Variations on a Russian Theme
by elmey

Summary

It's winter in Moscow, the evening is free...

The lovely illustration was created by open_channel_d

Notes

A Russian translation of this work, by open_channel_d, is available here:

Variации на русскую тему

See the end of the work for more notes

Trees line the pathways, their bare branches frosted with snow; beyond them rows of pines, cones of white guarding the park. Napoleon is gliding, there's a warm presence next to him, he knows without looking that it's Illya. They're gliding, almost soundlessly, only a quick whisper when their skates cut the ice. It's cold, but Napoleon doesn't feel it; it starts to snow, Illya is laughing as he speeds up; Napoleon tries to keep him in sight, but Illya is moving farther and farther ahead. The snow is coming down harder now until finally, he can't see Illya at all.
1.
There's a snow globe on Napoleon's desk, a cheap plastic thing, St. Basil's in Red Square. Every airport has souvenir stands, even Sheremetyevo. Illya had picked it up and shaken it, he was always fascinated by such gimcrack toys; perhaps because he'd never had them as a child. Napoleon had taken the globe from his hands and bought it, grinning while Illya rolled his eyes. Truth be told he'd bought the thing just to see that reaction. Even now though, Illya would still pick the globe up from his desk sometimes and shake it, eyes glued to the falling snow. In his own world, silent, thoughts hidden away.

_Napoleon waits for those moments, savours them, letting the tendrils of desire take hold._

2.
"One night in Moscow before we go back, the whole evening free," Napoleon teased as they were having an after dinner drink at the bar in the National. "Let's have some fun. Give me some hints how to romance a lovely Russian."

Illya looked around at the crowd of foreign businessmen in town for an industrial show, the hard-eyed women they were buying drinks for, and scowled into his vodka. "That is _not_ a good idea here, Napoleon."

"Tell me anyway, you never know when it might come in handy."

Illya shrugged. "It's much the same as anywhere else. Poetry, flowers... lies."

"You know what they say _droog moy_, inside every cynic is a failed romantic."

"I'm a realist," Illya said with a half smile, but he looked away, denying the challenge in Napoleon's eyes.

_Napoleon picks up the snowglobe himself and holds it in front of him; watches the flakes settle silently on the ground. Lies is what we're both good at, pretending it doesn't matter._

3.
"You can't be serious," Napoleon said.

Illya had dragged him out of the hotel. The imposing entrance gate at Gorky Park was lit like a beacon in the night, and beyond it was an unexpected sight. The park's wide carefully laid walkways were flooded and iced, snow pushed to the side. They glistened under the lights, angling through the trees, filled with a crowd of people out for an evening skate as though it were a springtime stroll. A people for whom winter was in the blood, Napoleon thought as he watched, and they had found a way to make the most of it.

They'd stopped at one of the wooden kiosks. "I haven't skated since I was a boy."

"We'll have a beer to spur our courage."
I don't think so," Napoleon rubbed his hands together wishing he had heavier gloves. "Let's have something hot."

Illya grinned and reached for the two glasses that appeared at the kiosk's window. "It's Russian beer, Napoleon. It will warm you up. "

Whether it was the beer or Illya's sudden high spirits, a few minutes later they were both on skates, Napoleon holding on to Illya's arm until he found his own footing in a turn around the plaza. They headed down one of the wide paths into the park, speeding up as the crowd thinned and the music and the chatter from the entrance area faded. A few more steps and suddenly they were racing, leaning into the corners, skates biting the ice, caught up in the chase.

Napoleon slowed down first to catch his breath. They were in the middle of the park now; trees lined the pathways, branches frosted with snow. A few couples holding hands were skating quietly ahead of them, a group of young men sped by, racing as they themselves had been racing a few seconds ago.

Illya turned back to look at him, then spun, skating backwards until Napoleon caught up. Graceful easy movements, he was smiling, relaxed and open in a way Napoleon had rarely seen. This is in his blood too. It had been snowing lightly, but now the flakes began to come faster, swirling and glittering in the lamplight. Illya kept gliding backwards and started to quote:

Чёрный вечер.
Белый снег.
Ветер, ветер!
На ногах не стоит человек.
Ветер, ветер –
На всём божьем свете!

Завивается ветер
Белый снежок.
Под снежком – ледок.
Сколько, тяжко,
Всякий ходок
Скользит – ах, бедняжка! (transl.)

It might have been a rut or an errant twig or just a cosmic joke, but Illya stumbled, and then he fell. And Napoleon, who'd been watching him, caught up in the sound of his voice, couldn't stop in time and tumbled too.

They rolled together and laughed as they tried to extricate themselves from the tangle of arms and legs and skates, laughed until their eyes met.


The next moment a pair of young men had stopped to help them up, then waved off their thanks as they skated back into the snow.

4.
Napoleon set the snowglobe back on his desk. "Do you know what tomorrow is?" he asked Illya.
"I believe it's Friday." Illya didn't bother to look up from the papers he was working on.

"It's St Valentine's Day you heathen."

"Ah yes. The martyr for chocolates and frilly doilies."

Getting no response, Illya looked up over his glasses to find Napoleon's eyes on him. He read the challenge in their depths.

"You should bring me flowers when you come for dinner," Napoleon said.

5.
Illya's shirt is off his shoulder and Napoleon is kissing him there, hot mouth on hot skin. He breathes in winter and flame, all of it Illya; he raises his head and brushes his hand gently over the red flower blossoming under the skin. Illya sighs and turns in his arms and his eyes when he looks at Napoleon are dark; dark and filled with heat, filled with promises.

_**Napoleon is gliding, there's a warm presence next to him, he knows without looking that it's Illya. They're gliding, almost soundlessly, only a quick whisper when their skates cut the ice. It's cold, but Napoleon doesn't feel it; it starts to snow, Illya is laughing as he speeds up.**_

Napoleon wakes up, he's had this dream before. He touches the warm body next to him. He goes to sleep again. This time he knows that he's caught up.

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**End Notes**

This story was written as a Valentine's present for open_channel_d. A big thank you to injj for her help in finding sources on Moscow in the winter.

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