In a last minute effort to stop an evil plan by THRUSH, and with Solo on task for the CIA, Illya and Gaby are sent on a mission to intercept a priceless package, but it isn’t what any of them expected.

With their exit plans torpedoed, a mafia family and THRUSH agents hot on their heels, the duo is forced to deal with the troublesome package as well as the rising swell of desire and passion between them which threatens to either destroy them... or make them whole.
Dear oceans_and_lovers. I'm afraid I have written you a novel! I didn't mean to, but the Muse had a heyday when I saw your prompts. From almost the moment I read them, this story started forming. I can only hope you don't mind a long read, a slow burn and me smooshing all your requests together into one, giant work. I actually really enjoyed writing it and hope you like it. I am sorry it's not out all at once but, I just didn't have time for proper edits. It IS finished however so never fear! You WILL be getting the whole thing as quickly as possible.

I would like to thank my beta readers! diadema! Festiveviolet31 and Turningleaf, who all helped me with this in one way or another. Especially diadema, who held my hand and kept me going when I thought I was going to fall apart completely! Thank you so much!

And to everyone else who might be reading this. I hope it's worth the ride.

Title is from Sing Me Sweet by Matt Nathanson (a very gallya song)

Other songs to consider for this: Water by Bishop Briggs, The Heart is a Muscle by Gang of Youths, All We Have is Now by The Modern Electric and You Send Me by Sam Cooke (for period appropriate feels. lol)
Of all the parts of her job as a spy, Gaby Teller enjoyed paperwork the least. Give her guns, mud, and half-formed backup plans. Give her bickering partners and a villain’s hand on her derrière. Hell, give her uncomfortable shoes! But God, please, save her from paperwork.

There had been paperwork to be done in her foster father’s garage, of course, but it had nothing on espionage. The detail, the nuance, the sheer redundancy of it was almost too much to endure. She pushed back her current pile of forms and reports and pressed cool fingertips to the center of her forehead. She was ready for a fourth cup of coffee.

She had just gotten to her feet when Bonnie, her team’s shared secretary, came in with a large mug and a stack of mail. She smiled broadly and offered the mug to Gaby first. She was pretty, in a very simple way, with auburn hair and a line of freckles over her nose. She was also extremely pregnant.

“Thought you might be needing this about now,” she said, and when Gaby accepted the offered drink, the hand that had been holding it dropped to smooth absently over her rounded belly.

“I was, thank you,” Gaby said, turning back to her desk. “Though I don’t mind getting it myself.”

“It was no big deal,” the other woman said. “I was coming in here anyway.” She waved the mail as evidence and then set it on Gaby’s desk. Gaby watched her look around the room. It was a simple enough office with three desks all facing toward the center. Filing cabinets stood somber against one wall, a silly painting of dogs playing cards [Which Illya hated and, therefore, Solo insisted on] hung on one wall. There was a fake fig tree in one corner. An attempt to bring in a touch of the outdoors, considering the room had no windows. The other desks were unoccupied, still and silent.

“It sure is quieter with those two gone, isn’t it?”

“You’d think it would help,” Gaby said, looking away from the stoic reminders of her partners’ absences. She took a careful sip of her coffee. Sweet, sweet caffeinated salvation.

Bonnie gave her a small, knowing smile, but Gaby ignored it, leaning back against her desktop and crossing her legs at the ankle.

“Crazy the things you miss,” Bonnie said.

Gaby scoffed. “Crazy is a good word for it,” she replied, then thought of blue eyes beneath a disapproving scowl and took another sip of coffee to cover her frown.

“Oh!” Bonnie exclaimed, and Gaby snapped her head up, spilling a little of the hot liquid on her fingers.

“What is it? Are you all right?”

The woman grinned at her. “I’m fine,” she said with a soft laugh. “The baby just moved.”
“Moved?” Gaby looked, a little wide-eyed, from the woman’s bright face to her distended abdomen.

“Yeah! She’s kicking me something fierce. Do you wanna feel it?”

A jolt of discomfort had her leaning away from the woman. “Oh—no!” she stammered, before recovering quickly and continuing a little more steadily, “I mean, that’s all right. I’m good.”

If she were being completely honest, the whole pregnancy thing kind of freaked her out. Gaby had grown up without a mother, or a mother’s friends, in her life. As a ballerina, pregnancy was a taboo subject. Hushed-up, hidden, and ‘taken care of.’ She had spent her post-ballet life in a garage with a bunch of men. If pregnancy were spoken of at all, it was done so with crude references or degrading commentary. Bonnie was the first pregnant person she’d had any meaningful interaction with. Her only other exposure came from the occasional client’s wife at the garage, a woman at the market, or... television.

“Thank you—though,” she offered, unsure of the correct way to smooth over the situation.

Bonnie nodded, a little smile playing at her lips. “All right then. I’ll let you get to drinking your coffee before it gets cold.”

“Thank you,” Gaby offered again, her words rushed as she held up the mug. “For bringing it.”

Bonnie turned with a broad grin. “No need to thank me, Agent Teller. Taking care of you three is my job.”

Gaby waited until the door was closed before returning to her desk. She glanced around once more, taking in the other desks with a wistful turn of her mouth.

Illya’s was a tidy, sparse thing to her right. It held a small stack of books on language and culture, a very practical desk lamp, and a holder for his fountain pens and ink.

Solo’s, on her left, was a display case for any number of artifacts he’d collected, from a fake (she hoped) Fabergé egg to a small statue of himself to a perpetual motion toy which he liked to drive Illya crazy with whenever they were all ensconced in here together.

Looking away, she tried to return her attention to the forms she still needed to finish, but instead, allowed herself to be distracted by the mail.

She lifted the pile, sorting through the different envelopes with mild disinterest until a postcard fell from the stack. It landed on her desktop, one of the paper corners denting on impact.

It was a picture of Washington DC, the Washington monument set against a blue sky. She smiled, turning it over. It was blank, as she knew it would be, but there was the familiar scrawl of Solo’s handwriting for the address. Del Floria's Tailor Shop [REDACTED], New York City, New York.

Blue skies, she thought. That was a good thing.

Her hand fell to the necklace at her throat. A black pearl ring hung from the chain, and she let her finger slip inside for a moment before withdrawing it.

She hadn’t yet heard from her other partner...

Illya had been in Moscow when she and Napoleon had come up with their little code. When he’d returned, it had been business as usual.
They’d never had a chance to tell him about it.

She had hoped it wouldn’t be needed, but recently, Waverly had been sending each of them out with other teams to serve in an advisory capacity. It was an honor to be trusted with that endeavor, and she understood it was important…but she had gotten used to her team as a unit. They worked well together and…

And, well, she didn’t like either one of her partners out there without backup. Without *her* as backup specifically.

Taking another long look at Illya’s desk, she set the postcard aside and pulled the paperwork back into place with a sigh. Like deteriorating hinges on a Trabant’s rear hatch, it could not be avoided forever.

Illya sat on the pale green sofa with his hands resting on his knees. They were wide set and higher than his hips since the piece of furniture was low and modern, and he was too tall for it.

“Welcome home,” a woman said, taking a seat across from him. He watched her brush her skirt down under her and lift her notepad onto her lap.

Dr. Hannah Poole, UNCLE’s resident psychologist. *Therapist*, Waverly had called her. Illya wasn’t fooled by a change in title.

“You just got back, right?” she continued.

She was young and blonde. Pretty, in a solemn way. After she spoke, she scratched something on the pad of paper in her hand. Illya tried to remain impassive and not give it an evil look.

“Yes,” he said. He had, in fact, gotten off a plane and come right here. Waverly’s suggestion, wanting him to ‘check in,’ whatever that was intended to mean. “But this is not my home.” The words were spoken without any conscious thought.

“Of course,” Dr. Poole replied. “I suppose that would technically be Moscow.”

“Mmm,” he assented absently, but that idea felt strange to him. Off somehow. He didn’t really have a *home*. He moved around too much. He had apartments…he supposed where his mother was would be home, but then it wasn’t her face that came to mind. It was another face, dark eyes, stubborn chin, dimpled smile when she chose to grace him with it.

He felt a pulse of excitement go through him at the realization that he would be seeing her very soon.

“Perhaps I should get a different couch,” Dr. Poole said, and he looked up to see her contemplating his awkward position. He said nothing more, but pretended to settle into the back rest and study the wall.

