in reality it had only been twenty minutes before the phone rang again and interrupted Illya’s pacing and the tapping of Gaby’s nails.

Napoleon’s kidnappers had been traced and Waverly had been informed by a reliable source that Napoleon had been taken to a factory in one of the industrial districts that bordered the city. Illya could barely recall the car journey from the hotel. He was only dimly aware of receiving Waverly’s instructions and a stern warning from Gaby not to lose his cool. She had given Illya a concerned look as he left the hotel suite that Illya did not care to analyse.

Illya’s world had condensed to a single moment: the tremor of his hands, the increasingly ragged rhythm of his breathing, and the distant ringing in his ears which grew steadily louder as he moved through the factory.

The wide sweep of his torchlight beam illuminated the corridors and within minutes he burst through the room that Waverly had marked on the factory floor plan. Relief hit Illya, sharp and painful, at the sight of Napoleon bound to a chair. He had a dark bruise forming on his cheek and a gag in his mouth, but he was so clearly alive, alive, alive.

Illya felt the strange urge to laugh through the sickening rush of relief. His fear dwindled to a dull burn as he unleashed his rage and terror upon Napoleon’s captors, revelling in the flow of blood and the hollow crack of bones.

Illya knew that he was truly a savage creature. Being in love only seemed to evoke all of the qualities that he tried to suppress. He was dangerous… defective. Not fit to love or be loved in return.

Napoleon raised his head to look at Illya. He appeared slightly awestruck as Illya untied his gag and the rope that bound Napoleon’s hands. The rope had chafed at his skin, leaving swollen bracelets
around his wrists. Napoleon rubbed at his jaw and licked his lips. Illya looked down at his own hands. They still shook.

‘You really have remarkable timing, Peril,’ Napoleon said, his voice slightly hoarse. ‘They were about to bring out the knives. So, as always, I’m thankful for your punctuality. I happen to like my face the way it is. Unlike you, I would not look quite so dashing with a scar.’

Illya ignored the twist of horror in his gut and turned his head towards the door, distracted by the piercing trill of an alarm and the distant thud of footsteps.

‘Time to go, Cowboy.’

Illya felt a heady rush of exhilaration surge through his body as they ran through the narrow corridors of the factory, stopping only to incapacitate the stray guard who tried to block their exit. They darted through a maze of deserted buildings, losing the few men who were bold enough to chase them through the night. Seconds expanded into minutes as they reached the looming shelter of a distant warehouse shrouded in shadows.

Illya pulled Napoleon into a doorway and they pressed their backs flat against the wide metal door, their chests heaving. The white puffs of their breaths dissipated into the night air and the moon cast pallid light upon Napoleon’s bruised face. Napoleon had a cut above his right eyebrow that was seeping blood onto his temple. Illya curled his hand into a fist to keep from reaching out to Napoleon. He wanted to touch him, tend to him.

The now familiar ache in his chest had returned. Napoleon was staring at him intently with the same contemplative, immersed expression that he wore when he was in the presence of great artworks.

‘I suppose I should say thank you for saving my life but it’s becoming rather commonplace now. I might come to expect it if you’re not careful, Peril.’

Illya did not respond. He did not know how to say something without revealing too much of himself. *I would always save you. I would do anything for you if you asked it of me.*

Illya was not skilled with words. He could master multiple languages for the sake of a mission but transmuting his most convoluted thoughts into words had always been a struggle. Too often his speech came out clipped and harsh as if he were ready to wage battle with the world. In contrast, Napoleon clearly relished words, often hiding behind them and delighting in equivocation. It was a game that Illya did not know how to play.

Instead Illya slid his gun out of his holster and checked to ensure that he had enough bullets. His hands were still shaking. He placed his gun back in its holster and clenched his hands into fists, willing the tremors to still.

‘I never realised that you harboured such affection for me, Peril,’ Napoleon pressed, one dark eyebrow raised. ‘After all, when we first met you did try to kill me.’

Napoleon’s tone was gently prying and Illya struggled to keep his face impassive. It was difficult to know if Napoleon ever felt truly felt something for anyone else. He liked to toy with people and pick them apart with that smile on his face, callous and charming all at once.

Meanwhile Illya exerted so much of his own energy trying to keep Napoleon from recognising the terrible gnawing ache that bloomed in Illya’s chest whenever their fingers brushed or whenever Napoleon held Illya’s gaze for a fraction of a second too long. Illya suddenly felt very tired.

‘I try to kill a lot of people, Cowboy. Don’t take it personally.’
Napoleon held his gaze for a few seconds more, his expression inscrutable. Napoleon’s eyes were the clear intense blue of the Mediterranean Sea or the incendiary blaze of a flame underneath blue glass. Illya came from a world filled with waxen blues and the bleakest of greys; he was unaccustomed to such a colour. Illya recognised the moment when Napoleon embraced his thief’s mask. His expression shifted, suddenly good-natured and unbearably charming as he rifled through his trouser pockets.

‘Well Peril, they removed all of my weapons and my beloved Brioni sports jacket—more’s the pity—but they did not take this. Here, I found a souvenir for you to remember your travels by.’

Napoleon extended his hand and dropped a small object into Illya’s palm. It was a tiny wooden toy. Illya squinted the make out its details in the pale moonlight.

‘A camel,’ Illya said in surprise. Joy and misery sparked and waged a battle inside of him. ‘You nearly got yourself killed for a toy?’

Napoleon’s smile was a contradiction, sharp but with a hint of softness that lurked in the corners. Illya did not know if he would ever be able to accurately read the language of Napoleon. He would need a lifetime to be able to speak it fluently and decipher it perfectly, to be able to trace its lettering with agile hands. But he was willing to learn. There was a momentary tenderness in Napoleon’s expression that lured Illya in like the tide, washing over him and pulling him down into unknown depths. He could drown in this and would not complain. But Napoleon’s expressions were mercurial, like quicksilver, and in the next moment his smile was amiable and teasing.

‘As you know, I’m not prone to sentiment but even I could see that you and the camel formed a very special bond.’

Illya rolled his eyes, careful to stop the twitch at his mouth from blossoming into a grin. *How wonderful he is, Illya found himself thinking, and how ridiculous too.*

‘Next time just buy postcard, Cowboy.’

*Napoleon remembered the first time he visited the Uffizi Gallery in the heart of Florence.*

He was twenty-two and most of his former wide-eyed naïveté had been stripped off and ground away by the brutality of the war. He was visiting the city while on furlough with a group of fellow soldiers seeking alcohol, sex and empty distractions. During their trip they meandered through abandoned Tuscan villas, uncovering heirlooms that had been frantically hidden in attics under layers of newspapers and dust. Filling their army-issued rug sacks, they absconded with whatever they could sell on the black market. Napoleon purloined a set of gilded candlesticks and an emerald bracelet hidden underneath a mattress. Among other things, he discovered that he had a knack for lock picking, which accompanied his appreciation for fine things. After two years of crushed expectations, Napoleon considered that perhaps his idiotic spasm of patriotism might not amount to nothing after all.

Napoleon was no longer the same boy that he had once been.

His guileless outlook had been replaced with something cynical and calculating but that only seemed to make him more appealing. Napoleon now noticed the lascivious gazes of men and women when he walked into a room. He saw the way they responded to him when he spoke, noticed how they
were helplessly drawn into his orbit with mesmerised expressions. Napoleon was still unused to this new version of himself.

He self-consciously trailed his old self behind him like a second skin, trying to shake off the last vestiges of artless idealism with every exploit of thievery and seduction. Perhaps the two acts were not so different in practice. Napoleon had grown rather adept at stealing hearts too.

But when he walked through the gallery he felt the ghost of his former awestruck-self gasp for breath, a frisson of wonderrment striking through his veins as he absorbed the works of the great masters. It was awe so intense that it bordered on pain. Napoleon had always been partial to art, classing it among the many other fine decorative things that he coveted. But as Napoleon wandered through the main gallery, dwarfed by delicate marble statues and gilded Renaissance portraits, he was struck by the idea that art was one of the many things that could not be appreciated in abstraction.

He knew in that moment that he would spend the rest of his life thieving, pilfering, and committing general acts of debauchery if doing so meant that he could claim a piece of that beauty for himself. And just like that, Napoleon evolved into a new version of himself, melding both tenors of his former selves. He was hardened and inalterable, set in his ways except in the face of extreme beauty, which had the capacity to render devastating change to Napoleon Solo’s inner world.

Everything about Illya was like that moment of visceral revelation in the Uffizi Gallery. He was an unexpected force of destruction and turmoil, reaching his giant hands into Napoleon’s chest and staking claim.

He knew that he should feel some measure of wounded pride knowing that Illya had been forced to rescue him yet again as if Napoleon were a goddamn damsel in distress. But he could hardly bring himself to care. Not when Illya was a vision of glory and brutality, bursting into that dingy little room lodged deep inside a warehouse on the outskirts of Cairo and sweeping aside Napoleon’s captors in a wave of fury and blood. Seeing Illya unleash his strength was both horrifying and magnificent. Something about the coiled power in those hands was so starkly violent that a nearly unconscious Napoleon found himself absently thinking of Artemisia Gentileschi’s artwork, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*— the same crimson blaze of blood, the same remote and callous expression.

Illya himself was art. This thought troubled Napoleon. He sensed that this meant that Illya was something he would be unable to recover from.


He hated the gilded skyline strewn with arches, domes and elegant spires. He hated the maze of ancient sandstone buildings, the cobbled streets and the mullion-paned windows that glinted in the sun like a thousand eyes. He hated the endless quadrangles with neatly trimmed grass. He hated the Fellows with their billowing black robes and leather bound books, who sneered at him when they detected the trace of Illya’s poorly concealed Russian accent.

He hated their mission.

Most of all, he hated Horatio William Cavendish III—an esteemed professor in Romantic literature, a suspected homosexual, and Napoleon’s mark for the mission. The professor was believed to be collaborating with a circle of aristocratic criminals who were conducting an underground human
trafficking ring that had bases in every major European city. Napoleon had been charged with seducing the professor and somehow extracting the names of the ringleaders who were conducting the operation.

U.N.C.L.E.’s ancillary research staff had completed investigations on Cavendish, compiling incriminating letters exchanged with criminals and photographs of his numerous trysts. All of the research indicated that he was a man who excelled in manipulation and his sexual habits often bordered on violent. Cavendish took delight in breaking and humiliating his conquests. Illya seethed at the idea that Napoleon should be tasked with Cavendish’s seduction.

‘Why should Solo be forced to do this?’ Illya had demanded of Waverly during their debriefing meeting in London. ‘Surely there is another way—a safer way—to get necessary information?’

Napoleon flicked through the photographs taken of Cavendish’s latest conquest, eyes lingering on the blood stained dress shirt and the burn marks pressed to the man’s skin; round and dark, the exact outline of a lit cigarette. Gaby’s nose crinkled as Napoleon passed the photographs to her across the boardroom table. Napoleon adjusted his cuff links although they were already straight. Illya could tell that he making an effort to appear unperturbed.

‘Cowboy?’

‘Relax, Peril. I can handle it,’ Napoleon had glanced up with a loose smile that did not hide the apprehension in his eyes. ‘After all, this isn’t my first rodeo.’

Illya’s stomach dropped at the implication in those words.

‘Excellent, I’m glad that’s been decided,’ Waverly clasped his hands together, smiling broadly. ‘I’ll secure the introductions.’

Despite his air of affable geniality, Illya recognised that this was Waverly’s way of reminding them all that they were prized but expendable.

True to his word, Waverly obtained Napoleon and Gaby their invitations to an exclusive lecture Cavendish was giving on nineteenth century English poetry at All Souls College. Napoleon was posing as an antiquities dealer who specialised in Baroque artwork, which ensured that he could utilise his extraordinary understanding of art history in his quest to engage Cavendish. It was essential that Napoleon should appear to be unattached which meant that Gaby was attending the lecture on her own, employing the guise of a literary-minded viscountess who was considering making a sizable endowment to the college. Meanwhile, Illya was forced to pose as a waiter, resigned to wear a stifling black suit and circulate the library with a tray of champagne and hors d’oeuvres while Napoleon flirted shamelessly with the professor.

Perhaps it might have been easier for Illya to watch had the professor been an ancient and ugly specimen with a protruding stomach, greying hair and drooping jowls to accompany his non-existent moral fibre. But instead Illya glowered at Napoleon from the opposite side of the library, watching helplessly as Napoleon introduced himself to the professor, a middle-aged but handsome man with thick dark hair, a shrewd gaze and shiny teeth.

‘Stop scowling,’ Gaby hissed at Illya as she appeared by his right elbow and swiped a flute of champagne from his silver tray.

‘I am not scowling,’ he protested gruffly. He tried to school his features into a dispassionate expression.
‘You will never pass as a waiter if you look as if you intend to murder the guests,’ Gaby murmured in a low voice as her borrowed diamond rings clinked on the stem of her glass.

She turned away from him and directed a deceptively sweet smile towards a group of three men in expensive dark suits who were watching her with open interest. Like Napoleon, Gaby never failed to court attention wherever she went.

‘I don’t—’ Illya startled to growl but his words were cut off by the sight of Napoleon running his hand flirtatiously along Cavendish’s chest on the flimsy pretence of straightening his tie for him.

Illya ignored Gaby’s furious whisper of his name as he stalked across the library, moving around bohemian artists and literary scholars who clustered in small circles amongst the books.

‘Champagne?’

Illya extended his tray to the immaculately dressed elderly couple standing close to Napoleon and Cavendish. They smiled at him in the coolly polite way that seems to coincide with affluence while the man lifted two glasses from Illya’s tray. As they pondered over the hors d’oeuvres Illya strained to listen to Napoleon’s conversation with Cavendish.