She wrote something on her pad, and he forced himself not to look at it.

It was like this every time he came in, him sitting stoically, her scribbling away in that notebook. Regular visits, at Waverly’s ‘request,’ that made him question how the man really felt about his
viability as an agent… or as a person. He knew the head of UNCLE had access to his psychological profile from the KGB and he knew what it said about him, the story it told. Was Waverly trying to rub it in, or just dig deeper and find out how far the deviancy went? Illya didn’t know the reason, but he knew the game. It had been played on him for years. So, he sat for his allotted sixty minutes, always saying as little as possible.

“Many people find it more comfortable to lie down,” Doctor Poole offered.

“Not going to happen,” he snapped and then grimaced. Usually saying as little as possible. “I… apologize. That was uncalled for.”

Her smile was gentle, and he tried to find the lie in it, the manipulation, the place where she was waiting to cut him open and pull out his insides, scrutinize them, use them against him.

“It's all right. But, if I may… why do you think you responded that way?”

Because you are trying to get inside my head.

He said nothing out loud, and several long beats of silence passed.

“This is waste of time. Waverly said there is a mission,” he said, moving as if to stand.

“I know about the mission—” she started, but Illya cut in, looking at her sharply.

“You do?”

She looked down, looked as if she were trying to hide a smile. “I know you have a mission, and that this needs to be a short visit, but I don’t know the specifics,” she assured him. “I do have clearance, if that's your concern.”

“It is not,” he replied. “My concern is that I am here on this couch while my partners prepare for this mission alone.”

“You don’t trust your partners?”

He glared at her and made a gruff sound. “Of course, I trust her—them.” His accent was heavy. Emotion close to the surface. Too close. “Ga—Agent Teller is more than competent agent. Solo is… passable. Is not about trust, is about pulling my weight,” he ground out and then immediately regretted it. She nodded slowly, wrote something down. He wanted to snatch the pad from her fingers, read for himself how she was diagnosing him.

“I can understand that.” Her voice was mild, tranquil, an attempt to soothe. He didn’t trust it. His insides roiled as he forced himself to sit still and wait for dismissal. They would run out of time eventually. Thanks to the mission it would be much quicker.

“You don’t have to stay,” she told him, and it was a jolt to his system, as if she had read his mind, and for a moment, he lost his sense of the world he was in. Then it came circling back, making him dizzy, making him feel ill.

“Waverly asked me to stop in,” he said, his voice even deeper than usual.

“Yes, just a check in, it's not…” She sighed and settled back into her chair, looked at the wall. When she looked back there was sadness in her eyes that he refused to accept as real. Just another manipulation. “It’s all right. You can go. Good luck with the mission.”
He stood to his feet and moved toward the door, but her voice stilled him just as his fingers closed over the handle.

“Illya,” she said. “You know you're safe here, right?”

Opening the door, he stepped out into the hall without answering, closing it quietly behind him.

Safe, he scoffed. If his life had taught him one thing, it was that his mind was safe nowhere except inside his own skull.

And even that was questionable.

His hands were shaking as he made his way down the hall toward his office. The office he shared with Cowboy and Gaby. He took a breath and let himself wonder what odd thing Solo may have added to his collection or if Gaby had been using the coasters he had bought her or if her antique mahogany desk would be covered with the rings from neglected coffee cups.

He felt edgy and restless at the thought of returning. Maybe she wasn’t even there, he told himself. It wasn’t like she didn’t have work to do.

Then he rounded a corner, and a small rush of pale blue cashmere and soft dark hair nearly smacked into him. He reached out to catch her by the arms and his world settled back to rights as he looked down into Gaby’s face.

Had he thought he had missed her? The word was wholly inadequate.

Focused on holding the thick stack of paperwork together as she rushed through the familiar path to Waverly’s office, Gaby completely forgot to watch where she was going. One Second she was half-running, half-walking along, and the next, she was nearly crashing into someone coming around the corner.

Gasping, she stumbled backward and would have fallen if two large hands hadn’t shot out and took hold of her upper arms. They held on, firm but gentle, and she knew who they belonged to even before she looked up to see the curve of his lower lip, the length of his nose, the concern in his pale, blue eyes. Her stomach did some kind of Esther Williams-level swan dive, making her feel a little dizzy.

"Illya!" she blurted out, stepping back and taking a moment to recover from the contact, let alone the near collision. Her hand flew to the neckline of her sweater where the ring was still visible and quickly tucked it beneath the baby blue cashmere. She pinched the ring beneath the knit, then tried to cover the action by reaching up to tidy her hair. "When did you get back? I thought you were consulting with Agent Bashkin’s team in Florida?"

He nodded, his eyes leaving hers to sweep over her face for a second. "I was, but Waverly called. I flew in this morning. He says there is a mission."

"Oh," Gaby said, a mix of contrasting feelings fluttering through her. "I guess the team is back together."
"It looks that way." His smile was small, and one of his hands was still holding her arm. "How have you been?"

"Busy," she said. "I'm still wrapping up that bit of business from Nepal."

Illya nodded. "Yes, you did a good job with that team."

She felt a spreading warmth at the praise as well as the way he said it—as if he were not the least bit surprised. "Thank you. And you?"

He looked her over once more, and there was that something in his eyes, that thing she both craved and feared. "I have been well, but," he paused, hand finally falling from where he had been holding her, and she felt its loss, a brush of chilly air. "I prefer working with our team."

The words echoed, so in line with her own feelings. She brushed aside the little rush and gave him a raised eyebrow, teasing. "What? I would think Bashkin and Diệu would be much easier to work with than Solo and me." She smirked. "Aren't you always saying how impossible we are?"

"No one is as impossible as that man," Illya asserted. "Not even Cowboy."

"Don't let him hear you say that."

Illya's chuckle was soft. "I would appreciate you keeping my secret."

"Of course.
She shrugged, trying to look noncommittal and feeling suddenly awkward. She looked at her paperwork, remembering the errand she had been on when she'd run into him. "I guess I'd better deliver this," she said, holding it up. He nodded, and she started to leave, but paused mid step. "Me too, by the way." When his eyes fixed on hers again, she added, "I prefer our team."

As problematic as it had been at times, she'd missed it. She'd missed them.

The change that came over Illya's face at her words was subtle, but she knew those features so well at this point, it was easy for her to see his pleasure.

She started to move away again, but he stopped her with a word.

"Wait."

She stilled and looked back at him. His gaze lifted from her throat to her face, then back again as he raised a hand. "Your chain…"

His fingers grazed her, rough with calluses but gentle, cool against her skin. She felt the thin thread of silver slide along her neck before he settled what she assumed was the clasp at the back of her nape.

"Better," he said, and his mouth, turned up every so slightly at the corners. She was having a challenging time looking away from his mouth when Waverly saved her.

"Good, you're both here," their superior said, coming up beside them looking mildly harried—which for him was the equivalent of being a downright mess! "Come to my office."

"Aren't we waiting for Agent Solo?"

"The CIA has Solo on a task at the moment," Waverly said, opening his door and letting them
precede him. "And this requires immediate action."

They took a seat at the small conference table in Waverly’s office, Gaby smoothing her skirt beneath her thighs and then starting a little when Illya was there to push in her chair. She looked up at him as he took his seat and found that small, reserved smile of his waiting for her.

“One of our sleeper agents has gotten wind of a package THRUSH is going to be retrieving,” Waverly began. “That is all she was able to ascertain. That, and the fact this package is something that will bring the Prime Minister of Iestrye under their influence.”

“That would be bad,” Illya rumbled, and Gaby realized she found the tones soothing after his absence.

“It would be very bad,” Waverly continued, and Gaby forced herself to focus on the conversation. “As you know Iestrye sits in an ideal position to cause unrest in what is already a very unstable area.”

“But what is it?” Gaby asked, leaning forward. “The package? As I understand it, Prime Minister Novak’s convictions are to remain neutral and put his own people first. What could make him change his mind?”

“That is the question, but one we can’t afford to wait to find the answer to. The hand-off is happening in two days, and I need you to intercept this package, whatever it may be.”

“Of course,” Illya agreed at the same time Gaby said, “Where are we going?”

“The package is currently in Iestrye, according to my sources. I’ve had April draw up your papers,” he explained, handing them each a Manila folder. “You’ll be going in as a married couple, Tomaž and Lumi Nylund-Pleško. Everything else is in the files. You’ll have to read as you fly.”

“Are we leaving right now?” Gaby asked, glancing at the contents and back up at him. They’d never had an immediate departure before, and it unsettled her.

“We must pack—” Illya started. From the tension coming off him, she could tell he was a little uneasy as well.

“I’m afraid so, Agent Teller.” He nodded at Gaby and turned to Illya. “And everything has been arranged, Kuryakin. All has been taken care of. I oversaw the preparations and in fact, I packed your weapons myself.”

Gaby trusted Waverly with her life, it was true, but she she finds the lack of information unsettling.

“There is a helicopter on its way to pick you up and take you to the airport,” Waverly said, rising from his seat. “We will fly you into France, and from there, you will travel to Austria.”

“I have a sudden feeling that I left something on at my flat,” Gaby said, turning to Illya with a little frown.

Waverly gave her an apologetic smile, which crinkled the corners of his eyes. “I’ll send Bonnie over.”

With those words, he headed out of the office and the two agents got to their feet.

“I prefer to choose and pack my own tech,” Illya murmured.
“And your first aid kit, I know,” Gaby added with a small smile, setting a hand on his arm.

“It is not much to go on, but whatever it is, we can’t let THRUSH have an influence in Isterye.”

“I agree.”

“Come,” he beckoned, taking her arm and looping it through his. “The helipad is two blocks away.”

Gaby followed his lead, running a little to keep up with his longer strides. Trying to ignore the way her heart rolled over in her chest like some sort of purring kitten, she let her eyes travel down the length of his back. Flat cap, navy turtleneck, gray trousers.

It wasn’t quite her team back together, but some small part of her,(the part she tried very hard to keep tucked away out of sight out and out of mind,) didn’t seem to care.

Illya was back.
Chapter 2

The plane was small for a transatlantic flight, and Gaby felt jostled as she read through the paperwork one more time.

“Professors of architecture,” she read aloud. “Seems to be a theme with us.”

“At least this time you are more than a pretty thing on my arm,” Illya said. “Much more suitable.”

His voice was muffled on the last part, and she looked up to find him pulling his turtleneck off over his head. The sight of his bare torso made her breath catch, caused a tightening in her belly.

She had seen both her partners naked or nearly naked by this point, and while Solo was well-built and thickly muscled, Illya’s leaner, well-trained body was the one that drew her in every time. She took a moment to enjoy the rare sight of his pecs, the terrain of his abs, and the line of his obliques where they disappeared into the waist of his gray slacks. She started to look away as he emerged, so she wouldn’t be caught staring, but something besides his physique caught her eye.

“What is that?” He looked at her and then down to where she was pointing. There was a fresh scar at the top of his left hip, still pink and puckered and barely healed.

“Bullet graze,” he answered, reaching into the case he had been provided and pulling out a pale blue dress shirt.

“When did that happen?” She felt incensed and futile that he had been injured like this and she hadn’t even known.

“Two weeks ago,” he said. He set the dress shirt aside and yanked on a white undershirt. “Why are you angry?”

“What didn’t I know about this?” she demanded. “We’re partners.”

“We were not partners at the time—” he began, but she cut him off.

“Right, and if it were my body you were discovering a new bullet wound on, you would feel this way?”

He stilled. She realized the implication of what she’d said, but it didn’t deter her. She held his gaze with fury in her eyes. “No,” he finally responded.

“Exactly,” she hissed. “We are partners.” She took a deep breath. “Solo too,” she tossed in, because it was true and she needed the reminder to defuse some of the tension that had mounted, that always seemed to mount, between them. “No matter what assignment we are on.”
“You are right,” he said quietly. “It was not bad injury, only a graze and I have not seen you…”

She sighed. They hadn’t seen each other in almost a month. That wasn’t his fault. “You’re right. When would you have told me?” She shook her head. “I will yell at Waverly instead,” she added. “When we get back.”

A small smile lifted at the corner of his lips, and she absorbed it along with his presence, his being. This, more than anything, affected her in a way that was always difficult to manage. Yes, the sight of his body, the touch of his hand, made her feel weak with desire, but his presence, so near and yet so far, made her ache in ways she couldn’t put into words.

He finished the buttons on his shirt, and she looked away as he tucked it into his slacks. “I will go talk to the pilot while you change,” he said softly, and she nodded.

There was no other room on the plane but a tiny bathroom, so changing in the cabin area was a necessity. It wasn’t uncommon that she would have to change in front of her partners as they did with her. It was only practical. So, with that air of practicality in mind, she stood to her feet and began to strip out of her powder blue sweater and skirt and into the more sedate trappings of Lumi Nylund-Pleško.

They went over their cover for the rest of the flight, reading over the info multiple times, and then questioning each other in character until they had covers and accents down. As the plane made its descent into Ambérieu-en-Bugey Air Base, Gaby turned to look out the window. Morning light was coming in, highlighting the curve of her face, the line of her neck, and Illya let himself indulge in simply looking at her.

She appeared the same as before he had left – well, whole. He couldn’t count the number of times he’d dreamed of something happening to her when he was away. Usually, he was in Moscow when the dreams came. Moscow where he was much too far to do anything to help her if something should happen. But even when she had returned from Nepal, and he had only been several hundred miles away, the thoughts had still plagued him.

Aside from the bad dreams, he had missed her. That inadequate word. He had missed the sound of her voice, missed her sharp mind and even sharper mouth. Missed her gallows humor and her strength. He’d also missed that downturn at the corner of her mouth, the line of her jaw, her dark, observant eyes, the length of her legs.

The legs in question, legs that would very likely be the death of him someday, were currently crossed and he let his gaze travel over the shapely calf down to where her small foot was encased inside an ugly but functional shoe.

“Are you critiquing my outfit?” she asked, her mouth quirking up in a smile before she turned to him.

“Those shoes are terrible,” he said, giving a little shake of his head. “Mrs. Nylund-Pleško has terrible taste.”

“I suppose she cares more about how buildings are dressed than herself.” She smiled.

The words sparked a thought, and he patted his chest, trying to remember which inner pocket contained what he was looking for. “That reminds me.” He reached inside the left pocket and pulled out two rings. He held them up, and as the plane banked right, a split second of sunlight glinted off the gold bands.
“Ah, wedding rings,” she said softly and held out her hand. He reached forward and tried to give her the woman’s ring, but the man’s ring fell into her palm instead. She smiled and closed her hand around it. Then, he watched as she slipped it onto her finger, where it hung loosely. “I don’t think this one is mine.”

He smiled and offered her the other one, but she took his hand in hers and turned it, lifting his second-to-last finger. “Left hand for Iestrye, right?”

He nodded slowly and watched as she slid the ring home onto his finger. She had calluses on her fingertips, and he felt them rasp over his skin, catching for a moment on the ones on his palm. She twisted the ring and then tapped it with her finger before pulling away.

“Now, we are married,” she said with a smirk. “Again.”

“Not quite yet,” he said and held hers up. She held out her hand and he took it. He noted the way his fingertips settled so perfectly into the hollow of her palm, how her hands felt so warm in his, as he slid the ring onto her finger. He felt a pang of emotion at the sight of it there but repressed it. There was no sentimentality in this, no romance - that was an impossibility. There was only a cover and a mission to complete.

When he released her, she lifted her hand to look at it. “It has been a while,” she said and then made a practiced squeeze of her fist.

Gaby’s eyes lifted to his and there was that soft thing in her eyes, that thing she sometimes let him see. They didn’t talk about it. It was an unspoken agreement, a truce, though how exactly they had decided was beyond him. In keeping with the arrangement, he let that look go and smiled at her instead.

“We make a good team.”

By the time they had boarded a plane to Austria, they were back to being fully in character. The plane ride had them discussing architecture and whether Tomaž wanted to put up with a visit to Lumi’s mother in the Fall. No one who saw them or overheard them would have any question as to who they were.

As they checked into their hotel, Gaby held onto the crook of Illya’s arm, and he allowed himself to enjoy the moment. Her small hand, her strong grip, the way he had to shorten his long strides in order for her to keep up.

Illya pushed open their hotel room door and dragged their bags inside. Gaby followed him and looked around, curious. It was small and inexpensive, appropriate for a couple with their supposed means, but it was more cramped than she’d expected. She watched Illya skirt around the end of the two twin beds, the space between the foot and the dresser leaving barely enough room for his legs.

“This room is tiny,” she said, moving to the closest bed before tossing her bag onto it, then flopping down onto it herself. “And the bed is lumpy.”