‘And why the art world, Mr. Hawthorne? You appear to be a man possessed of multiple talents. What is it about Baroque art that enthrals you so?’

‘I’m drawn to beautiful things,’ Napoleon replied, his voice pitched low and seductive. A shiver darted along Illya’s spine. ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever: Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.’

Illya glanced at them from the corner of his eye as he moved away from the elderly couple with a polite nod. Cavendish’s expression was surprised and delighted, layered with a predatory interest that caused Illya’s gut to twist unpleasantly.

‘You know your Keats then. I myself am partial to *Endymion,*’ Cavendish crooned. He stepped closer to Napoleon, crowding him against the bookshelf, not so close as to draw attention to them but too close to retain the semblance of mere polite interest. ‘I must say that I’m impressed by you, Mr. Hawthorne.’

‘I aim to please. In all things,’ Napoleon answered, his tone warm and deep.

Illya longed to break something, preferably Cavendish’s nose.

The evening seemed interminably long and Illya could only watch helplessly as Napoleon successfully captivated Cavendish, ensnaring him with rakish smiles and the lingering brush of hands along Cavendish’s lapels. Illya felt as if he were being subjected to a very specific brand of torture. He did his best to circulate the room with his silver tray while watching them from afar but it was difficult to avoid scrutinising Cavendish.

Illya forced himself to stop listening to their conversation, recognising that his self-control was steadily fraying with every lascivious look Cavendish directed towards Napoleon. Gaby had sent several cautionary glances his way whenever Illya spent too much time glowering at the pair.

Cavendish clearly intended to acquire Napoleon. Illya recognised the hunger in Cavendish’s stare, which lingered on Napoleon’s chiselled jawline, the hollows of his cheekbones and the lush curve of his lower lip—all of the things which Illya himself could not help but notice. Napoleon was glorious in the candlelight, composed of sleek lines and shadows that dipped low against his throat and caressed the planes of his face. Napoleon stepped closer to Cavendish and lowered his head to
whisper something into his ear, a sly smile gracing his lips as Cavendish ran his hand along Napoleon’s forearm, moving forward and invading Napoleon’s space.

Illya watched and silently burned.

It was not the first time that Illya had experienced the feeling. It was a heavy thing, black like hatred but tinged with despair. It curled in his gut and cramped until breathing felt impossible.

Illya had difficulty reconciling the feeling with Napoleon, but it always emerged during missions such as these when Napoleon turned his back on Illya and made a performance of seducing a petty criminal or a diplomat’s vacuous wife. Napoleon became the impossibly charming version of himself that Illya adored and despised in equal measure. He would wear expensive French cologne and slick back his hair, his scent appealing but cloying. Illya loathed that cologne. Napoleon’s laugh would become a carefully measured thing, designed to captivate and enthral, not a true indication of what he was feeling. The agony of watching the transformation was startling. Illya would stare from a distance and long for Napoleon’s true laughter—a surprised, infectious thing drawn out over a drunken game of chess with Illya or a disastrous attempt to teach Gaby how to dance the tango. Illya would yearn for the unpolished version of Napoleon giving him an artless smile over the breakfast table in their shared hotel room, a stray lock of dark hair curling over his forehead as he quietly sipped his coffee, still too tired to adorn himself with his usual studied charisma.

Jealously and resentment settled underneath Illya’s skin like a toxin.

It was already agonising to watch Napoleon flaunt himself as if he were disposable. As if his worth were solely measured by his abilities as a bed partner. But the prospect of Napoleon allowing himself to be mauled and broken by a man like Cavendish for the sake of a mission was too much to endure. Illya felt the tell tale tremor of his hands begin and he curled the hand not holding the silver tray into a tight fist. The blunt drag of his nails created crescent moon indentations on his palm.

‘Illya? Are you okay?’

Gaby appeared by his side and closed a gloved hand over his arm as she stared up at him with an apprehensive expression. The fanned shape of her false eyelashes cast long shadows across her pretty face.

Despite his encroaching panic, Illya felt warmed by Gaby’s concern. He raised his hand to briefly press it against hers before stepping away, needing space. Illya gave a curt nod in response to her question and looked up to see Napoleon watching them from across the room with a strangely shuttered expression. He met Illya’s eyes and swiftly turned his attention back to Cavendish, awarding Cavendish’s lecherous advances with a roguish grin.

‘Do you need to leave? Shall I create a diversion?’ Gaby asked in the brisk tone she always used when worried about Illya or Napoleon.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Illya replied rigidly.

‘We shouldn’t be much longer. Things with Napoleon seem to be going smoothly,’ Gaby observed with the wry arch of an eyebrow.

Illya’s stomach turned. It was a feeling reminiscent of seasickness.

Cavendish looked at Napoleon as if he wanted to nothing more than to spirit him away from the polite clamour of the library and devour him slowly in private. To anyone who did not catalogue the vagaries of Napoleon Solo’s movements as astutely as Illya did, it would appear as if Napoleon were
contently basking in Cavendish’s attention. But Illya knew Napoleon. He saw the tension in Napoleon’s shoulders and the irregular tapping pulse of his index finger against his champagne flute. Illya felt as though the air were being stripped from his lungs.

Illya clenched his hand into a fist once more, focusing on the sharp cut of his fingernails against the skin of his palm.

‘Oh, Illya,’ Gaby sighed as she looked down at Illya’s tightly fisted hand.

Illya felt exposed before her as if he were flayed open under her knowing gaze. Soon everyone would see him for what he was. His predilections would be exposed before the world and he would be marked with every descriptor he had ever shied away from—unnatural, perverted and abnormal. Blighted with rage and an unconquerable attraction to a man who would never return his affections. What had once been so natural for Illya, to veil his emotions in sheets of icy indifference, was now an almost Herculean task.

‘You are both so stupid,’ Gaby muttered despairingly to herself. ‘So dramatic and so stupid.’ Illya bristled but did not answer and she continued muttering. ‘Do they no longer perform IQ tests on spies? Is this no longer a pre-requisite?’

Illya ignored her, his attention abruptly captured by Cavendish and Napoleon leaving the party. Cavendish’s hand was plastered low against Napoleon’s back, his mouth whispering into Napoleon’s ear. Napoleon laughed at whatever Cavendish had whispered. Illya thought the honeyed untruthful sound of it might kill him.

‘He is wearing a tracker and a microphone, Illya. Nothing will happen to him,’ Gaby said a reassuring tone. She seemed to recognise the deceit buried in her own words and her dark eyes widened as she faltered, ‘I mean, nothing too bad will happen to him. Nothing he cannot recover from. He knows what he’s going into.’

Vitriol seeped through Illya’s chest like kerosene, sparking buried tinder into a blaze. But he could not be angry with Gaby. It was not her fault that Napoleon was condemned to pay his penance by subjecting himself to the lust and cruelty of aristocratic criminals. But Illya would fight them all. He would rip apart anyone who dared to lay hands on Napoleon.

Illya nodded curtly, anxiety closing his throat. He left Gaby in the sparsely occupied library among drunken scholars in order to pursue the retreating figures of Cavendish and Napoleon.

He stalked them through the long corridors of the college as the wizened eyes of faculty deans observed him silently from their place inside gilt framed portraits. Illya was good at this. He could make himself invisible when needed. It was what made him a predator. It was what made him one of the KGB’s best. This was what killers were trained for.

Illya silently followed the lilting sounds of Napoleon’s voice and Cavendish’s brash laughter through the narrow cobbled streets, seeking cover against sleek convertibles and shoddy, dented vehicles alike. It was nearly midnight and they were meandering their way towards Cavendish’s sandstone townhouse. Napoleon staggered slightly, affecting to be significantly more inebriated than he actually was and Cavendish’s arm curled low across Napoleon’s back and his hand pressed against Napoleon’s hipbone. Cavendish’s other hand sprawled against Napoleon’s chest, spread against his heart as they stumbled laughingly past the dark windows of closed cafes and the eerie, vacant green spaces that dotted the city. Illya readied his gun.

He waited against the small garden shed hidden away in the corner of Cavendish’s immaculate garden and prepared his transmitter, listening to the frequency adjust as Cavendish unlocked his front
door and hauled Napoleon inside.

Their voices were muted but Illya suspected that this had more to do with Napoleon attempting to slur his words than the efficacy of his transmitter.

Illya watched through the window as Napoleon slumped against the fireplace and started to loosen his top buttons while Cavendish prepared their drinks. Illya had seen Napoleon drunk before and he was normally far clearer headed than this, with the exception of that startling night in Vienna when Napoleon had rambled so incoherently and beautifully. But Napoleon was smart. He knew that a man like Cavendish revelled in picking apart his prey, particularly when they were vulnerable.

Cavendish was murmuring something indistinguishable and Napoleon smiled lazily at him.

Although his back was turned to Illya, Illya knew that Cavendish’s expression was ravenous and that his gaze was fixed on the newly exposed, elegant line of Napoleon’s throat. Cavendish leaned down to rest their drinks on a side table and stepped close to Napoleon, his hand raised as if to caress Napoleon’s face. He instead wrapped his hand against Napoleon’s throat and pressed hard. Illya saw Napoleon’s face register surprise and briefly pain before everything escalated.

Illya sprinted toward the house without hesitation, his breathing frenzied and his vision blurred. He was prepared to dismember, to destroy, to kill. He ripped open the door and burst into the small, suffocating sitting room only to find Cavendish prostrate on the floor, his arms and legs twisted awkwardly as Napoleon stood above him with a scotch in hand and an expression of mild surprise on his face.

‘Cowboy?’ Illya asked frantically.

‘Is he dead?’ Napoleon asked, his tone indifferent.

There was a long, red dart sticking out of the back of Cavendish’s neck.

Had Illya not been trained by the KGB for years to not react to unexpected stimuli, he would have startled at the sound of Gaby’s voice emitting from Napoleon’s cufflinks.

‘Not dead. Asleep.’

Illya’s eyes followed the trajectory of the dart and landed on the small shadowy shape of Gaby curled against the open window frame of the townhouse behind Cavendish’s. She waved and her diamonds glittered in the moonlight.

‘Disappointing,’ Napoleon said ruefully as he passed Cavendish’s untouched glass to Illya. Their fingers brushed and Illya felt it in more than his hand. He did not normally drink scotch but he took a large sip, savouring the distraction of the burn against the back of his throat.

‘It is a shame,’ Illya agreed calmly as he landed a sharp kick to Cavendish’s solar plexus.

He looked up at Napoleon who was lightly rubbing his hand along his throat, his expression indecipherable.

‘Are you okay, Cowboy?’

The hectic rush of terror at the sight of Cavendish hurting Napoleon lingered in Illya’s chest and it made him stupid. It made him brazen. He reached out and brushed his fingertips gently against Napoleon’s jaw, tilting his face towards Illya’s. Napoleon’s eyes widened slightly. He could feel Napoleon’s breath on his cheek. Illya had forgotten what it meant to breathe. The red marks of
Cavendish’s fingerprints were pressed against Napoleon’s skin and Illya longed to sweep them away, so he did. He brushed his fingers against Napoleon’s throat, lingering on the quick, extraordinary beat of his pulse. Napoleon had gone still beneath Illya’s hand.

The door behind them creaked open and Illya dropped his hand as Gaby entered the room. He looked away from Napoleon who was unusually silent.

Gaby moved towards Cavendish. Her head was tilted slightly and her earrings swayed as she admired her handiwork.

‘He’s out cold,’ she said cheerfully as she stepped on Cavendish’s outstretched fingers.

‘I think I need another drink,’ Napoleon said, his voice hoarse.

They did not return to their hotel until five o’clock that morning. Waverly sent a team to remove Cavendish and take him to London for questioning while Illya, Gaby and Napoleon completed the necessary paperwork that accompanied incapacitating a mark. Waverly quirked an eyebrow when he saw Cavendish sprawled unconscious on the floor but if he was displeased with the departure from the original plan to extract information from Cavendish he didn’t say anything. Illya was relieved.

They returned to Gaby’s hotel suite and Napoleon immediately moved toward the bar trolley to fix himself a gin and tonic.

Illya’s eyes swept across the expanse of Napoleon’s back and lingered on the tension in his broad shoulders.

Was he disgusted with Illya? Amused by him? Perhaps now was the time to speak, perhaps not.

He felt as if he were brushing against a live wire around Napoleon. Any sudden movements might be fatal. Illya forced himself to stop staring at Napoleon who had now retreated to an armchair, his eyes closed and his shoulders downturned in a tired slump. Illya’s throat felt strangely tight.

Illya joined Gaby on the small balcony and stood beside her, their elbows brushing as they leaned against the metal guardrail overlooking the city.

The sky was a dusky pink and the rising sun was beginning to touch the sea of domes and spires. Everything was painted in shadows and gold. Mail vans and cyclists were beginning to trace the narrow streets. Haggard students were traversing the well-worn path from libraries to college dormitories. Oxford was timeworn and new all at once. Something about the shifting night made Illya feel alive.

‘You need to do something about this, Illya,’ Gaby murmured into the still, crisp air. ‘Before you cut yourself on Napoleon.’ She paused. ‘Or before he cuts himself on you.’

Illya glanced at Gaby anxiously. Was he so transparent? Could everyone see that love transformed him into a weapon?

Illya shifted uneasily. He watched as a murmuration of starlings contorted across the sky like a living shadow.

Gaby sighed deeply and cupped Illya’s face with her small hands. ‘Such stupid boys,’ she muttered as she patted his cheek affectionately.

Gaby turned away from him and sat down at the small glass-topped table next to the guardrail. She rested her head tiredly in the cradle of her arms.
‘Wake me up for breakfast,’ she said drowsily before promptly falling asleep.

Illya turned away from the rising sun and saw Napoleon standing in the doorway, watching Illya with a carefully neutral expression.