Illya smirked over at her as he pulled the curtains closed. He turned back to her and crossed his arms. “You are spoiled,” he said, and she scoffed.

“We will practically be on top of each other in here,” she said. There was a long pause, and then her words sank in. On top of each other, her brain repeated and she suddenly felt very warm.
Illya cleared his throat. “It could be worse. Cowboy could be here.”

Gaby laughed softly. “Remember that time in Spain?” she asked.

“More than I care to.”

Gaby chuckled, then winced as she stood up again. “Ugh, these shoes are death.”

“One more reason why it is never good for other people to pick out our gear,” he said, moving back across the room to help put away their cases. “Those shoes are cheaply made.”

“Hmm.” Gaby made a face. “I never thought I’d see the light on the way you abuse our clothing budget. The shoes you buy still hurt, but not like this.”

“Let us hope the tactical gear is more suitable.”

“Speaking of gear,” Gaby said and turned, bending down to reach under the bed. “Have our other things arrived? We’re meeting our contact in an hour, and I don’t want to go without being properly armed.” She searched under the bed with her hands and then smiled as her fingers closed over a cool, metal handle.

“It had better be the right things,” Illya said darkly and then moved to check beneath the other bed.

Gaby tossed open her case and perused the array of guns, knives, and holsters. “Looks promising.”

The first container Illya retrieved was full of electronic equipment and a few more weapons. He looked down at it and made a face at the selection. He supposed it would have to do.

The second held his Makarovs, sitting side by side in protective foam. He lifted one out and inspected it.

That was better.

... Gaby pretended to peruse the array of handkerchiefs, running a finger over the silk before glancing up at her mark. He was looking at blankets, wandering through the baby section looking lost, and she glanced around cautiously, wondering if he was, in fact, here tailing someone else. He picked out several items and then went to the counter. She watched him pull out some cash to pay before slipping outside to wait for him to emerge.

She was wearing the shoes of death and carrying a small sketchbook as part of her cover. She pretended to gaze up at the building as he came out, scratching her pencil against the paper.

Her mark paused just outside the market and turned his head right and left, watching the lane. His gaze landed on her briefly before moving on. He tucked his parcel under his arm and started off in the direction of the hotel. Gaby’s smile fell into a grim line as she watched him from the corner of her eye. She waited a few beats, then followed after him.

Back at the hotel, Illya was going through the man’s things with slow and vigilant deliberation, making sure each piece was replaced just as it had been when he’d arrived. He searched for some indication of what this package might be, any reference to it whatsoever, but so far, he was coming up empty.

He frowned at the bassinet in the corner and wondered what cover this man was going by that would
require this particular item of furniture. Did he carry it around empty and pretend there was a baby inside? Still, he searched it, checking the lace ruffles, lifting the mattress, and finding nothing. Next, he checked the desk where a row of glass bottles stood in line, empty and sparkling in the light. The desk, too, was empty, holding only the pad and pen with the hotel’s logo and a listing of local dining establishments.

It was under the bed that he found the case and pulled it out with a small grin of victory. Opening it up revealed a tracking system, and his grin widened slightly as he looked it over. Decent tech, he thought, not too shabby, but could be better.

There was a little, blinking dot on the screen, silent but persistent, and Illya mapped it out. Whatever it was, it was sitting just outside of the city. Illya pulled his portable receiver out of his bag and set to work.

... 

Gaby was waiting for him when he returned, and he couldn’t help but feel warmed but the way she looked him over as if checking for injury. He scanned her as well, taking in her face an extra few seconds when the rest of her checked out unscathed.

“I was worried when you weren’t here,” Gaby told him, sliding from concern into mild annoyance.

“It was close, but I was out before he came in.” He held up his tracker. “I got what we needed.”

Gaby looked at it. “Did you take that? He will notice.”

“No, I did not take it. His device is much larger,” Illya said, a little smug. “I made this one myself.”

“Okay,” she said, and he wasn’t sure, but thought a smile tried to lift the corner of her mouth. “But I still don’t understand how that is what we need.”

“Our contact said they had a way of finding the package without written instructions,” Illya said. “This is how. There is a tracking device on it.”

Gaby smirked. “Someone after your own heart.”

He gave her a look – some combination of exasperation and humor – then moved to the bed where his bag was laying open and pulled off his suit jacket. “I cloned his tracker so that we could follow the signal,” he said, fingers going to the buttons at his collar. “We should try to get there before he does.”

Gaby blinked. “You cloned his tracker?” she said. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

He glanced up and caught the look in her eye, a flare of pride that instantly humbled him. “It was not too difficult.”

“Sure,” she said, moving to her own case and pulling out her covert gear. “Anyone can do it.”

A small smile played over his lips as he folded and set his shirt aside. “Well, maybe not anyone.”

Gaby laughed and then went to her suitcase, tossing aside different things as she looked for what she wanted. “Finally! I get to change out these shoes for a pair of combat boots.”

Illya smiled and handed them to her.

...
They stripped out of their clothing with practiced efficiency, and Illya kept his eyes to himself as much as possible, resisting the temptation of Gaby standing across from him in only her underwear. She torpedoed his efforts, however, when she called his name. He lifted his head from refastening his fly, his eyes immediately taking in the soft swell of her breasts above her bra, the expanse of her lean stomach, and the length of those stunning legs of hers in one go. Her underthings were white and simple, but it didn’t diminish the effect seeing her in them had on him.

“Help me with this ankle sheath,” she said, setting her foot on the bed. It was shoeless, and her dark sock was rolled down to her ankle. “The buckle is difficult.” She looked a little flushed, and her eyes darted away when he made eye contact.

He focused on her ankle, setting his hand against the back of her calf as he looked at the tiny fastening. There was a flaw in the form, but he was able to force it into position. She would probably have to cut it off when the mission was over, but for now, it would hold her knife in place. He smoothed a hand over it, then stepped back, looking up at her instinctively—only to once again realize that she was standing there in next to nothing, all flawless, tawny skin, and white, hip-hugging panties. He turned away and started pulling on the rest of his own clothing: dark turtleneck over the black trousers and a holster system that could hold several weapons as well as extra ammo.

“You’re twisted,” Gaby said.

“What?” His stomach plummeted. Had she seen him looking? Was she disgusted? He turned to look at her over his shoulder, eyes wide. She was fully dressed now, which was a relief, but no less beautiful—a fact that struck him every time he looked at her. She was dressed much like him, dark sweater and trousers with combat boots. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, her bangs swept back from her face like she’d just brushed them aside.

“Your rig,” she said, pointing. “On the back. One of the straps is twisted.”

“Oh.” Relief flooded him and he reached back to feel for the error, but Gaby stopped him. Her fingers were a warm touch against his.

“I’ll get it,” she offered, and then he felt her hands on his shoulder blade, running beneath the length of leather and canvas. “There we go,” she said, an odd softness to her voice.

“Thank you.”

"Now—" She slid her Walther PPK into the holster at her shoulder and smiled at him with her dimples showing, "—let’s go steal a package from under THRUSH’s nose."

Illya felt the words strike an ill-omened chord in his mind, but he returned her smile with one of his own.
Chapter 3

There was a car waiting for them on one of the side streets, something nondescript and ancient, planted by their prep team. Gaby slid into the driver’s seat as Illya threw the bag with his gear into the back and climbed in beside her. She caught a faint whiff of his shaving lotion and became distinctly aware of his presence and the way he dominated the space.

She took a steadying breath and started the car.

This wasn’t new, this gut-wrenching pull of attraction. It had been there since Rome. Before she’d even known him. So much had changed since then, but so far, she had managed to do her job, even with that warm sense of need humming at the edges of her thoughts. She had worked with him, mission after mission, without problems. Well, mostly without problems… they worked together well. Today wouldn’t be any different.

She glanced over to find Illya watching the receiver in his hand, his face a mask of concentration as he rolled the small dial on the front until a light blinked onto the screen.

“Which way?” she asked.

“North.”

They made their way through the dark city streets and then out into the countryside, winding along maintained, rural roads before turning off onto a rutted, dirt byway. Illya had her pull off to the side, and they consulted a map together to decide the best way to approach whatever was ahead of them.

A serious departure from their standard missions, where they knew what they were headed into, often armed with blueprints, approach plans, and backup plans to spare, this time, they were going in almost completely blind.