Illya’s chest hurt as if his lungs were expanding inside his rib cage. Napoleon glanced between Illya and Gaby’s slumped body, his expression unusually vulnerable. Illya struggled to make himself speak but could not. Silence loomed. Napoleon placed his tumbler on the coffee table, opened the door to the hotel suite, walked through it and shut it behind himself without sparing a backwards glance for Illya and Gaby.

*

Napoleon was not entirely certain whether it was a fluke of wondrous or very poor luck that had landed him in his current predicament.

Certainly the way Illya had sworn at him as they thrashed through brutal, glacially cold waves while being shot at by multiple assailants was not ideal.

Nobody likes being shot at and Napoleon disliked the prospect of contracting hypothermia even less. But despite these unfortunate circumstances they were alive and Napoleon was supremely pleased that he had been able to rescue Illya for once. It had taken some not inconsiderable effort on his part, but he helped Illya escape the small fishing vessel where they were both being held captive by a maniacal billionaire with grand plans to force them to divulge international secrets via torture. (Or something to that effect: Napoleon always became bored by homicidal rants and he stopped listening halfway through). But Illya did not seem particularly appreciative when it became apparent that they would have to quite literally abandon ship.

‘This was your worst plan yet, Cowboy,’ Illya snapped as they eventually dragged themselves to the shore and hurriedly sought cover from gunfire amongst the jagged rocks.

The serrated edges cut into Napoleon’s palm and his heart thrilled with the knowledge that he was alive and cognizant enough to take pleasure in the obscene way Illya’s white cotton shirt clung wetly to his chest.

‘Cheer up, Peril,’ Napoleon said as he forcibly raised his eyes to Illya’s scowling face. ‘We’re alive and we washed up on shore like mermaids in a children’s story. Should I fashion you a shell bra to complete the look? I’m sure you’d look fetching.’

Illya gave him a scornful glare, clearly not in the mood for Napoleon’s particular brand of humour.

Napoleon licked his lips, surprised to find the metallic flavour of blood on his tongue. He raised his fingers to his mouth and examined his hand in the dim starlight. Blood stained his fingers. He must have cut his face in the flurry of movement when they jumped overboard. He glanced up at Illya who was cataloguing Napoleon’s injuries with a stony expression.

‘Worst plan yet, Napoleon,’ Illya muttered again as he turned away to peer over the rocks. Napoleon felt a twinge of guilt in his stomach. Illya only referred to Napoleon by his given name when he was particularly angry. Napoleon turned over his gun in his hands and bit his lower lip in discomfort, ignoring the twinge of pain.

‘They were about to shoot you, Peril,’ Napoleon said with a raised eyebrow. ‘I feel as if that justifies our undignified exit.’
Illya frowned and snatched Napoleon’s gun from his hands and volleyed a row of shots over the rocks. His eyebrows were furrowed in consternation and his mouth was curled into a grimace. He turned to Napoleon and Napoleon was struck by the distress in his eyes.

‘I would have been fine,’ Illya said lowly between gritted teeth. His shots had landed their mark and the sonorous crashing of waves against the cliff face drowned the air as the remaining men on the fishing vessel paused to reload their guns. ‘You should have saved yourself while you had chance.’

Napoleon scoffed at this. He was a notoriously selfish creature but love had instilled within him at least a few redeeming features, most notably a reckless disregard for his own personal safety when Illya’s wellbeing was in question.

When Napoleon had seen the dull gleam of the gun barrel pressed to Illya’s temple he had felt as if something vital were about to be torn from his chest. But Illya could not know this. Perhaps after everything they had been through together Illya still secretly regarded Napoleon as the worst kind of coward—someone entirely incapable of self-sacrifice. Admittedly, Napoleon’s moral compass did not always point true north but he had hoped that Illya might have seen something more in him.

Napoleon sighed raggedly, his good mood souring. His response was unguarded and acerbic.

‘Don’t be a fool, Peril. It doesn’t suit you. Besides even you would have difficulty recuperating from being shot in the head.’

Illya scowled gloriously. He was a sodden portrait of unexpressed frustration.

Napoleon did not miss the way Illya’s breathing skipped or how the curl of his fingers tightened against the gun’s handle. Seeing Illya’s bristling irritation reminded Napoleon of when they had first met, when Illya responded to Napoleon’s prodding so beautifully like a cobra poised to strike. The memory made something electric and greedy flicker along Napoleon’s spine. He wanted to draw it out and unspool Illya’s tightly held control until Napoleon exposed the untempered raw version of Illya that he tried so desperately to conceal from the world.

Illya opened his mouth, possibly to refute Napoleon’s comment, when the sky blazed with fire and their faces were cast in sickening bursts of red and orange.

Napoleon resisted the urge to cup his ears against the aftermath of the explosion and instead dug his fingers into the wet sand. Waves carried broken flecks of timber to the shore and the shadowy hulk of the vessel began to sink into the ocean, slowly at first and then all at once as its weight dragged it underwater. Stars flickered coldly overhead and in the distance a siren blared.

Illya turned towards Napoleon, his gaze demanding.

‘Before I rudely interrupted your private time with our captors I attached explosives to the hull,’ Napoleon answered in a purposefully bored tone.

Illya tilted his head to one side as he watched the waves consume the flaming carnage. ‘Huh,’ he said eventually. ‘Not very shabby.’

Napoleon’s heart lurched painfully at Illya’s distorted use of the phrase. Illya was exquisite in his awkwardness. *There is no coming back from this,* he thought.

Napoleon was uncomfortably aware of how cold he was now that he and Illya were safe from imminent danger. Although it was spring, the Norwegian water had been bitterly cold and the wind whipped around their crouched bodies ferociously.
Before jumping overboard, Illya and Napoleon had discarded their coats and their shoes, removing anything that might drag them down into the dark unforgiving water. Frantically swimming to shore had been bad enough but the sensation of glacial wind lashing his wet skin was almost painful. Napoleon’s shoulders began to shudder violently and he rubbed his hands along his forearms, but to no avail.

Illya glanced at Napoleon sharply, his expression simultaneously irritated and concerned as it so often was around Napoleon.

‘You will freeze, Cowboy. You do not know how to handle real cold. Americans are not equipped for it.’

Napoleon was about to ask whether the KGB required their agents to roll around in the snow to prove their dominion over the elements, but his quip dissolved in his mouth when Illya stood up abruptly and reached down a large hand to pull Napoleon to his feet. Napoleon felt the relief of warmth everywhere. Their chests brushed and Napoleon instinctively leaned into Illya’s body heat. He felt rather than heard Illya’s breath hitch although it was possible that he too felt the sting of the cold. The white clouds of their breaths intermingled and Napoleon found the image strangely intimate.

Illya dropped Napoleon’s hand.

‘We are lucky,’ Illya called loudly over the wind and the sirens. ‘Safe house is not far from here. I calculated latitude while we were on boat.’

‘Of course you did. How far is “not far”?’ Napoleon responded between shudders.

Although he knew that he had survived worse, Napoleon was beginning to wonder whether he had ever been so cold in his life.

‘Five miles,’ Illya replied gravely.

‘Oh, for fu—’

The howling wind snatched Napoleon’s words from his mouth but he imagined that Illya would sense the gist of his displeasure.

Illya’s lips twitched slightly but he quickly rearranged his features into an expression of dour solemnity.

Beneath his concern, Napoleon had the sneaking suspicion that Illya was amused. The bastard. As they trudged along the beach and inhaled sea air and drifting clouds of black smoke, Napoleon silently cursed the man he was in love with. Neon ribbons of green and purple streaked across the night sky. If Napoleon hadn’t been freezing he might have taken the opportunity to enjoy watching the Northern Lights with Illya by his side. But the display was short lived and by the time they reached the small cabin perched atop a cliff face, Napoleon could hardly feel his fingers and the rising sun had bleached the sky of its vibrant colours, leaving only a chalky blue in its wake.

‘Home sweet home,’ Illya said drily as Napoleon pushed through the front door and immediately started fumbling with the fireplace in the small sitting room.

The room was sparsely decorated with a threadbare lounge, a wicker table and two mismatched armchairs. A home decorating magazine and a yellowed newspaper with lipped edges was spread on the table next to a partially melted candle and a red telephone. From Napoleon’s place kneeling at the hearth he could see the doorway to the only bedroom, a small bathroom and a tiny kitchenette that
was dominated by a hulking Aga cooker. The windows in the sitting room overlooked the ocean and were coated in sea salt. They rattled as fierce gusts of wind shook the cabin.

‘Christ,’ Napoleon muttered as he searched for something to light the fire. ‘Where are the matches?’

He turned around to find Illya sprawled on the longue half-naked with his eyes closed, his huge frame dwarfing the piece of furniture. Napoleon blinked. Had he died and not realised it? Was he having some kind of cold-induced hallucination?

‘Peril? What are you doing?’

Why was he questioning this?

Illya was an Adonis. He was Michelangelo’s David. He was every piece of art morphed into flesh. Napoleon could hardly breathe at the sight of his muscled chest, the wide expanse of his bared shoulders, and the long stretch of his thighs graced with golden flecks of hair. His white boxers were damp and Napoleon could see the heavy outline of Illya’s length and felt desire coil in his gut. Napoleon had always known that men could be beautiful but watching Illya was like seeing for the first time. When he closed his eyes tonight this was going to be all he thought of. Napoleon might never sleep again. If he died tomorrow then this would be what he imagined in his last moments.

Illya’s eyes opened and the shock of blue startled Napoleon into speaking.

‘Not that I object, obviously.’

Illya rolled his eyes dramatically as if Napoleon were making a flippant joke and not in danger of suffering from heart failure.

‘Why do they let American spies out into world?’ Illya sighed. He raised an eyebrow at Napoleon and spoke slowly with a level of condescension that Napoleon would have been surprised by had it come from anyone other than Illya. ‘My clothes are wet and I am cold. If I take clothes off then I am not so cold. Also, matches are probably in kitchen.’

Napoleon staggered into the kitchen wordlessly, his capacity for speech having temporarily vacated him.

He continued to shiver as he opened drawers at random, thinking that it was a miracle that he was so cold otherwise it would have been impossible to conceal his reaction to Illya’s state of undress. His day was improving rapidly. Napoleon found a sewing kit, a battered saucepan and two cans of expired pea and ham soup before he managed to find a box of matches. Clutching the box triumphantly, he re-entered the sitting room. Illya was rummaging through a linen cupboard and emerged with an armful of woollen blankets.

Napoleon resumed his stance in front of the fireplace and tried to strike a match and failed. His hands were shaking violently. He swore under his breath. Illya’s hands closed around Napoleon’s, gently pulling the box from his grasp. Napoleon could hear his teeth chattering and if he had the body heat necessary to summon a blush, his face would probably have been an uncharacteristic shade of pink.

‘Go sit, Cowboy,’ Illya said gently. ‘I can take care of this.’

Illya carefully adjusted the tinder and struck a match as Napoleon stood. The flame cast Illya’s face in gold but Napoleon couldn’t draw his eyes away from the shifting muscles in Illya’s back and the delightful curve of his spine as he hunched over the budding fire. Napoleon’s teeth continued to chatter.
‘Put a blanket on, Cowboy, or come closer to fire,’ Illya murmured as he prodded the flames with an iron poker.

Napoleon’s clothes were uncomfortably damp against his skin and he sighed.

‘In for a penny…’

It took Napoleon longer to unbutton his shirt than he had anticipated due to his quivering hands but he eventually divested the sodden fabric and dropped it to the floor. He hooked his thumbs into his trousers and unbuttoned them swiftly, sliding them down his legs and allowing them to join his shirt in a wet heap. He had taken his socks off while still on the beach so once he disentangled his legs Napoleon stood by the fire clad in only his navy blue boxers and a dwindling sense of bravado.

‘It is done,’’ Illya announced as the flames crackled cheerfully and warmth steadily radiated from the fireplace in intoxicating waves.

‘What a good Boy Scout you would have made, Peril,’ Napoleon said softly.

Illya raised his head at the shift in Napoleon’s tone and paused, his face seemingly mesmerised in the light of the fire as he absorbed Napoleon.

Napoleon’s throat felt suddenly dry at the sight of Illya kneeling before him, illuminated by the morning sun as he gazed up at Napoleon as if he were something wondrous. That alone was devastating but seeing Illya on his knees with so much pale skin bared was utterly catastrophic to Napoleon’s equilibrium. Napoleon swallowed reflexively and Illya’s eyes darted from Napoleon’s chest to his throat. Napoleon’s teeth snared his lower lip and Illya’s eyes followed the motion.

Napoleon was accustomed to the game of seduction. He knew how to play his part. He was well versed in the expected strategies—Napoleon knew when to lower his voice, when to touch and when to hold back. He understood how to make himself desirable. He knew how to please and how to use his mouth and hands. As much as he loathed it all, being rented out to the CIA had made Napoleon well trained. Seeing sex as a game was a necessary mindset that enabled Napoleon to complete his missions, but this was different. Undoubtedly the stakes were higher, but Napoleon was no longer playing. Napoleon dreamed of what it would be like to make Illya writhe with pleasure, to feel Illya’s hands against his skin, his mouth feverish against Napoleon’s.

‘You are bleeding, Cowboy,’ Illya murmured. Concern etched his features as his gaze swept over Napoleon’s face.

Napoleon had never been particularly religious, but he was transfixed by the way the dawning light gilded Illya’s broad shoulders, transforming him into an icon that Napoleon longed to worship.

‘What?’ he asked dazedly. Napoleon could have been missing a limb and he might not have noticed in that moment. He raised his hand to his mouth and felt a viscous wetness against fingers. He stared down at the red stain on his palm confusedly until he recalled the cut on his face that he had acquired while swimming to shore.

Illya stood and Napoleon’s eyes were drawn to the enticing trail of blond hair that disappeared beneath Illya’s boxers. Illya dragged one of the grey woollen blankets from the lounge and unfolded it. He stepped forward slowly as if he were strangely cautious of Napoleon and draped it around Napoleon’s shoulders. Illya was close enough to touch and Napoleon could feel his breath against his temple. He was losing his sense of reality.

Napoleon knew that this was when he was supposed to make a lewd or insouciant remark.
Something callous and shallow like you’ve gone to great lengths to get me out of my clothes, Peril. You could have said something sooner—a comment that would restore their predictable repartee. Something that would make Napoleon feel as if he were in control of the moment. But Napoleon could not speak, not when Illya was standing so close to him, his huge body radiating warmth. Not when Illya stared at Napoleon as if he were something incomprehensibly valuable.

‘Stay here, Cowboy,’ Illya whispered. Napoleon wasn’t certain why they were both speaking so softly but something about the warm sunlit moment seemed to require hushed voices.

Napoleon continued to shiver by the fire as Illya disappeared to rustle through the bathroom medicine cabinet. By the time Illya returned with antiseptic cream, a bag of cotton balls and gauze bandages in hand, Napoleon had his hands spread towards the fire and he had regained feeling in his toes.

Illya regarded Napoleon huddled in a blanket by the fire with a warm expression.

‘You still shiver even with blanket and fire. Come sit, Cowboy. I will fix your face before you get blood on blanket.’

‘Are you impervious to the cold, Peril?’ Napoleon asked between shudders as he sat on the lounge, angling his body towards the warmth of the flames. Illya sat next Napoleon and pushed the newspaper aside to place the medical supplies on the side table.

A slight teasing smile graced Illya’s face as he replied, ‘No, Cowboy. I am just tougher than you.’

The spectre of their usual rivalry had returned but nothing about the night followed their well-worn patterns. It took some effort, but Napoleon managed to roll his eyes.

‘You underestimate me, Peril. I may not be invulnerable to hypothermia, but I have other strengths.’

‘You do,’ Illya allowed. His lips were curved in a devastatingly affectionate smile that was going to kill Napoleon. ‘You blew up boat and found matches. You are very tough, Cowboy. Happy? Now tilt head towards me.’

Napoleon angled his head toward Illya and glanced down at the small white tube of cream in his hands. The label was covered in indecipherable Norwegian lettering. He frowned at it.

‘Are you sure that’s antiseptic cream, Peril? Can you read Norsk?’

Illya shrugged as he uncapped the tube and opened the bag of cotton buds. ‘No, but I thought we would try it and see. You have made it this far. I suspect you will live.’

Napoleon’s frown deepened and he opened his mouth to dispute this point but was then abruptly silenced when Illya lifted a hand to gently cradle Napoleon’s jaw, tilting his chin toward the sunlight. Napoleon inhaled shakily and nearly released his grasp on the blanket draped across his shoulders.

‘Hold still, Cowboy,’ Illya whispered as his fingers grazed Napoleon’s throat soothingly.

Napoleon closed his eyes against the sensation. Illya could surely feel the racing thrum of his pulse.

He had never been more aware of his own heartbeat. What a wonderful and terrible dream. How could he be expected to move on from this? To live his life with any semblance of normality? All others were to be measured against Illya and the destructive thrill of this moment. Napoleon knew he should pull away and tend to his own grazes, rather than pathetically grasp at the crumbs of affection that Illya was willing to spare him. Soon they would return to their lives and Napoleon would be forced to watch from afar as Illya shared secret moments with Gaby, exchanging private smiles, all
the while Napoleon would be resigned to clutch onto this moment and starve.

‘This might sting,’ Illya breathed against his cheek as he wiped away the crusted blood on Napoleon’s lower lip.

Napoleon inhaled sharply at the feeling of Illya’s fingers against his mouth.

He desperately wished that he could extend this moment so it would last for eternity. Napoleon would live and die in such a moment if he could—he would relish infinity spent with Illya’s fingers against his lips and the warmth of Illya’s body brushing against Napoleon’s. Illya had the power to destroy him. Whether he realised it or not, Illya held Napoleon’s heart in his hands. There was nothing that Napoleon would not do for him.

But Napoleon was a thief and he knew he was only stealing borrowed time. While it was just the two of them seeking refuge inside a tiny cabin by the sea, curled close together for warmth, it was easy for Napoleon to pretend that Illya might hoard the same crazed feelings in his heart. Napoleon could selfishly pretend just for a moment that Illya wasn’t besotted with Gaby and that he might allow Napoleon to kiss him.

Perhaps if Napoleon were a more honourable man then he would be happy that Illya and Gaby had found each other. After all, they each ignited an imprudent impulse for self-sacrifice within Napoleon. He would die for either of them if the occasion called for it.

Yet Napoleon had not imagined the look on Illya’s face when he disrobed by the fire. There was lust in Illya’s expression when he stared at Napoleon, alongside something foreign and unbearably sweet that made Napoleon’s hands shake. It was reminiscent of the disastrous Oxford mission when Illya had held Napoleon’s face as he tenderly examined Napoleon for injuries. Another moment that Napoleon would cheerfully live and die within.

The dissonance that Napoleon had felt when he later spied Gaby and Illya embracing on the balcony was jarring. If Illya felt anything for Napoleon it did not dissolve his obvious feelings for Gaby. At one point Napoleon might have been able to seduce Illya and then move on unscathed, but he had come too far for that. Although part of Napoleon knew that he would eagerly accept whatever Illya was willing to give him, he suspected that a mere casual fuck might devastate him. Napoleon was always so sure of himself when it came to seduction, but it was apparent that navigating his own heart was entirely outside of his scope of experience.

He felt like a stranger in his own skin.

‘Are you feeling okay, Cowboy?’ Illya asked with a frown as he pulled away to examine Napoleon. ‘You look…what is right word? Lightheaded.’

Napoleon was feeling rather delirious, but he suspected that it had more to do with Illya’s close proximity than anything else.

‘I’m sure I will live, Peril,’ Napoleon replied, echoing Illya’s earlier words. ‘Although if you had not been available to play nurse I may not have made it.’

He lifted a hand to his mouth and prodded with his fingers. His lips still stung slightly, but he was otherwise pain free.

‘Stop poking,’ Illya chastised as he reached out to restrain Napoleon’s examining hand. ‘You make terrible patient.’ But Illya’s voice was fond and his eyes were amused.

Napoleon glanced down at their fingers curled together.
Illya’s hand held his in a loose grip. Illya’s thumb pressed to the soft skin at the juncture between Napoleon’s thumb and forefinger. The pale skin of Illya’s upturned wrist exposed blue rivers of veins that trailed along his forearm. Napoleon marvelled at the transparency of Illya’s skin, an unexpected sight of vulnerability in someone so formidable, and before he could stop himself he used his free hand to trace the thin blue markings extending along Illya’s wrist.

‘Cowboy,’ Illya breathed.

Illya’s voice was hoarse. His eyes fluttered closed as Napoleon continued to graze the soft skin along Illya’s forearm with the tips of his fingers.

Illya’s grip on Napoleon’s hand tightened and Napoleon lifted his fingers and trailed them along Illya’s bicep and shoulder, wondering at the curve of muscle and bone. Illya’s eyes remained closed although his breathing quickened. His lips parted slightly and Napoleon could feel the warmth of Illya’s breath ghost against his lips.

Napoleon really was delirious. His fingers tenderly traced the delightful sweep of Illya’s collarbone before coming to rest high against his chest, his palm curling against Illya’s rapid heartbeat. Illya opened his eyes and Napoleon felt the effect of his stare throughout his entire body. Napoleon’s palm tingled where it remained connected to Illya’s and his breathing was shallow. Illya’s cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bright. Slowly Illya raised his free hand and pressed it to Napoleon’s, their hands tangling against the pulse of Illya’s heart. Illya’s gaze darted to Napoleon’s parted lips and Napoleon’s heart made a valiant effort to escape his ribcage. Illya’s breathing grew ragged as Napoleon’s thumb stroked gentle circles over his heart and Napoleon began to shiver slightly although he was no longer cold.

Touching Illya’s skin and feeling the rhythm of his heart beneath his hands was an improbable miracle. Napoleon longed to do it again and again.

A piercing trill emanated from the red telephone on the side table and they broke apart, equally startled.

Illya cursed swiftly in Russian and turned his face from Napoleon as he scrambled to snatch the phone from its cradle. Napoleon could not help but direct his gaze heavenward, wondering if divine retribution for his sins had manifested itself through the interruption of one of the most charged moments of his entire life. Napoleon had never felt so shaken and he hadn’t even kissed Illya.

‘Hello?’ Illya’s voice was unsteady as he clutched the receiver tightly. Napoleon derived some comfort from this as he felt as if he were on the precipice of losing his mind. Illya’s cheeks were a vibrant pink and he angled his face further away from Napoleon as he spoke into the receiver.

‘No, we are fine. We are in safe house north of beach. Have you tracked our co-ordinates?’

As Illya silently listened to the person on the other end of the line he absentmindedly held a hand to his heart as if his skin burned where Napoleon had touched him.

Napoleon desperately scanned the sitting room for a hidden bottle of scotch or vodka.

Napoleon was so frantic for a distraction that he would even make do with a flask of cheap tequila, which was well below his usual standards. Anything to stop himself from thinking about ripping the phone from Illya’s grasp, pressing their bodies together and tracing Illya’s skin with his tongue until Illya could only moan Napoleon’s name. Clearly these electric, tender moments with Illya were either going to render Napoleon unhinged or turn him into an alcoholic.
‘Yes, mission is complete. We will provide full report when we see you.’

There was a brief pause before Illya answered, ‘Yes, I know where meeting point is,’ before placing the receiver back on the cradle with a dull click.

Napoleon picked up the home decorating magazine from the side table and idly flipped through it. He was excruciatingly aware of Illya’s eyes on his face.

He looked up and Illya’s blue eyes immediately flickered away, fixing on the opposite wall. The sun had fully risen in the sky and the room was doused in light. Illya had not shaved and the sun illuminated the golden stubble that was beginning to grow on his cheeks and neck. Napoleon wondered what it would be like to put his face to Illya’s jawline and feel the rough texture scrape against his lips.

‘Waverly has arranged boat to collect us,’ Illya said in a low voice as he glanced down at his hands. ‘Gaby will meet us. She was worried about us.’

Napoleon observed the discomforted way Illya hunched his shoulders while he stared at his clenched hands.

Napoleon recognised with a sharp pang in his chest that Illya felt guilty for allowing Napoleon to trace his skin and grasp his heartbeat while Gaby waited for him alone in her hotel suite in Oslo, no doubt sitting by the phone and anxiously expecting an update from Waverly. Illya was faultlessly loyal and adhered to an ironclad moral code which meant that to betray Gaby, if only for a single sunlit moment, was anathema to Illya’s integrity.

But maybe it was worse then that. Perhaps Illya’s evident guilt was coupled with disgust.

After all, Napoleon was accustomed to the occasional self-loathing that flared in the men he slept with. He tried not to take it personally. It was unsurprising that Illya who had been moulded by the austere strictures of the KGB might feel such a way. Napoleon wondered if Illya would grow to think of this morning as an oversight or whether he would revisit the memory and pick at the edges until it unravelled, or whether Illya would rather not think about the memory at all. Napoleon supposed that such a reaction was to be excepted, although that did not make the revelation hurt any less.

Napoleon lolled his head against the lounge, feeling suddenly exhausted by the turn of events. But he could try and remedy this. No doubt Illya would refuse to work alongside him if he recognised the terrible and infinite depth of Napoleon’s feelings. Illya would be able to dismiss Napoleon’s lust but love was something else entirely.

Napoleon met Illya’s eyes boldly and embraced a veneer of casual indifference.

‘Excellent news,’ Napoleon announced in a deliberately jovial tone that ruptured the hallowed silence of the cabin, ‘I’m sure she will be overjoyed to be reunited with you, Peril. I myself will be overjoyed to be reunited with a hot shower and a glass of scotch. While you and Gaby reconcile I might find someone at the hotel bar who will be willing to share both with me.’

Illya stared at Napoleon, hurt and confusion woven through his expression before his features quickly settled into careful impassivity. Napoleon dropped the magazine on the lounge and stood up, trying to clutch his blanket around his shoulders with as much dignity as he could muster.

‘I rather feel like a nap before the boat arrives. Wake me up when it’s time to leave, won’t you, Peril?’
Napoleon grabbed another blanket from the pile folded on the armchair and tucked it under his arm as he moved toward the tiny bedroom.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of Illya staring down at trembling hands before he shut the door with a definitive click. Napoleon closed his eyes as he leaned his forehead against the door and tried to regulate his breathing in time with the distantly crashing waves. Napoleon knew what he was getting into with Illya, but he was unaccustomed to coveting someone so fervently and futilely. It made Napoleon feel untethered. He was loosing his grip on his treasured composure. In time he could move on, or at least pretend to do so, but for now he needed a solitary moment of reprieve in which to fall apart.

*

Eight days of averted glances, barbed tempers and cold silences exchanged with Napoleon had done little to alleviate Illya’s bad mood.

Waverly had permitted the three of them to enjoy a brief respite in Cancun before they received the instructions for their next mission. Although Illya normally welcomed the intervals between missions when Gaby would attempt to beat him at chess and Napoleon would coax him into helping cook a needlessly elaborate meal, all the while teasing Illya for his shamefully uncultured palate, their time spent in Mexico was soured by Illya’s wounded humiliation over Napoleon’s rejection.