They followed the tracker until Illya felt they were close enough to continue on foot. Gaby maneuvered the car into the bushes and they retrieved what gear they thought they’d need from the trunk. Illya covered the back with a camo net and several branches, then they trailed through the woods with only the large, gibbous moon to see by.

The only building within miles was a personal residence. No humble, country house either but a large, sprawling mansion. Tall and gothic, it rose amongst the trees, with a wrought-iron fence, stonewalled garden, and tall, dark spires that reflected the moonlight. Gaby peered up at it through the fence, her hands wrapping around the bars.

It was like the villain’s house from a children’s book.

Illya seemed unaffected by the sight and was, instead, swinging his bag off his shoulder. He looked from the fence to her.
“I will give you a boost.”

“And who will boost you?” she challenged with a smile. He was tall, but not tall enough to reach the top, even if he stood on his toes.

He smirked back at her. “Also me.”

Gaby rolled her eyes. “Such a braggart.” She tsked, still smiling. “All right, get over here.” She waved to him, and he bent down with his fingers laced, his hands forming a step, and she set her foot onto it.

There was a rush as he lifted her up, his strength never failing to impress her, though she wasn’t about to tell him so. For the space of a heartbeat, the height was dizzying, then she grabbed onto the top rail and swung her body over, dangling by her hands before letting go to land on the other side.

Illya tossed his bag over to her and then took a running jump, grabbing the top of the fence, and vaulted over in one, smooth motion. Gaby watched with appreciation as he dropped to the ground.

“They should put you in the Olympics.”

“Hmm,” he considered. “You think they will open a fence scaling competition?”

She grinned and passed the bag back to him.

They looked up at the backside of the house, the expanse of stone walls and jutting gables. Illya pointed to a window and Gaby nodded. They would have to scale the wall, one of Gaby’s least favorite things, but it looked like the best way in. Illya pulled a grappling hook from his bag and threw it with a marksman’s precision. It caught on the sill with a ‘clink’, and they waited to see if it had drawn anyone’s attention. Gaby went first, climbing up, hand over hand, and Illya followed. She set the glass cutter against the window, and soon, she was slipping over the edge into an enormous bedroom. She took out her gun and scanned the space as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the increased darkness.

Illya joined her a moment later and pulled out his tracker moving to let her see the screen as well.

“It is not far from here.”

“Probably another bedroom.”

Illya tipped his head toward the door and they made their way into the hall, sweeping it with their silenced pistols, looking out for anyone who might spot them, sound an alarm. Illya led the way, and Gaby followed, watching his back as he monitored the device in his hand.

At the third door, he stopped and got her attention with a hand signal. She waited as he put his receiver away and lifted his gun, pausing in the doorway of the new room, trained eyes checking the space. Gaby turned to watch the hallway as Illya stepped inside and she backed into the room after him and closed the door.

The room was decorated with a softer touch than the other room had been. Gentle blues and golds marked the paper on the walls, the draperies that hung from the windows, the furniture that filled the space. There were several dressers, a baroque-style desk, and baskets full of plush toys next to a lavishly upholstered rocking chair. In the center stood an elaborate, curtained oval crib draped in cornflower blue and golden tassels.

It was a nursery.
Illya stalked about the room, searching in the dressers, and Gaby followed suit. They examined every piece of furniture, checked the nooks and crannies in the walls. Gaby hurried forward to examine the crib and found, to her shock, there was an infant inside.

It was sleeping on its back, cheeks rosy, delicate blankets pulled up to its chin. She looked at it with a mix of awe and horror. She couldn’t remember if she’d ever seen a real baby this close before. In the market, maybe, or waiting to cross a street? But she didn’t recall having ever seeing one quite this small. What was it doing here? Would these people be callous enough to keep this package of blackmail in a baby’s room? Illya’s tracker must be off, as unlikely as it seemed.

“Illya,” she whispered.

“I will check the chandelier,” he said and handed her the tracking device. She looked down at the receiver as he carried the desk chair over and set it into position next to the crib. He reached up to the ornate glass monstrosity that hung overhead, the crystals catching moonlight as his movements made them clink together.

Gaby’s eyes were drawn back to the baby, and she leaned over the crib, caught up in the tiny fingers curled into a tiny fist. So small and detailed, she found it hard to believe they were real. The crystal overhead rattled and the little mouth moved, bottom lip pulling in and out as though it was suckling in its dreams.

“Illya,” she said again, more urgently, this time. “There is a baby in here.”

He stepped down off the chair. “What?”

Gaby looked at the device in her hand, a strange, awful notion coming over her. The light was blinking furiously and then, when she held it over the baby, it froze, holding bright and steady.

“The blankets and clothing he bought at the market,” she said, looking up at Illya with wide eyes.

He his gaze fell to the infant and that same sense of horror and foreboding she felt played over his features.

“The bassinet and the bottles in his hotel room,” he murmured, then his astonished eyes flew to hers.

“The baby is the package,” they said in unison.

The door to the bedroom swung open, and their faces whipped toward it as their mark appeared, swaggering in like he owned the place.

He started toward the crib but froze when he saw them and went for his gun. Illya was quicker and fired first, his silenced pistol emitting a hiss in the quiet room.

The man’s body fell to the floor, his collapse muted by the lush carpet. The man crumbled to his knees, the weight of it muted by the lush carpet. He fell forward, hand around his gun still half in its holster. For a breath, it seemed they had avoided the problem but as his hand was crushed beneath his body, the gun went off, a harsh bark of sound.

Gaby’s head jerked from their would-be assailant to the infant like it was a bomb that had already gone off. She saw it startle with a full body jerk, its eyes flying open, watched its face scrunch up as it started to scream.

Illya swore, a string of mild Russian curses as he reached into the crib, pulling the child out with one hand, and securing it against his chest as if it were something he had done a hundred times before.
“You will have to take point.”

Gaby stared at him. “We can’t climb out the window with a baby!”

“Exactly,” Illya said, holding up his gun.

There were several loud shouts from down below, and Gaby whipped her head toward the door. “Oh mein Gott,” she cursed, tucking his receiver into one of her many straps as she realized they would have to go through the house. Through their enemy.

With a baby in Illya’s arms.

She took a deep breath and ran to the open front door. The hall was clear, but as she stepped out, two men crested the top of the stairs. She fired her silenced pistol, catching one in the head, but had to fire twice to take the second one down, and grimaced at the fault.

Running toward the grand staircase, Gaby had her gun up and ready. Two men came charging in through the front doors below, looking around in confusion. She shot one, Illya shot the other. She heard Illya fire two more times and turned the bottom of the stairs to see another group of men coming from the back of the house. They all lifted their guns in Illya’s direction.

Guns aimed at Illya tended to piss her off, but the fact he was holding the baby ripped through her thoughts with such force, she was barely aware of what she was doing as she took them out. When the way was clear, she bolted toward the front doors, jumping over several bodies to get there. The last one caught her eye, and she realized, even as she continued to run, that it was the butler. He was lying face up as if taken out in the midst of doing his job, his eyes staring wide in terror.

She rushed down the front steps, gun ready. Her eyes at once swept for assailants and something else—car. Any car. Illya was firing behind her, but so far, the front was clear. She felt a flash of relief as she spotted exactly what they needed.

“The Cloud II!” she shouted over her shoulder and sprinted toward the black and silver Rolls-Royce, yanking open the door and sliding into the driver's seat. Illya stood guard as she set her pistol in her lap and checked the visor. Under the seat, the ashtray, glove box. No keys appeared, so she climbed back out and started tearing wires from beneath the steering wheel until she found the ones she needed.

“Gaby,” Illya said, a note of urgency in his voice.

“Almost got it,” she sang softly, looking up in time to watch him lay the baby on the passenger seat and pull out a second pistol. He gave her a grim nod and turned to defend their position.

For the briefest of seconds, her attention snagged on the flailing hands of the squalling infant. Little feet kicked the air, naked, pink, and tiny. Gunfire dragged her thoughts back from it and pressed together the wires in her hands. The 6.2 L V8 rumbled to life, and she grabbed her pistol and stood back up over the top of the car.

“Let’s go!” she shouted and fired toward the house where several of the enemy had taken up cover positions.

Illya grabbed the baby and threw himself into the seat. Gaby followed, barely taking time to shut her door, before she slammed the transmission into first gear.