He had been reckless during their last mission, tending to Napoleon’s wound with such open longing and allowing himself to stare at Napoleon with a pitiful lovesick expression. Being so close to Napoleon and feeling his hands hot against his skin had felt strangely sacred to Illya. But could not blame Napoleon for reminding him that he was only one option of many in an ever-changing Ferris wheel of Napoleon’s admirers.

Napoleon had no reason to choose Illya for anything other than temporary entertainment. He had made it clear that Illya was merely an easy fuck, nothing more.

Illya tried to convince himself that it was merely wounded pride that kept him awake at night, staring blankly at the moulded ceiling. But then Napoleon would swagger into the suite at two in the morning, staggering slightly and smothered in another person’s cheap cologne and Illya felt as if the bone-deep misery would cause his body to disintegrate piece by piece.

During such nights Illya sprinted on the beach until his lungs burned. He ran until the sea air erased the memory of Napoleon’s hands tracing his skin. Sometimes he felt everything too intensely—the numbing repetition of the waves became a thunderous crash, the balmy air scorched his skin and the lights of the city became a kaleidoscope of primary colours— and at other times he felt strangely hollow as if he were not capable of feeling anything at all.

Illya was not inclined towards dramatics but he suspected that he might be suffering from a broken heart.

His handler’s predictions and all of his worst fears were coming true.

Illya was a defective creature designed to kill, comprised of ice and sharp edges. He was his father’s greatest source of shame. He could not love something without destroying it and he did not deserve to love. But his infatuation was like a disease that lurked beneath his skin, coursing through his blood stream, always waiting to flare hot and bright whenever Illya imagined recovery. Illya was incurable.
He considered the possibility of asking Waverly if he would be able to transfer to another branch of U.N.C.L.E.

Working with another partner every day might help Illya learn how to breathe again and how to function without feeling as if there were a knife perpetually jammed between his ribs. If he could work with another team then perhaps with time he might forget Napoleon’s sly humour, the way his eyes glinted with steely determination when cracking a safe, his unfeigned laughter, the curve of his lips, and the soft expression he would sometimes wear when looking at Illya.

But Illya had always been distrustful of the adage that time heals all things. He thought it was a naïve and wistful sentiment. Time might cauterise the wound but it always left an ugly scar.

Like all addicts, Illya knew that Napoleon was bad for him but he craved whatever momentary thrill he could get with a fervour that frightened him. Asking for a transfer was not a viable option.

Gaby made a point of determinedly avoiding both Napoleon and Illya while they brooded and bickered with each other. More than once she had stormed from the room while muttering that she was not paid nearly enough to be their babysitter.

Tension continued to crackle between Napoleon and Illya when they arrived in New York for their next mission. Waverly ordered a private air charter for the journey, which Gaby had spent napping by the widow seat, her legs curled underneath her and her shoes scattered underneath her seat. Illya set up his portable chess set that he kept for such occasions and started playing a solitary game against himself while Napoleon peered over his shoulder and commented on his strategy for the sheer purpose of irritating Illya.

‘Are you sure about that move, Peril? You seem rather tense. Is it possible to lose a game against oneself?’

Illya unclenched his jaw and stonily reminded Napoleon that Gaby was trying to sleep and took vindictive pleasure in the flicker of discontent in Napoleon’s eyes.

He returned to his game and Napoleon retreated to the other end of the plane to stare out the window in sullen silence. Illya forced his eyes to remain fixed on the black and white tiles of the chessboard rather than allowing himself to be distracted by the uncommonly dishevelled lines of Napoleon’s Savile Row suit or the loose texture of his dark hair, which was unsullied by its usual product.

It was strange to see him looking anything other than immaculately groomed. Illya considered the possibility that the tension of the past few missions might also be impacting Napoleon. He was loath to admit that he was fascinated by the cracks in Napoleon’s composure, made more evident by the restless rhythm of Napoleon’s fingers as they tapped against his thigh.

Waverly had given them the afternoon to settle in and requested that they reconvene later in the evening to be briefed on the details of the upcoming mission. Napoleon left straight from the airport to travel to his apartment. As he got into the backseat of a yellow taxi he gave Illya and Gaby a perfunctory parting smile that did not reach his eyes.

Illya and Gaby spent the afternoon touring U.N.C.L.E headquarters and unpacking in their individual rooms at The St. Regis. As they travelled up the elevator Gaby pushed her sunglasses to her head and wiped her face with the back of her hand. Her mascara was slightly smudged and had formed a flaky ring around her eyes.

‘You have make up on your face.’
'I'll wash it off. I think I might shower and have another nap before we meet Waverly. You know, Napoleon’s apartment is supposedly quite large. We could have just stayed with him if he’d asked us.'

Illya did not reply but instead stared at the illuminated buttons on the wall as the teenage bellhop who was crammed into the elevator with them eyed Illya up and down nervously.

They reached the twelfth floor and the doors parted with a cheerful chime. Illya scowled at the bellhop who speedily hurried out of the elevator. The doors closed again and Gaby emitted the histrionic sigh that she seemed to reserve solely for Napoleon and Illya. They continued their ascent in silence and Illya stubbornly avoided Gaby’s gaze, which he knew would be filled with equal parts sympathy and judgement.

At nine o’clock that evening the trio sat at a boardroom table with Waverly. The meeting room was ensconced within U.N.C.L.E.’s underground headquarters, which were accessible through the back entrance to a small barber’s shop on the Upper West Side.

Napoleon was once again pristine in a crisp grey suit with a navy blue tie looped around his neck. His hair was slicked back in its usual style and he lounged nonchalantly in his chair while sipping from his glass of scotch. Illya scowled at Napoleon from across the table and Napoleon levelled a smug smile at Illya in return.

‘Excellent scotch, Waverly. Is this the Macallan?’

Waverly appeared pleasantly surprised. ‘I believe so, Solo. Good spotting.’ He took a sip from his own glass, hummed in approval, then unclipped the briefcase sitting on the table and extracted three manila folders. ‘Now that we are all assembled, we can get down to details. If you will each kindly take a folder.’

Illya opened his folder and flicked through a series of black and white photographs, which included several mug shots of disgruntled Italian men and a wide shot of a derelict warehouse with a mutilated body in the foreground. As the photographs progressed the method of murder appeared to become increasingly creative and gruesome. Gaby emitted a small sound of distaste from beside him but otherwise maintained a straight face.

‘Charming stuff,’ Napoleon murmured as he eyed the photographs dispassionately.

‘Indeed. As you can see, we are dealing with a cantankerous bunch,’ Waverly said wryly. ‘Violence seems to be embedded into the Cosa Nostra’s activities, but we have reason to believe that they have acquired some unfortunate knowledge regarding the alternative use of uranium in nuclear weaponry. Meaning bigger explosives and increased devastation. How they obtained this information we cannot be entirely certain but we suspect that they might have contact with the same web of informants previously employed by our dear friends, the Vinceguerras.’

‘What will they do with the information?’ Gaby asked curiously, ‘Nuclear weaponry doesn’t seem to be their preferred style.’

‘I’m glad you asked, Miss Teller,’ Waverly said in a bright tone as if Gaby were his favourite student. ‘We suspect that they hope to sell the information to another party. The Yakuza appear to have demonstrated interest but there may be many other unidentified groups vying for the information.’

‘Do we know where information is stored? Or if there is more than one copy?’ Illya asked.
‘We know that the formulas are currently stored on a disc and we have reason to believe that said
disc will be located in the home of one of the Five Families.’

Illya did not have any previous experience with the American branch of the Italian Mafia but he
recalled studying the criminal organisation in between KGB missions. A KGB agent who was not
prepared for all eventualities ultimately became a dead agent, which meant that Illya used what little
free time he had to stay informed on the movements of underground criminal organisations.

The Five Families comprised the power base that controlled the wider activities of the Cosa Nostra
and an overarching ruler known as the capo di tutti capi, or the “boss of all bosses” governed the
Five Families. The Mafia operated its criminal syndicates using a complex hierarchy of soldiers,
under bosses and lesser informants. Infiltrating such a system would be a dangerous and difficult
task.

‘Fortunately, we happen to have an inside source,’ Waverly continued placidly. ‘Solo here has a
passing acquaintance with several members of the Cosa Nostra.’

‘Of course he does,’ Illya muttered darkly. ‘It is not surprising that a thief should mix with criminals.’

Napoleon raised his eyebrows and took a long sip of his scotch. He gave Illya an imperious stare
over the rim of his glass.

‘Peril, you didn’t seem to have a problem with my dastardly criminal connections during the Istanbul
mission. If I recall correctly, my criminal contacts saved your life.’

Illya felt heavy tendrils of anger start to knot in his stomach. He dropped his folder on the table and
hissed, ‘We would never have been in situation if you had not taken shot too soon.’

Napoleon’s mouth twitched irritably, a single fissure in his self-possession, and he leaned forward
and placed his glass on the table with a jarring clatter. He sat back in his seat and regarded Illya with
an equable gaze. ‘If I hadn’t taken that shot you would be dead. Gratitude really isn’t your strong
suit, Peril.’

‘Gratitude for what? American incompetence?’

‘I feel like now is the time to clarify that Solo doesn’t have any business connections with the Cosa
Nostra,’ Waverly interjected with an amused glance directed towards Gaby, who was tapping her
heel testily against the carpet as she eyed Illya’s and Napoleon’s defiant expressions. ‘And I will
personally recommend that your review for a pay increase be expedited, Miss Teller.’

‘Thank you,’ Gaby said with a saccharine smile as she swiped a sip of scotch from Napoleon’s
tumbler.

‘Now as I was saying,’ Waverly continued, ‘Solo’s connections to the Cosa Nostra are invaluable as
he has previous experience with their security systems. He kindly alleviated their vaults of several
masterpieces seven years ago.’

‘You stole from the Cosa Nostra and you’re still alive?’ Gaby asked. Her tone was impressed.
Napoleon awarded her with a rakish grin.

‘You are still criminal,’ Illya muttered impatiently.

‘That’s quite the philosophical question, Peril. I rescued one of the Klimt paintings believed to have
been destroyed by the Nazis. If one steals from a criminal, particularly if one steals something which
is no longer supposed to exist, then surely the act becomes one of salvation rather than criminality?’
‘No,’ Illya replied bluntly.

‘I’m inclined to agree with Kuryakin on this, Solo,’ Waverly said, looking greatly entertained. ‘Philosophical musings aside, the letter of the law generally regards it as a criminal act. However, that being said, for the purposes of this mission I am glad you committed that particular act of salvation. It suits our goals very well indeed.’

Napoleon looked insufferably smug. He turned to beam at Illya and Illya clenched his hands into fists beneath the table.

‘Moving on swiftly, I think,’ Waverly continued with a cautious glance in Illya’s direction. ‘We have been able to obtain a blueprint of a night club in Brooklyn where we believe the Cosa Nostra are hiding documents which tie them the Vinceguerra’s past informants. If we can recover those first it may make the acquisition of the disc itself easier.’

‘What makes you believe that they will store the disc in the same vault?’ Gaby asked with a frown. ‘If it is valuable then surely they would change their security measures to protect it against someone like Napoleon.’ As she spoke she jabbed an elegant finger in Napoleon’s direction. He looked strangely affronted for someone who was indeed planning to infiltrate the vault and steal its contents.

‘We don’t know for certain that it will be in the same vault. But we imagine that the disc will be in the same building. The Cosa Nostra has a notoriously long memory and rumour has it that they believe Solo still works under the CIA. We believe that they intend to lure Solo into a trap, which will be able to spin to our advantage. If fortune smiles on us, we will be able to secure the disc.’

Comprehension flashed on Napoleon’s face and Illya felt a cold trickle of anxiety begin to bleed down his spine.

‘So Napoleon is the bait?’ Gaby demanded angrily.

‘Clearly I made quite the impression,’ Napoleon murmured as he took a bracing sip of scotch. ‘I can’t say that I’m surprised.’

Waverly glanced between Gaby’s protective expression and the dangerously blank look on Illya’s face and held his hands up in a pacifying manner, although when he spoke he addressed Napoleon directly. ‘The Cosa Nostra are not inclined to forgive and forget, I’m afraid. But ideally you would not be caught, Solo.’

‘And if he is?’ Illya asked icily.

Waverly was not a cruel man but the nature of his role dictated that if he had to choose between international security and an agent’s life then he would be obligated to make the practical decision. Illya wished that he could hate him for it, although in the past Illya would have felt the same way—duty before personal feelings always. Napoleon was the exception to every rule.

‘Then that would be unfortunate indeed,’ Waverly said carefully, ‘and we would try our best to extricate him from the situation.’

*If he lives that long* loomed unspoken in the silence. Illya clenched his jaw and tried to steady his breathing.

‘But we should strive to be optimistic, Kuryakin. Another drink anyone? I’m feeling rather parched,’ Waverly commented lightly as he pressed a buzzer beneath the table, which summoned his secretary instantly.
Illya glowered at Waverly and Napoleon pushed his tumbler forward.

‘I think I might,’ he said sanguinely. ‘Talking about my own demise always puts me in the mood for a drink.’

Two hours later Napoleon and Illya caught a taxi to the speakeasy bar where the Cosa Nostra was believed to be hiding documents that tied them to the Vinceguerra’s informants.

It was nearly midnight and the taxi journey was painfully slow as the city streets filled with limos and drunken Friday night revellers. Steam rose from the pavement and neon signs flashed as the taxi crawled into the more disreputable part of Brooklyn.

The passing street lamps cast striated bursts of light across Napoleon’s face. He looked tense and a lock of dark hair had escaped the confines of the gel that he normally used. It curled across his forehead and Illya braced his hands in his lap and ignored the persistent itch to sweep the lock of hair away.

‘I do not like being in such a large city,’ Illya confided, suddenly desperate to distract Napoleon from his own apprehension. ‘It feels strange to not see stars at night.’

Napoleon’s expression was indecipherable as he turned to face Illya and quietly responded, ‘I have a house on the edge of Lake Brienz in Switzerland. I kept it under a fake name so the CIA couldn’t trace it. At night the sky is scattered with stars.’ His eyes lingered on Illya’s face. ‘Maybe one day we could all go there. I think you would like it.’

Illya nodded silently, both bewildered and grateful for the fragile peace offering. Despite his hurt, Illya found it difficult to hold onto his animosity while Napoleon might be in danger.

The speakeasy bar was connected to a thriving discotheque that had a bustling line of people spilling from the doorway and snaking along the cement sidewalk. Women in sequinned mini skirts and towering high heels laughed drunkenly while men in cheap suits and scuffed shoes ineptly flirted with them.

Napoleon pulled off his silk tie and, with a sigh of regret, stuffed it into a nearby trashcan. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of his white shirt and exposed the tanned, elegant line of his throat to the cool night air. As Illya forced himself to stop staring at the enticing hollow at the base of Napoleon’s throat, Napoleon scrutinised Illya with narrowed eyes.

‘That turtleneck is not ideal, Peril. But you’ll do.’

They entered the bar through the back entrance once Napoleon picked the locks.

The pulsing beat of the discotheque’s music from next door reverberated along the walls and quivered underneath their feet. Illya peered through the first doorway they found which led into the bar area. It was crammed with people who jostled for space so they could shout drinks orders at the frazzled bartender. Plumes of cigarette smoke spiralled over the heads of patrons who shoved to secure a better view of the baseball game playing on the television suspended over the bar. On an elevated stage in the corner a lone man played a morose saxophone solo, which was muffled by the hum of mindless chatter.

Illya and Napoleon turned their backs on the scene and threaded their way along the hallways and found themselves in a tiny office space lined with filing cabinets. There were eight filing cabinets with no clear labelling system.
‘This will take hours,’ Illya muttered, frustrated. He turned to lock the door behind them.

Napoleon’s lips quirked upwards. ‘Waverly’s right, Peril. You really do need to be a little bit more optimistic.’ He walked towards the desk in the corner and turned back to Illya who was glaring at him, ‘Now, if you were harbouring secret documents that tied you to a psychopath such as Victoria Vinceguerra would you hide them in plain sight?’

Napoleon delivered a sharp kick to the side of the desk and a door swung upon on creaky hinges, revealing a small safe ensconced within the hidden cavity. Napoleon crouched on the floor and immediately started fiddling with the lock.

‘Does this one have an alarm?’ Illya asked sardonically.

‘Has anyone ever told you Peril that it’s rude to continually point out someone’s past mistakes?’

‘You might have once or twice.’

The safe door popped open within minutes and Napoleon started to rustle through its contents. He handed random pieces of paper to Illya as he searched through files and sealed envelopes.

‘This one isn’t related. But it’s good blackmail material so add it to the pile.’

‘Cowboy,’ Illya warned.

Ten minutes passed while Napoleon examined the contents of the safe and Illya protectively loomed in the shadows by the door.

‘I’ve found it,’ Napoleon whispered eventually. He tucked the folded sheaf of papers into his suit pocket and Illya silently passed him files and photographs to return to the safe. Napoleon closed the safe and wedged the secret door within the desk shut with an incriminating creak.

Together they slipped from the office and stalked back down the corridors. Their path was empty and the hum of the bar was growing louder but Illya felt a mantle of apprehension settle on his shoulders.

He felt Napoleon grow tense beside him and without thinking Illya shoved Napoleon into the safety of an adjacent passageway as the first gunshot whizzed past his head. Their assailant fired again and Illya swore as he felt a bullet graze his sleeve, scraping the skin of his forearm. Whoever was pursuing them was a poor shot but was rapidly improving.

Illya rounded the corner and nearly collided into Napoleon who placed a restraining hand on his arm when Illya moved to pull out his handgun and shoot back.

‘Not yet,’ Napoleon murmured urgently. ‘We’re cornered. And this isn’t the place to make a scene.’

He was right. The corridor they were sheltering in was a dead end and the doorway to the bar was merely metres away. The saxophone solo had faltered and was silent, leaving an undercurrent of panicked voices questioning the source of the gunshots.

‘Follow me,’ Napoleon whispered as heavy footsteps approached their refuge.

Napoleon surged forward and Illya heard a sharp crack and an agonised groan of pain. He followed Napoleon’s path and nearly tripped over the scrappy young Italian man sprawled on the ground clutching his broken nose. A torrent of blood was pouring from his nose and was dripping from his chin onto his blue, striped button-down shirt.
‘Careful now, or that will stain,’ Napoleon advised as he bent down to retrieve the man’s gun. The man was more of a boy really, barely more than eighteen, wide eyed and terrified. He flinched at Napoleon’s proximity.

He was clearly an underling and a poorly trained one at that, but the pounding footsteps and furious hollers that echoed down the maze of corridors indicated that the boy was not without reinforcements.

‘I think this is our cue to leave, Peril,’ Napoleon said before bursting through the doorway and into the chaos of the bar.

Shrill screams charged the air, rising above the reedy baseball commentary emanating from the television set. Glasses smashed as Illya and Napoleon shoved through the disorientated crowd.

As Illya dove behind the bar to avoid gunshots he absently thought that Waverly was not going to be pleased with them. He never liked them to cause a scene. Perhaps this was why Gaby was being trained to be their handler and not the other way around.

After weaving through the frantic mass of patrons in the bar, Napoleon and Illya burst onto the street. Knowing that they would be followed, Illya and Napoleon sprinted down the pathway, weaving through the indifferent crowd still lining up for entrance into the discotheque.

The din of the bar was fading behind them but they continued to tear through the Brooklyn nightlife, passing listless drunks and hostile streetwalkers. Napoleon reached into his suit and shoved the sheaf of papers into his trouser pocket as they ran. He pulled his arms out of the suit jacket, exquisitely tailored and immediately recognisable, and dropped it into onto the pavement as they rounded the curb.

Illya arm stung from the bullet graze and his lungs were burning slightly from exhaustion and exhilaration. There were people everywhere. He could not tell whether the distant shouting marked the approach of their enemies or whether it was the ordinary sound of angry bar goers being pushed onto the street for drunk and disorderly conduct. Police sirens screamed in the distance.

They began to slow and Napoleon turned into an alleyway crammed between another bar and a closed deli. Cardboard boxes were piled against the brick wall and the dark ash-like scent that Illya had come to associate with city life drifted passed them. A streetlight sputtered weakly overhead.

‘Do you think we’re safe?’ Napoleon asked as he pulled Illya behind the cover of the boxes.

‘For now,’ Illya replied. He reached for his gun cautiously and recalled the cut on his forearm.

He raised his right arm and pulled back his sleeve to examine the wound. The bullet had barely grazed his skin. He was lucky.

‘You didn’t say you had been shot, Peril,’ Napoleon said, distress threaded through his voice. He gripped Illya’s arm tightly and examined the wound in the dim light.

‘I will live,’ Illya replied, his eyes fixed on Napoleon’s bent head. They were standing so close that Illya could feel the warm trace of Napoleon’s breath on his skin.

The violent crack of a gunshot rang through the night and their heads jerked in the direction of the sound in unison. The alleyway did not pass onto an open street, which left them effectively cornered. If they were still being pursued then there was no open space for them to run to.

Napoleon glanced at Illya sharply and regarded the minimal space between their bodies. His
expression was calculating and familiar. Illya had long since learned to be wary of that look on Napoleon.

‘God help me,’ Napoleon whispered hesitantly. ‘Please don’t kill me for this, Peril.’

‘What are you planning?’ Illya asked, instantly alert.

Napoleon gave Illya a rueful half-smile which caused Illya’s heart to thunder in his chest. ‘Just close your eyes and think of Mother Russia, Peril.’

Before Illya could articulate a response to this, Napoleon surged forward and pressed his lips to Illya’s.

He pushed Illya against the cold brick wall, the warmth of Napoleon’s body crowding against him, shielding him from the cold. Napoleon’s warm hands cradled Illya’s jaw, like he was something precious, and electricity flickered through Illya’s veins. In that moment Illya felt furious, as he knew in his bones that he had been ruined for life. Nothing else could compare to the feeling of Napoleon kissing him again and again, his lips moving urgently against Illya’s as if he were trying to douse the wildfire that had been burning in Illya since Rome. But Napoleon’s mouth had the opposite effect. Illya blazed.

Footsteps raced passed and faded into the distant muted hum of the surrounding nocturnal street life. Illya had forgotten why they were here. If someone had questioned him in that moment it was possible that he would not be able to recall his own name. The single truth of his world was Napoleon’s lips moving against his own and the warmth of his tongue sliding between Illya’s lips. His heart might never settle into the placid rhythms it once knew.

Illya’s hands clutched onto Napoleon’s shirt, running along the muscles of his back and the shifting terrain of his shoulder blades.

Napoleon lowered his mouth and scraped his teeth along the sensitive skin of Illya’s throat, his tongue seeking the violent thrum of Illya’s pulse.

A broken gasp escaped Illya and Napoleon drew back with wild, delighted eyes. Napoleon’s mouth was wonderfully pink and his chest was rising and falling rapidly. The blue of his eyes had retreated to accommodate the black expanse of his dilated pupils.

Illya had done that to him. His heart thrilled with the recognition.

Illya’s eyes returned to Napoleon’s lips again, full and kiss-ravaged, and he grabbed Napoleon’s collar and pulled him forward once more.

His hand reached up to trace the line of Napoleon’s jaw and curl in his hair as his lips found Napoleon’s. A fire kindled in Illya’s chest and spread throughout his limbs as Napoleon’s lips parted and his tongue traced Illya’s lower lip. Napoleon pressed closer and Illya could feel his hardness against his thigh and his breath hitched at the sensation. He knew that Napoleon could feel the evidence of Illya’s own unconquerable want. His free hand curled against Napoleon’s bicep, willing him to become impossibly closer.

Illya bit Napoleon’s lower lip and soothed the nip with his tongue. Napoleon moaned in response and pulled back. He looked so broken with desire that it was all Illya could do not to pull him back in again.

‘We’re talking about this later, Peril. Mark my words,’ he gasped raggedly as he pulled away from
Illya. Napoleon ran a hand through his hair distractedly as he took a step back and Illya found the
dishelved mess of Napoleon’s hair impossibly endearing. Desire and love tangled helplessly in his
chest, spreading roots through his heart, grounding him.

Illya held Napoleon’s gaze and his eyes conveyed a promise.

‘We will. There is more to say.’

*

Napoleon felt as if a firecracker had been lit within his chest.

He found it hard to stop his eyes straying back to Illya as they journeyed across Manhattan.

His gaze absorbed the slope of Illya’s shoulders and the pink mark that was beginning to blossom
against his throat. Napoleon wanted to press his fingers to his own lips and remember over and over
again what it was like to kiss Illya and to feel the hard planes of Illya’s body pressed against him.

He wanted to recall what it felt like to share Illya’s breath and to have Illya’s hands threaded through
his hair. And he wanted to do it all over again.

Napoleon was becoming disgustingly sentimental and he should have been appalled by his thoughts,
but he couldn’t summon the appropriate level of self-reprobation to care.

It was nearly impossible to focus on the remainder of their mission, which was concerning
considering how perilous the task ahead of them truly was. Napoleon would have preferred that he
be given a few days to study the Cosa Nostra’s activities and consult the few remaining informants
he had who always lurked on the fringes of the black market, but they didn’t have enough time.
Once the Cosa Nostra knew that it wasn’t just the CIA who were interested in their find then they
were sure to move the disc to a more secure location.

Their interest in capturing Napoleon and delivering retribution in the form of an excruciatingly
painful death would not be enough to induce them to risk the security of the disc.

He couldn’t say that he found the prospect of being used to bait the Cosa Nostra appealing but he
understood the necessity of Waverly’s actions. What mattered now was ensuring that he and Illya
secured the disc unscathed so they could return to Illya’s hotel where Napoleon could properly
question him, ravish him, or both.

When they were a block away from the Fifth Avenue mansion they paid the taxi driver and walked
the rest of the distance in silence.

Illya’s face was tense as they clambered over the iron fence of the neighbouring mansion. His fair
brows were furrowed and he wore the taciturn expression he always presented when calculating
strategy, his mind clearly parsing through potential modes of attack and counter-attack, escape routes
and back up plans.

Without speaking they scaled the ivy trellis and climbed over the closest balcony. They were good
partners. When everything aligned perfectly Napoleon felt as if he and Illya could communicate
wordlessly, instinctively sensing what the other needed and anticipating any potential danger with
ease.

When Napoleon had done this many years ago he had crawled through the heating vents and
emerged in the kitchens before disconnecting the heat-activated security system and emptying the vault hidden in the study. But it would foolish to replicate the same plan. The familiar coil of adrenaline spiralled through his veins, setting his heart alight. He was a thief at heart. It had been too long since he’d done this.

Illya unspooled the KGB issued rope attached to a steel climbing-hook and with practiced ease he swung it through the air. It arched gracefully in the dark before landing on the opposite roof and catching on the tiles with a soft clattering sound as the clay tiles crunched together. Napoleon wrapped the other end of the rope around the chimneystack next to him and secured it tightly with a knot he had learned in the army. Illya gave him a curt nod and carefully crawled along the taut stretch of rope that was suspended over the three-storey drop between the two mansions. When he reached the other side Napoleon followed.

They planned for Illya to wait on the roof while Napoleon searched the house and attained the disc. Illya would protect their exit strategy and provide back up if necessary. Napoleon attached another rope to the chimney and had turned to lower himself over the roof when Illya caught his wrist in his hand.