The powerful engine roared from beneath the hood and the tires temporarily lost traction in the elegant, white stone drive as Gaby floored the accelerator, cranking the steering wheel to the right
and aiming for the front gate. The spinning tires spit up a shower of rocks that peppered the front of the house and their enemy as they peeled out of the driveway.

Gaby looked over at Illya and found him holding the baby over his shoulder. He was trying to soothe it, bouncing it in his arms and patting its back, even with a gun in one hand. It was horrifying and incongruous, but at the same time, something soft inside her did a little flip. She brought her eyes back to the road.

Gunshots rang out behind them, several pinging off the back of the car. The rear window shattered and Gaby instinctively ducked. She looked in the rearview mirror to see several sets of headlights following them and gaining. She gritted her teeth as they turned the next corner.

“What are you doing?” Illya demanded.

“What?” she shouted. “It’s not a Sunday drive!”

“Exactly, so why are you driving as though it is! This is not how you usually drive!”

Gaby growled. “I don’t usually drive with a BABY IN THE CAR!”

“If you don’t do what you need to do, none of us will live to worry about it!”

She cursed. He was right. She hadn’t even realized she was trying to toe the line between fast and cautious. She down-shifted and stomped on the gas. The car pulsed forward, the impressive torque throwing them both back into their seats.

It was too late however. They heard the tire explode before she felt the vehicle jerk to one side. A long stream of German obscenities flew from her lips as she forced the car into the trees, tearing through bushes and bouncing along over small logs and debris. It wasn’t much, but it gave them a little cover. The car came to an abrupt stop before colliding with a large tree.

They both leaped out of the car, and Illya was by her side a moment later. She startled as he pressed the baby into her arms. Her eyes widened as she looked down at it. It was still wailing loudly, its voice growing hoarse. It flailed in her arms, and Illya lifted it, pressing it closer to her body, adjusting her hands.

“Be sure to support the head.”

“Ilya...” She had no idea what to do with a baby.

“You need to get back to the hotel,” Illya said, checking his weapons. “I will cover your escape and meet you there.”

“I am not leaving you.” she hissed, leaning toward him.

“This child is the most important thing,” he said. “That is our mission.”

She glared at him as she tried to bury her panic.

“You know I am best at this part,” he told her in low tones. “I’m not giving you the baby because you are a woman.”

She knew that. In the deepest parts of her, she knew it, but she wanted to lay it on him anyway. The fact he saw through her didn’t make it any better. “You better come back.”

He looked at her, his blue eyes full of things she didn’t need to think about right now. “Go,” he said,
nodding his head toward town and then left her, creeping along the path their vehicle had made in the underbrush. Gaby tightened her arms around the baby and started in the other direction.

It was difficult. The baby was crying still, and she didn’t know how to soothe it. It writhed in her arms, stronger than anything its size had a right to be. She ducked behind a tree and stopped, adjusting her hold. The little body shuddered and sobbed as it looked up at her with wide, dark eyes. A beat of quiet, little catching breaths then its face scrunched up, and the howling started all over again.

“No, no, no… I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I know this is scary.” She realized she was bouncing and wondered when she had started. “I don’t know what to do, but you have to be quiet.” She held its body awkwardly out from hers, then remembered Illya pushing it close to her and pulled it into her body, cupping a hand behind his head. The small thing was wearing a thin nightgown, the blanket Illya had grabbed hanging loose from her hand at its back.

“Maybe you are cold.” She did what she could to wrap the soft blanket around the plump legs, tucking the arms in too, feeling the cold, little fingers. Her breath caught when she heard the snap of twigs in the distance, and she pulled the baby in tight against her chest and ran.
At some point along the way, the child had stopped crying and fallen asleep. Gaby didn't understand how being jostled against her body could be the least bit soothing, but she was grateful for the quiet as she slipped into the city by moonlight.

The weight of the infant had started to wear on her arms, but she kept it close as she drew near their hotel. It was dark, and the early hour meant a woman walking through the streets with a baby was a glaring discrepancy. She ducked her head and tried to appear casual as she rounded the corner of the brick building to head for the rear entrance. She stopped cold when she saw a man waiting there, leaning against the brick.

He was smoking a cigarette and wearing his shoulder holster proudly. Light from a street lamp glinted off the pistol as he changed position, and Gaby backed up against the wall and watched him, her instincts telling her this was no ordinary thug. He was there for her.

A radio at his side crackled, and he lifted it to his mouth. "No sign of them yet. What did you find?"

"Agents all right, but I can't tell you whose," the voice in the box said. "They have weapons, trackers, papers."

Gaby closed her eyes and cursed silently.

"Dan said the tall one looked Russian."

"Dan thinks everyone's a commie," the other voice drawled, and the man in front of her laughed. "Corbin isn't going to like this."

"Eh, we'll find 'em."

Gaby scooted away, sliding down the brick until she was out of his line of sight. As she turned onto the sidewalk to make her escape, the baby let out a high-pitched squawk. A sharp pang of fear bolted through her.

"No, no," she muttered as she rushed across the street to the park, then tempered her voice, she tried to shush him. She patted him back awkwardly as she searched the empty park for a place to sit. Her feet and arm were weary, her nerves jangled. She found bench, hidden in nightly shadow, that let her watch the hotel from a distance without being full out in the open. She was hardly inconspicuous — dressed in covert gear with an infant on her lap just hours from dawn. She took a seat, sighing in relief, and shifted the baby in her arms as she looked around for anyone who might take notice. The infant fussed halfheartedly, then settled down again, pressing its face into her breast, a little hand fisting in her knit top.

Where was Illya? She knew he'd be too cautious to walk into the trap at the hotel, but they didn't have an alternate meeting place. There was their extraction point, but she was loath to move on to it without him.
"You might have to, her traitorous mind told her. He might not have made it."

"No," she whispered out loud. She refused to think that way. Illya was fine. He was alive. She wouldn't think anything else.

As time ticked past, the baby in her arms grew heavier and heavier, a physical weight as well as a pressing responsibility she had no idea how to care for. Worry ate at her. After more than an hour had passed, she began to feel resigned to the fact she was going to have to leave, head toward the extraction, and hope Illya caught up with her in time. He had been right; this child was their mission now.

"Gaby."

His voice seemed to come from nowhere, and Gaby stilled. Then he was sitting down beside her, and she felt her entire body relax, relief seeping into her bones. She leaned into his side, assuring herself that he was solid.

"How did you find us?" she asked, tilting her head back to see his face, pale in the moonlight. If she had been that obvious, their enemy would have found her by now.

His eyes flicked over her before he held up his tracker. "You are wearing your ring."

Her fingers went to the space beneath her collarbone, feeling for the telltale lump beneath her sweater. She gave it a twist before letting her hand drop. "What took you so long?"

"I led them on a bit of a goose chase," he told her. "Appears like it did no good. Did you get inside?"

"No, they were already here."

He swore softly in Russian and reached over and lifted the baby from her lap and tucked him into his chest with an assurance he envied.

Gaby took one look back at the hotel as she stood to her feet and nodded.

... They cut through the backside of the park and then into the side streets, creeping their way through the darkened city. Gaby tapped Illya's shoulder when she saw a line of laundry hanging over head, and they raided it for clothing. There was nothing there that would fit Illya, but there was a simple dress that would do for her and a line of diapers too and baby clothes, which Illya grabbed up and which Gaby had overlooked completely.

"Where are we going?" Gaby asked as they hurried on, slipping through alley after alley as the sky began to lighten. "Our extraction window isn't open until tomorrow."

"I know of a place," he said, somewhat hesitantly. "It is a little farther."

Two more blocks, and he handed her the still-sleeping baby as he reached up to pull down a fire escape ladder. Gaby peered at the small face and frowned.

"Is it okay?" she asked. "It has been sleeping a long time. I thought babies didn't sleep."

Illya looked back at her and a small smile played over his lips. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"What?"
"Nothing," he said with a little shake of his head. "He is only overstimulated, wore himself out with crying."

"Him?"

Illya shrugged. "The room was blue."

"Huh," Gaby said. "That doesn't mean anything." It probably did though. Fancy house like that, they were probably into all the traditions. A brief memory of pink petal wallpaper and a canopied princess bed filled her mind, but she pushed it aside. Those memories might as well be from another lifetime.

Illya took the baby back from her. "Up you go," he said.

"You're going to climb with the baby?"

"One of us has to."