‘Be careful, Cowboy,’ Illya whispered. He swiped a gentle line across Napoleon’s wrist with his thumb. Napoleon’s breath caught in his throat traitorously.

‘I always am, Peril,’ Napoleon replied quietly. Which wasn’t strictly accurate but Napoleon felt to answer otherwise would rupture the romance of the moment. Illya rolled his eyes, which indicated he knew what Napoleon was thinking anyway, and released Napoleon’s wrist.

Napoleon dropped over the roof and braced his legs against the wall with a soft grunt.

It was rather difficult to open a locked window one-handed but he managed it regardless and slipped through. He landed softly on the opulent runner that spanned the length of the hallway. His feet were inches away from activating the lasers that barricaded the thresholds and criss-crossed like a red spider’s web along the corridor. He pulled a women’s compact from his pocket and unclipped it, slowly sliding it against the wall until it reached the floor and intersected with a glowing laser beam. It was a child’s trick, a relic from old spy movies, but it was surprisingly effective.

The beams shattered and fractured in various directions. Most pointed toward the opposite end of the hallway. It was relatively easy for Napoleon to slide his way between the red shafts, contorting his shoulders to avoid brushing them accidentally.

He could hear the footsteps of guards shuffling on the floor below him and he headed in that direction.

Napoleon descended a level down the twisting mahogany staircase, trailing his hands along the balustrade and admiring the carving as he went. When he reached the landing, he flattened himself against the wall and pulled a round cats eye marble from his pocket (which really was very well stocked). He flicked it with his thumb, a gesture that lingered from his own childhood, and it scattered along the oak floor. The cracking sound of the marble hitting the plasterwork ricocheted throughout the empty space and as the two guards turned, suddenly alert, Napoleon struck their necks with the flattened blade of his palm just as Illya had demonstrated during their first mission together. Although he had mocked Illya for it at the time, Napoleon had employed the move more than once on subsequent missions.

As he left the two guards standing unconscious in the corridor, Napoleon slipped between the shadows and emerged in the study.
It was almost exactly how he remembered it. A large, mahogany Chippendale desk stood in front of
the sash windows that faced out onto the street and an antique silver ink well rested on its surface,
complete with an ostentatious feathered quill. Several antiques of varying aesthetic appeal dotted the
room, including a truly hideous Saint-Louis Cristallerie vase. A circular ceiling painting hovered
above his head. A trio of cherubs wreathed in roses and garlands smiled down at him with vaguely
constipated expressions adorning their chubby faces.

Napoleon sighed in despair. The room was truly proof that money did not guarantee good taste.

He slowly lifted the Rembrandt portrait that concealed the safe from the wall, taking care to gently
lean it against the desk. He unwound his stethoscope and examined the safe contemplatively. The
locking mechanism had changed since last time and it was possible that a deterrent device had been
rigged into the alarm system. Knowing the extreme methods the Cosa Nostra would go to in order to
protect what was theirs, it was possible that a myriad of future delights awaited him, such as
poisonous gas waiting to scorch his lungs and slowly suffocate him, or maybe a hidden knife rigged
to a sling-shot-like device, poised to slice into his face. The possibilities were infinite and equally
unappealing. He tilted the dial slightly and listened to the compression mechanisms begin to click
into place, thousands of metal particles shifting and sliding with the intricacy of clockwork.

Footsteps pounded against the floorboards and Napoleon jerked back from the safe, instantly tense.

Before he could shield himself behind the desk and reach for his gun, Illya burst into the room and
slammed the door shut behind him. He flicked the lock and turned to face Napoleon with wild eyes.

‘Illya?’

‘We need to leave. Now. Have you got disc?’

Napoleon gestured to the closed safe. The stethoscope dangled from his hand. ‘These things take
time you know.’

Napoleon watched as Illya glanced between Napoleon and the closed safe, the ingrained drive to
complete their mission clearly waging with his instinctive survival skills.

His gaze settled on Napoleon and resolve hardened his features. ‘Does not matter. Time to go now.
Gaby sent message to say there are thirty men waiting to kill you. We must leave.’

‘How can we do that? We’re two stories up. There’s no ledge or balcony or trellis. The vent doesn’t
reach this room. We will have to fight.’

Voices echoed in the hall speaking rapid and angry Italian. The door handle twisted ineffectually but
the thudding strike of shoulders attempting to break down the heavy oak door echoed through the
room. Illya scanned their surroundings as he roamed the study like a caged animal, his hand
beginning to twitch by his side.

Napoleon caught his arm and forced him to still. ‘Hey Illya, stop. I’m the bait. Not you. Just let them
take me and try to save yourself. Don’t look at me like that. Let me be selfless for once in my life.’

Illya’s jaw was clenched and his eyes were flint-like and unyielding. Fury hardened his features.
Napoleon reached up and traced his fingers along Illya’s jaw and trailed his hand to rest over Illya’s
heart, a distant echo of that sunlit morning in Norway. Illya’s expression softened and he pressed a
hand over Napoleon’s, their pulses tangled together.

‘You are not bait,’ Illya frantically argued.
The door was beginning to splinter and Napoleon pulled away so he could ready his gun. When he turned back to Illya, Illya grabbed Napoleon’s hand and pressed something into his palm.

‘Hold onto this. It is yours now, Cowboy.’

Napoleon opened his hand and stared down at Illya’s father’s watch. Recognition and horror slithered down his spine. He glanced up at Illya in muted shock and Illya, his expression blazing and unwavering, shoved Napoleon through the sash windows, sending both Napoleon and a glittering rainfall of shattered glass and broken wood falling towards the ground.

*

Illya would happily watch empires fall and cities burn if that was the cost of preserving Napoleon Solo’s life. With this in mind, Illya’s own life was a trifling cost to pay in exchange for protecting Napoleon.

Illya was abruptly aware of his own mortality—the pulse of blood underneath his skin and the rattle of breath in his lungs.

He was accustomed to pain but this was something else. He regained consciousness for minutes at a time only to be met with the slash of knives against his skin or the ragged tightening of a rope around his neck. His knew from experience that his shoulder was dislocated and his right leg was broken. His ribs were bruised and he had lost a concerning amount of blood.

He was going to die in this cellar and he would relive every punch, every cut, and each sickening snap of bone if it meant that Napoleon did not have to endure a single moment of it.

When Illya closed his eyes he saw feathery bursts of light and blue eyes staring back at him. He felt a tender touch at his jaw and the warmth of lips against his neck. Then he would open his eyes and the pain would begin anew.

Amongst the pain there were questions. *Who do you work for? How do you know Napoleon Solo? Where can we find him?*

Illya had always been taciturn, inclined toward silent observation rather than speaking so this mode of questioning suited him well even if it did guarantee forthcoming agony.

He had been in the cellar for nearly a week. After the initial fight when Illya had killed two members of the Cosa Nostra before being immediately overpowered, he had been blindfolded, stuffed into the trunk of a car and taken to an underground cellar. His mouth was dry from a lack of water and his throat was hoarse from trying not to scream.

Illya was a realist. It seemed unlikely that he would survive long enough to be rescued.

*Who do you work for? How do you know Napoleon Solo? Where can we find him?*

Illya’s consciousness was beginning to fray at the edges and he welcomed the warm, murky darkness. He willed it to envelop him and shroud him in numbness. He was not afraid of death but he could do without the pain. His fingertips felt cold.

‘Illya? Illya!’ The voice was fearful, desperate and familiar.

There was a chorus of screaming and tormented shrieks, distant and unrelenting like the backing
track in one of the technicolour movies that Napoleon sometimes forced Illya and Gaby to watch. Gunshots boomed in the confines in the cellar and Illya’s eyes slitted open, squinting against the hazy light. He was too weak to lift his head. He hoped this was not death. He did not know what he had been expecting but it was not more guns, more screaming, more pain.

Warm hands gripped Illya’s face and he shuddered at the sensation and tried to pull away.

‘Illya! Don’t you die on me you stubborn bastard.’

*Napoleon.* He sounded agonised, terrified. He sounded as if he were close to tears. It made Illya’s heart twist painfully in his chest. It caused his stomach to coil tightly in despair. Illya dimly found himself questioning the series of events and choices that led to Napoleon sounding so sorrowful.

Illya closed his eyes again and felt the tide of darkness tugging at him, pulling him under. A voice tried to call him back and the sound of it wrenched at his heart. Illya focused on the blue eyes blinking at him from the blackness and he let himself unravel.

*When Illya woke up almost every part of his body ached. It hurt to breathe. He opened his eyes and flinched against the harsh fluorescent lighting suspended over his body. An inhuman groan left his throat and he heard a twin set of gasps from either side of him. He tried to lift his head but found the wave of pain nauseating. He closed his eyes again and sank beneath the frigid blackness.

When Illya opened his eyes again he was aware of something lodged in his throat. He fought the urge to choke. He reached for the mask on his face and ripped off the tangle of plastic tubes connected to various monitors in the process.

‘Whoa. Easy there, Peril. Don’t strangle yourself.’ Napoleon’s voice was a tired rasp melded with a bone-deep relief.

Illya looked up, his eyes seeking Napoleon instinctively like a magnet or a religious devotee seeking their guiding light.

Napoleon looked as if he had trampled through hell twice over only to emerge on earth in the middle of a world war. Napoleon’s blue eyes were ringed with red and he had dark stubble growing on his cheeks and trailing down his neck. His shirt was rumpled and his sleeves were pushed to his forearms. He was missing a button. His hair was a complete mess. He had a cut on his lip and his forehead and his left arm was in a sling. Dark rings of purple lingered under his eyes.

Illya had never seen Napoleon look so little like Napoleon.

‘Are you okay, Cowboy?’

Illya’s voice was barely audible. It was an exhausted scrape at the back of his throat. He turned his head to look for water and found Napoleon pressing a plastic cup into his hands.

‘You’re asking me if I’m alright, Illya?’ Napoleon demanded, incredulous.

His voice was tinged with something darker, something like fury and sorrow pleated together. ‘I’ve never been better. I’ve had the time of my life waiting for four days for you to wake up. Even better, the time spent trying to find where the Cosa Nostra had taken you was practically a vacation, knowing they wanted me but they were hurting you, not knowing if you were in pain, if you were
dead—’

Napoleon stopped suddenly and closed his eyes, his breathing ragged and shallow. He raised his right hand to rub against his face tiredly. He looked broken. Napoleon lowered his hand and looked at Illya. Napoleon’s eyes were desperate. When he spoke his voice was low and uncharacteristically serious.

‘Never do that to me again, Illya.’

‘I cannot promise that,’ Illya frowned as he took another sip of water. ‘Ask me to promise something else and I will.’

Napoleon’s laughter was surprised and cracked at the edges. It was his true laughter.

‘You stubborn bastard,’ he sighed wearily.

Illya caught his hand and gently rubbed his thumb along the cuts on Napoleon’s knuckles. ‘I am sorry for pushing you from window.’

‘But not for sacrificing yourself like some goddamn knight?’

Illya’s lips twitched and flattened. ‘No. Not for that. You are not bait.’

‘You’re lucky I landed in a hedge.’

‘I knew hedge was there before I pushed you.’

Napoleon quirked his eyebrow. Illya’s words were not strictly true and they both knew it.

‘I took chance,’ Illya allowed.

Napoleon smiled but his scrutiny quickly turned sober. He clutched Illya’s hand.

‘I’m serious, Peril. Please don’t put me through that again. I can’t lose you.’

‘You would move on,’ Illya argued. ‘And you would be safe.’

Napoleon looked insulted. ‘I would not move on! There’s no one like you, Peril. Where else would I find someone so impervious to my charms?’

Illya’s eyes strayed to Napoleon’s lips and back to his eyes. ‘Not completely impervious.’

Confusion flickered on Napoleon’s face. He appeared to be waging a battle with his own thoughts when he warily asked, ‘But what about Gaby?’

Surprise filtered through Illya’s expression and he frowned as he slowly responded, ‘What about Gaby?’

Napoleon looked desperately uncomfortable. His gaze skittered across the room, flitting across the hospital machines and the cast on Illya’s leg before landing back on Illya’s face. ‘You’re involved,’ he said slowly, as if Illya were being deliberately obtuse, ‘romantically involved, that is.’

A flash of comprehension flared in the back of Illya’s mind, trying to dart to the forefront of his consciousness, but his brain was working slowly, dulled as it was by pain and medication. ‘No one told me I was involved with Gaby.’
Napoleon sighed, becoming irritated. ‘You know what I’m talking about Illya. Remember Norway?’ How could Illya forget? ‘You pulled away because you’re so infuriatingly loyal and could not bear to betray her.’

Illya shook his head slowly. ‘I pulled away because phone rang,’ he corrected. ‘Then when I tried to think of way to…kiss you,’ he faltered and Napoleon froze, eyes wide, ‘you told me you were looking forward to hotel and bar and whomever you could find to share your bed.’ Illya pulled his hand from Napoleon’s grasp and clenched it in the hospital sheets. ‘You were looking for something casual.’ Illya lifted his chin as he stared at Napoleon intently, his expression solemn. ‘I am not casual.’

Napoleon blinked at Illya a few times, his expression dubious. ‘So…you’re not seeing Gaby?’

Illya’s head was beginning to throb and he was quickly losing patience with the circular conversation.

‘Why would I want to kiss you if I was involved with Gaby?’ he asked testily. ‘It is you who does not want me. At least not in way that I want you.’

Napoleon glanced up sharply. Illya had difficulty decoding the emotions on Napoleon’s face but he recognised the fleeting burst of shock giving way to reckless delight. Napoleon reclaimed Illya’s hand and threaded their fingers together tightly.

‘Peril,’ Napoleon murmured, his eyes warm, ‘I hate to argue with you when you’ve received several blows to the head, but you are an utter fool if you could ever think that I am anything other than hopelessly in love with you.’

A fledgling burst of untamed joy unfurled its wings in Illya’s chest, beating in time with his heart. He looked between their joined hands and the charmingly boyish grin spreading across Napoleon’s face. Every turn of phrase he could spin dwindled in his throat when he looked at Napoleon. So he tugged on their joined hands and pulled Napoleon in for a kiss that tilted the world on its axis.

It was just as good as last time, Illya thought eagerly as Napoleon ran his fingers through Illya’s hair and gasped against his mouth. He wanted to pull Napoleon impossibly close but Napoleon was being disarmingly gentle with Illya, touching him like he was made of glass or spun from gold. Illya’s heart rate monitor was beginning to beep alarmingly when someone cleared their throat.

Napoleon shifted back, eyes bright and grin intact, and Illya spied Gaby leaning against the doorway. She raised an elegant eyebrow at their compromising position on the narrow hospital bed. Napoleon nestled comfortably against Illya’s side and gripped his hand tightly. For the first time, Illya noticed that Napoleon had Illya’s father’s watch strapped to his wrist. The sight of it caused warmth to flood through his chest until he remembered something.

‘The disc?’ Illya asked as he tried to sit up. Napoleon pushed him back against the pillows gently.

‘Try not to strain yourself, Peril. We secured it after tracking you down. Gaby’s already passed it onto Waverly.’

Gaby’s smile was radiant. ‘I’m pleased to see that you are both feeling better, boys. But don’t tell Waverly you have found a way to resolve your sexual tension just yet. He’s just about to give me a raise for putting up with you.’

*
Napoleon was dizzingly happy.

Part of him doubted that he was deserving of the bright spark of joy that ignited in his body whenever Illya gave him a slightly bashful smile (and God did he love it when Illya’s cheeks flushed that delectable shade of pink) or whenever Illya waited until Gaby left a room so he could pull Napoleon close for a kiss. But Napoleon quickly discarded the idea, knowing that he was probably underserving of most of the good luck in his life but that had never stopped him from making the most of it.

Napoleon had always been highly sceptical of monogamy, considering it to be a gilded prison constructed by the unattractive and the insecure. He had never been enticed to try it with any of his other partners in the past. But then again none of those partners had ever been Illya Kuryakin.

What a fool love had made of Napoleon. The thought of sharing Illya with anyone else caused a sharp prickle of agitation to stab along his spine. Even the thought of being touched by anyone other than Illya made Napoleon’s stomach tighten unpleasantly. It was entirely possible that Napoleon had been ruined for life.

Not that Napoleon had been given the chance to do much touching despite his obvious enthusiasm. Illya had spent the past three weeks continuing to recover in hospital. But Napoleon had been strangely content to just spend each day at his side, watching Illya attempt to navigate his new crutches with a distinct lack of patience and try to bully his physiotherapists into giving him the all clear to be discharged from the hospital. Napoleon was able to eventually remove his own sling for the fracture in his wrist. They spent a lot of time holding hands and just talking. They retraced old memories, considering them from the other side and then remoulded them into something new.

Every few nights Napoleon would have nightmares. Awful dreams concocted from blood, a dirty cellar, and the terrifying sweat-slicked burst of horror when he would imagine that he had reached Illya too late.

He thought that Illya suspected that Napoleon was having such dreams. A tense, regretful look would pass over Illya’s face as his gaze lingered on the dark circles under Napoleon’s eyes and the tension in his shoulders. But those things would pass in time. Knowing that it was just a dream and that Illya waited for him, albeit in a hospital bed but still very much alive, made going to sleep bearable.

Eventually Illya managed to use his clutches with ease, although Napoleon sometimes caught him eyeing them speculatively as if he were considering their merit as a weapon, and he was eventually discharged.

Napoleon had quickly packed Illya’s few clothes and toiletries into a bag while Gaby tried to argue with Illya and convince him to sit in a wheelchair for ten minutes in order to be discharged. She won the argument but only barely. She gave them both a kiss on the cheek at the doors to the hospital before climbing into a taxi with the final warning that she didn’t want to hear from them for at least a week. Illya’s cheeks became slightly flushed and he avoided eye contact with Napoleon at Gaby’s comment and it was all Napoleon could do not to pull him into his arms and kiss him in broad daylight.

Illya adamantly refused Napoleon’s help as he slowly shuffled into the elevator in Napoleon’s apartment building, although he did permit Napoleon to hold the door to his apartment open for him and hover by his side, ready to reach out and steady Illya in case he slipped.

Illya inspired an entirely unprecedented form of anxious devotion in Napoleon that he supposed by
this stage he shouldn’t have been surprised by.

Napoleon left Illya sprawled on his sofa in the living room as he went to fetch him a glass of water for his painkillers. When he returned Illya wasn’t looking out the window at the spectacular view of Central Park but was instead examining the room with familiar careful scrutiny. He passed Illya the glass and their fingers brushed for longer than was technically necessary.

He sat next to Illya on the sofa and watched as Illya’s eyes moved from the Monet carefully positioned above the mantelpiece to the Botticelli tucked into the corner above the side table. Illya’s eyes flicked from the surrealist Dali in the hallway to the photos of Napoleon’s parents and sisters framed in silver in the cabinet next to a large glass tumbler filled with scotch.

Illya’s expression was unreadable until he turned back to Napoleon and his mouth curled into a slow smile that made Napoleon’s heart stutter.

‘So what do you think, Peril? Too bourgeoisie for your taste?’

‘Flashy but with unexpected depth,’ Illya said with one of his rare golden smiles which Napoleon had come to realise were reserved only for him. The selfish part of Napoleon that was ever reluctant to share his treasures hummed with satisfaction.

‘You wound me, Peril,’ Napoleon replied lightly. ‘But I suppose that’s the best I could hope for. I am not so naïve as to think that I can convert you to my scheming capitalist ways in an afternoon. Be fair and at least give me a week.’

Illya’s cheeks were pink and a flush was beginning to creep down his neck. God help him, Napoleon was not going to survive Illya.

‘I will give you more than a week. If you want it.’

Napoleon felt untethered as if Illya had unfastened the strings that kept him tied to the earth. A sudden flare of heat unfurled in Napoleon’s body and his gaze dropped to Illya’s lips. He rested his hand on Illya’s thigh and Illya covered Napoleon’s hand with his own.

‘I love you too, Cowboy,’ Illya announced suddenly as if he had been waiting for the opportunity to say it.

Napoleon inhaled a shaky breath. He felt a little as if he was unravelling. He curved his free hand against Illya’s face and kissed him slowly. When he pulled back, Illya’s eyes were still closed. He looked awestruck. Napoleon knew the feeling.

‘Do you want to—?’ Napoleon started to ask.

‘Yes,’ Illya replied immediately.

It took considerably more time than their eagerness allowed but they eventually moved down the hallway to Napoleon’s bedroom. Under normal circumstances (but nothing about this was ordinary, everything about it was entirely singular and miraculous) Napoleon would push Illya against the door and pull him into a scalding kiss. But he was overwhelmingly conscious of Illya’s broken leg and the bruised state of his body. Every instinct in Napoleon’s body screamed to be exceedingly gentle with Illya.

The wild sex would have to wait but Napoleon could live with that. He was more than happy to be given the chance to worship Illya.
Napoleon tried to settle Illya onto the pillows and make sure he was comfortable but Illya kept trying to distract Napoleon, grazing his teeth against Napoleon’s throat and stealing the breath from Napoleon’s lungs.

‘Hold on, Peril,’ Napoleon gasped. ‘Be careful with your leg.’

Napoleon’s usual finesse was failing him. He had been dropped into the middle of the ocean and he was having trouble staying afloat when Illya looked at him with eyes that blazed with want.

Illya quickly took advantage of Napoleon’s state of distraction and started to unbutton Napoleon’s shirt, running his large hands along the muscles of Napoleon’s chest and skimming along his ribs. Napoleon closed his eyes against the sensation and idly wondered when he had become the voice of reason in their relationship.

‘I’m tired of waiting, Cowboy,’ Illya murmured against Napoleon’s ear.

The sound of Illya’s voice unspooled something in Napoleon, perhaps his sanity, and he pulled Illya into a frantic kiss. He slipped his hand underneath Illya’s turtleneck (which Napoleon silently swore he was going to burn one day) and trailed his fingers along the ripples and hard curves of Illya’s muscles.

Illya’s breathing was frayed and when Napoleon pulled back he saw that Illya’s pupils were blown wide. The sight made desire pool hot in his stomach.

Napoleon was hovering slightly above Illya. He carefully leaned against his hands to avoid resting too much weight against Illya. Illya momentarily pushed him to the side so he could slide Napoleon’s shirt from his shoulders. They were silent for a minute, save for their shaky breaths, as they helped each other remove each article of clothing with watchful reverence until they were both naked.

‘God, Illya,’ Napoleon breathed as he trailed a hand over Illya’s frantic heart beat, down his chest, and lingering over his thigh. ‘Just look at you. I have no words.’

Illya smiled and he was radiant. ‘I never thought such a thing would happen,’ he replied wryly, but his eyes kept flitting across Napoleon’s chest and back to his lips. ‘Cowboy speechless? What a strange world we live in.’

Were it not for the fact that he was almost painfully aroused and Illya knew it, Napoleon would have rolled his eyes. ‘If you are this articulate Peril, then clearly I’m not doing my job properly.’

Illya emitted a sharp gasp as Napoleon fixed his lips to Illya’s jaw and reached down to grip Illya’s cock.

Napoleon unsuccessfully tried to hide a smile at Illya’s reaction and moved his lips down Illya’s chest, his tongue lightly grazing over Illya’s nipple. He removed his hand to lightly trace a scar on Illya’s abdomen that he intended to ask about later and Illya plaintively moaned at the loss of contact.

Illya’s head was thrown back against the pillow, his mouth slightly open as he gasped for breath, and Napoleon had never seen anything so beautiful. His apartment contained an array of artworks spanning almost every major artistic movement in human history but Napoleon could not imagine ever wanting to look at anything other than Illya again.

He lowered his head and took Illya into his mouth and Illya moaned openly. As he picked up speed and settled into an instinctive rhythm and listened to the melody of Illya’s shaky breathing and the groans wrenched from his throat, Napoleon was struck by the thought that he would happily do this with Illya for the rest of their lives, however long or short-lived they may be. Illya reached down and
tangled his hands in Napoleon’s sweat curled hair, stroking his face reverently, and Napoleon moaned around Illya’s cock. A startled gasp caught in Illya’s throat and his back arched gloriously as he surrendered to the pleasure that enveloped them both. Napoleon stroked Illya’s thighs and pulled back gently.

Napoleon lay next to Illya and placed a hand over Illya’s heart, a phenomenal and now strangely familiar gesture.

Illya’s chest was heaving and when he turned his head to look at Napoleon his expression was mesmerised. He wrapped a hand around the back of Napoleon’s neck and kissed him, moaning when he tasted himself against Napoleon’s tongue.

Napoleon let himself get lost in the pleasure of kissing Illya, running his hands down his arms and along the muscled arc of his back. He found himself mindlessly pressing himself against Illya’s thigh and Illya reached down to stroke Napoleon’s cock.

Illya picked up speed as he placed biting kisses against Napoleon’s throat and Napoleon felt himself unravelling embarrassingly quickly. Napoleon tried to kiss Illya’s smug grin from his face afterwards but he only had the effect of making the grin linger. Napoleon supposed he didn’t really mind.

After cleaning up he returned to the bed and curled against Illya’s side. He grazed his fingertips gently over the bruises staining the pale skin of Illya’s chest. He silently pressed a kiss to a knife scar that shone white on Illya’s shoulder.

Napoleon would happily spend days, weeks, months, and years learning the topography of Illya’s body. He intended to take the time to learn the origin of each scar and trace the valleys of Illya’s body with his hands and tongue. Napoleon briefly considered reciting some John Donne to illustrate his mood (O my America! My new found-land) but he doubted Illya would appreciate the irony. Illya pressed a kiss to Napoleon’s temple and wrapped his arms around him.

Napoleon closed his eyes and he slept properly for the first time in three weeks.

When he opened his eyes again pale light was beginning to filter through the curtains. Illya was watching him, his expression intent as if he intended to catalogue everything about Napoleon in that moment. Napoleon was sure his eyes were still bleary and his hair was an utter mess but Illya looked captivated. Napoleon pressed a kiss to Illya’s jaw and smiled.

‘Good morning,’ Napoleon said softly. His lips curved against Illya’s skin. ‘I’m sorry; I wasn’t planning to sleep for quite that long. You must be starving by now.’

Illya’s answering grin was uncharacteristically mischievous. The sight of it did unexpected things to Napoleon’s heart.

‘I am. But not for food,’ Illya replied as he threaded a hand through Napoleon’s hair.

Napoleon sighed wearily. ‘I should have expected that I would inspire an insatiable lust in you, Peril.’ Illya scoffed but he was smiling and his eyes were soft. ‘I suppose I will just have to live with it. We all have our crosses to bear.’

Illya laughed and something warm and golden stirred inside Napoleon’s chest and clicked into place at the sound. Illya pushed Napoleon back against the pillows and they kissed as the rising sun cast rays of warmth and light over the city.
End Notes

Just in case anyone other than me is interested, the Klimt paintings that Napoleon “rescued” actually did exist. They were destroyed in 1945 when Nazis set fire to Schloss Immendorf, the Austrian castle in which they were being held. Admittedly it seems unlikely that they found their way into the hands of the Cosa Nostra, but hey, it’s nice to dream.

Also, the title for this fic stems from the Vance Joy song by the same name. I listened to the song while in the process of writing this and the name stuck. Plus, I’m relatively sure the words "from afar" appear at least once or twice to justify its use.

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