Gaby scurried up the ladder and then turned to watch, ready to take the infant as soon as they were in reach, but Illya urged her forward, climbing the ladder easily with only one arm.

When they reached the third floor, Gaby once again accepted the baby so Illya could jimmy his way in through the window, using his knife to pry the swollen, painted wood from its frame.

"How do you know about this place?" she asked as he worked.

"It is a KGB safe house."

"Illya!" she chastised. "This is not a good idea."

"We are very much lacking in those right now," he told her firmly, as he thrust a shoulder against the window frame. "It is one night."

"You will be in trouble."

"Better to ask forgiveness than permission."

She shook her head. "You sound like Solo."

Illya shoved at the window with a grunt of effort, forcing it up until he could fit through the opening. He drew his gun and looked back at her. "Perhaps he is rubbing off on me."

Gaby scoffed and watched him climb inside, waited for his signal to enter.

It was a small, bare bones apartment – a kitchenette, a table with one chair, and a bed. The bathroom was cordoned off by a curtain.

"Living in style," she observed and got a roll of his eyes as a reaction. "I can't believe the KGB has a safe house here." She held the baby unconsciously tighter, then quickly stopped, worried she might crush him.

"A small monarchy that is pinched between Yugoslavia and the USSR," he reviewed. "And you are surprised?"

Gaby huffed. "I shouldn't be, I suppose. I'm sure you want to crush them too, force them into your idea of how people should live."
Illya paused in the middle of checking the closet and frowned at her. "Why are you angry?"

"You are spying on these people!"

"I," he insisted, pointing to his own chest. "Am not spying on them. Also, Agent Teller, perhaps you have forgotten, but we are spies!"

"That is not what I mean!"

"This is pointless argument," he growled, waving a hand through the air. "It has nothing to do with us."

Gaby scoffed. "Nothing to do with us, right."

He jabbed a finger at the floor. "It has nothing to do with this mission!"

"I don't want any more people to have to live that way against their will!" She didn't know why she was so upset about this. She wasn't surprised the KGB had a presence here, not at all, but with the events of the evening, the haywire mission, and now, being inside a KGB house, so close to a border that she never wanted to cross again, she felt overtly on edge.

"We will need to find some milk," he interjected, looking through the cupboards and refrigerator and not at her. "For the baby. And something else for me to wear. I will go."

Gaby set her jaw, some part of her wanting to continue this fight, burn off the anxiety, another part didn't want him to be out of her sight again, but she nodded. "Be careful."

Illya paused at her words, and turned to her again, his gaze softened.

"He probably needs to be changed," he said softly, before ducking to check his weapon and holsters. At her frown, he tipped his head toward the baby.

"Changed?" Gaby questioned.

Illya bent at the windowsill and looked back at her. "His... podguznik... er -- Windel."

"Windel?" Gaby glanced down at the bundle in her arms with a mix of distaste and worry, then back up in time to watch Illya disappear down the fire escape. She peered at the baby again.

"I think I will let you sleep a little longer."

She carried the baby over to the bed and, with all the care she might give a live bomb, set it down on the foot of the double mattress. As soon as she stood back to her feet, it started to wriggle, its face scrunching up and turning a bright, angry red.

"No, no, no." She rushed forward, lifting it back into her arms. "No crying, no crying."

She started pacing back and forth, bouncing awkwardly from her knees as she did so, but it did no good. A loud wail tore from the tiny lungs, and Gaby closed her eyes. She could only hope someone else in the building had a baby and that it wasn't flat after flat of KGB spies.

"Don't cry," she sang, pulling it in close, like she had in the woods. As she did so, she felt a warm wetness seep in through the fabric of her shirt.

"Ew..." She held it away again, and the crying kicked up a notch.
"Well," she allowed, looking it over. "I suppose it can't feel nice to be stuck in wet pants." She hurried over to the pile of clothing they’d stolen and dug though it for the square bits of cloth.

Carrying one of them and the baby over to the bed, she laid them both down. His gown was simple with a drawstring at the bottom, but the material was fine and soft beneath her calloused fingers as she pushed it up, revealing chubby, pink legs and a neatly pinned nappy. The pins were cutesy, with little ducks on their heads. She looked at the arrangement nervously then up at the screeching baby.

"I can figure out what is wrong with any engine just by listening," she told it. "And then, I can fix it. So, I can do this." She reached for the pins. The cloth was soaked, and she grimaced as her fingers came in contact. "Das ist ekelhaft."

It took her a few tries to get the pins undone. There was an extra catch to them that a regular safety pin didn't have, but soon she had pulled them free. She slowly lifted the material, touching as little of it as possible and peered warily inside.

"Hmm," she said, jutting out her lower lip. "I guess you are a boy." Not one second later, a stream of pee shot up, hitting her in the chin. She yanked back, and it proceeded to soak her neck and shirt as well. She cried out, wiping the urine from her face with quick hands. "You little beast!"

He was no longer crying, but blinking up at her with those dark eyes again as if the whole thing had been as surprising to him. He had gotten his own face and chest as well. He was soaked, she was soaked, and the bed beneath him was soaked.

"Wunderbar."

Once she'd recovered and used the cloth to dry him off and then to keep his tiny penis covered to prevent a repeat incident, she forced herself to study the soiled diaper to see how it had been folded. Feeling fairly confident it wasn't all that complicated, she worked to duplicate it with a new one from the pile. It took her more than a few tries and three pricks of her finger with the pin before she had a reasonable facsimile assembled on the baby. She stood back and put her hands on her hips, nodding with pride.

"Now, for me." She pulled off her shirt and the baby kicked his legs. "Oh yes, I'm sure you're thrilled. You've gotten a woman to take off her clothing for you. You naughty, little thing." She poked him in the belly, and he blinked at her. She stilled, studying him now that he wasn't crying or asleep.

His brown eyes were so dark, darker than hers, and there was an endlessness to them that was oddly unsettling. He also had a nearly bald head of soft, wispy, blond hair, a cupid's bow mouth, and round, pink cheeks. "You know," she said softly, tilting her head to the side. "You are sort of cute when you're not screaming."

She moved away toward the sink, reaching back to unhook her bra. It was soaked through, and since it was now the only one she had, she would need to rinse it out. She laid it on the counter and moved toward the pile of clothing. Just as she reached it, a loud, keening sound came from the bed, then turned into a wail and she hurried right back over to check on him. Tears were coming from his eyes, and his lower lip jutted out mournfully. Gaby picked him up again and ran a soothing hand over his head.

"I suppose you can help me," she sighed as she tried to figure out how to carry him one-handed. Eventually, she settled him into the crook of her elbow and wrapped a hand around his thigh to secure him. Once she was sure he was stable, she sifted through the pile of oversized men's shirts,
and held up the lone, muslin dress. "This one," she asked, then dropped her hand before lifting it again. "Or this one?" The baby choked out another long cry, and Gaby sighed again. "This one it is."

She turned around and jumped at the sight of a tall form just inside the window. In the second it took her to realize it was Illya, she had her knife in her hand, pointed at him, the muslin in a pile on the floor.

"It is me," he announced, several moments too late.

"You have to stop doing that," she growled, lowering her knife. "I swear you are too quiet for such a large man."

"I did not mean to startle you." He was staring up at the ceiling, his arms full of cloth-wrapped parcels. Gaby frowned, wondering what he was doing. She looked at the ceiling and saw nothing. Then it dawned on her. She was standing there completely naked from the waist up.

An unwelcome awareness zinged up her spine. It made her breasts tingle, her nipples pulling tight and she made a sound of annoyance as she pushed the bawling baby toward him. "Here, take this." Illya did, wrangling the parcels into one arm to do so, and his eyes glanced over her before darting away again. The look sent another frisson of heat through her, and she held her breath as she turned her back to him.

She wanted him to look at her, she realized. Wanted to watch him as he took her in, but now was not the time for those kinds of thoughts. And never would be the time for actual indulgence. She couldn't let herself go there, not with him. Not ever.

She grabbed the dress and yanked it on over her head, setting her fingers quickly to the tiny row of buttons that ran up the front. Once she was covered, she reached underneath to remove the rest of her gear.

"Did you get milk?" she asked, seeking to distract herself and hopefully him as well. She noticed the baby had stopped crying and turned to see Illya holding him on his shoulder, swaying in a slow circle, humming in a low, soothing rumble. He'd accomplished in a minute what she hadn't managed all night: to soothe the little beast.

"Yes," he replied, his voice modulated and calm. "I also found some more clothing and a bottle. We will need to boil some water to be sure it is clean."

"Boil water," Gaby said acridly. "Something I can actually do."

Illya looked at her. "You are doing fine."

"I've never held an infant before tonight," she confessed, searching in the cupboard for a pan. "I've never even really been around one for any length of time."

"They can be very intimidating for something so small."

"And how are you so good at it?" she wondered, twisting the faucet to fill the pot.

A series of emotions played over Illya's face, and he focused on the baby as he spoke, instead of her. "There was a time in my life where I had opportunity to gain experience," he murmured. Gaby waited, but he offered nothing else.

_How delightfully cryptic_, she thought. And how typical of him to hide from her.
"How are we getting to the extraction point tomorrow?" she asked. Deciding not to press him. "Steal another car?"

"I think we will have to," he replied. "Public transportation is too open. We will be seen."

"We will be more conspicuous with the baby."

"Perhaps not." He lifted his eyes from the child to her again. "We may look less suspicious. We will look like a family."

She paused on the thought, her eyes locking on his face. He was standing there with a baby in his arms, and she was in the kitchen boiling water in her bare feet.

She turned away quickly, back to the project at hand, lighting the stove and setting the pot over the flame. Her bra was still in the sink, and she ran the cold water again, rinsing it as the memory of how he had found her crept back into her mind.

She couldn't stop herself from wondering if he had liked what he saw.

Illya paced with the baby as Gaby worked in the kitchen, his brain spinning over strategies, routes, and alternates. They were in trouble. It had been a risk from the start, such a hastily made plan, but Waverly had never intentionally put them in danger before, always careful, always accounting for multiple contingencies, and Illya could see how important this mission had been. Now that he was holding the "package" in his arms, he realized it was more so than any of them had thought.

He mentally went over the maps and patted the baby when he fussed, rumbling in a low, gentle voice. He tucked the little head up under his chin and hummed like Nurse Golovina had shown him all those years ago.

But even with all of this to consider, his eyes and thoughts were drawn to the woman across the room with frustrating persistence.

Gaby moved with that perfect, controlled grace he had always admired on her, long before he'd ever actually met her. She was standing at the sink, washing something, her face a mask. He wondered if she were still angry with him.

They had set a lamp on the floor—there was no other place to put it—and it cast a dim, upward glow.

It also highlighted the fact that Gaby's stolen dress was very translucent. His gaze traveled over her, then flicked away, guilty. He could easily see the silhouette of those gorgeous legs he so admired through the material, her strong, lean thighs where they should have been hidden from view. When she bent forward, he could also see the line of her flat belly up to the under curve of her breasts.

He exhaled slowly and bounced the infant in his arms, more out of a need to move his own body and refocus himself than anything else. The memory of her topless when he'd returned from his errand...

He'd crawled in through the window, seen the expanse of her bare back and been beguiled by the length of her spine, the ripple of muscle beneath her skin. He had meant to announce himself, warn her, but the sight of her had stolen his ability to speak.

Then she'd turned around, and he'd gotten an arresting view of her naked breasts.
He'd seen Gaby in various stages of undress before, but he had never seen her breasts, had always tried to be the gentleman and give her as much privacy as any situation could afford when it called for changing in each other’s presence.

They were even sweeter and more perfect than he had imagined.

Not that he allowed himself to imagine often, but he was a man and he... well, he wanted her. There wasn't any point in lying to himself. There was more to it than that, more... everything, but wanting her was a certainty, and with the image of pert breasts and their rosy, dark nipples filling his head, he was finding her even more tempting than usual.

He heard the water coming to a boil and moved toward Gaby, thinking to offer his help, but she was fine, of course, as capable as always. She lowered the glass baby bottle into the pot and pushed it around with a wooden spoon, making sure all of it was covered.

"It won't take very long," he told her.

"I know." She stepped back to the sink and came up a bit of wet material, wringing it out, then giving it a shake before reaching to hang from the towel rack. Realizing it was her bra, all white satin and lace, he jerked his head away and tried to cover his reaction by shushing the baby.

"They killed his parents, didn't they?" The tone of her voice brought him out of himself, and his eyes rose to see her staring at the wall over the sink. It was said as more statement than question, but Illya heard the trace of hope there, hated that he was about to wipe it away.

"Yes."

"They were not far from the butler."

She nodded and turned away, reaching for one of the clean nappies to dry her hands.

"I think the men in the house were Mafia," he continued, trying to keep on task. "They must have sold the baby to THRUSH."

"So, I assume those people are important to Minister Novak. This baby is important to him."

"It does not matter," he said. "We will get him safely to UNCLE and go from there."

"Right," Gaby commented flatly. "It doesn't matter."

He felt a lump form in his throat at the bleak note in her voice. "I did not mean it like that."

Gaby shook her downcast head and sighed, apologetic. "I know."

She searched through the kitchen drawers and pulled out a long-handled fork. He watched as she used it with the spoon to lift the bottle from the water and set it on another clean nappy.

He wanted to go to her, pull her into his arms. To give her comfort or to take his own, he didn't know. He only knew that he ached to have her closer.

But then, he always did.

Their argument earlier was a strong reminder of why that would never be possible.

"So, this means THRUSH won't be the only ones searching for us."

The words pulled him back into the current reality. She glanced up at him, and he knew he looked
grim.

Her smile was gentle. "Not the toughest spot we've been in."

An answering smile pulled at his lips, relieved at the ease behind her words, the lack of hostility. They were colleagues and they could be a good team. He would have to content himself with that. "No, it is not."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you again to my wonderful betas, diadema, Festiveviolet31, and SydneyMo, for all your help and encouragement as I pull this baby together. You ladies are the best and I’m so thankful for you! [All mistakes are my own.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Illya woke with a start. Body tensing, he sat up, his mind jumping back to their situation with the quickness of a soldier and spy. Anemic dawn light cast a pale glow to the unfamiliar room. The KGB safehouse. A baby slept beside him on the bed, the “package” they had been sent to retrieve. Gaby was asleep on the other side of the mattress, her back to him. He turned to the window.

A noise from outside in the alley that woke him, he was certain. He was shoving his feet into his boots when he heard it again: the crunch of the glass he had broken and scattered around the bottom of the fire escape. He moved across the room and peered out from behind the dingy curtain, trying to remain out of sight. He didn’t see them yet, but the feeling in his gut was really all he needed.

He had gone to bed dressed in the clothes he had found the night before: brown, corduroy trousers and a blue and green flannel shirt, too-short sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He turned to the bed to wake Gaby, but she was already sitting up, watching him. At his look, she reached for her boots, unlaced and ready beside the bed.

They’d packed what supplies they had in a stolen knapsack which was waiting for them by the door. They’d wiped the place of their prints and burned the baby’s clothing to be sure they were rid of the tracker the mob had attached to him.

The baby himself was still an obstacle. They had no way of carrying him that didn’t take up the use of at least one arm. It was a problem he put a pin in at the back of his mind as he checked his Makarov and then scooped the little one up. Beside him, Gaby swung the backpack over her shoulder.

They slipped silently out the front door and made it down one flight of stairs before they encountered their enemy. Illya was the fastest with his shots, taking out the first two with effortless precision. The baby jolted awake in his arms at the sound of the gunshots and started screaming, his arms flailing. Illya grimaced and changed his grip, trying to cover the tiny ears. Gaby checked over the banister of the open stairwell and fired at the men coming up from below.

As they ran, people's heads started popping out of their apartments all along the hallway, and Illya cringed internally. They are not used to this type of activity, he thought. They were used to calm nights and low crime. Otherwise, they would know to stay away when bullets were flying.
"Go back inside!" Gaby shouted, turning to a woman who had stepped into the hallway looking
determined to scold them.

"Keep it down", he imagined her saying. "Some people are trying to sleep."

Gun shots sounded behind them and the woman’s door splintered. She screamed and finally heeded
Gaby’s warning, running back into her flat, waving her hands frantically.

It might have been funny if it hadn’t been so dire. He twisted around and took out two of the men
coming down the hall.

Some people are trying to survive.

They bolted down the stairs and through the lobby, then the narrow front steps. The early morning
streets were empty which left the two spies as easy to spot as their enemies. Gaby rushed across the
cobblestone to the alley between the opposing buildings, and Illya followed her, taking a second to
turn and fire back at the men exiting the building after them.

A bullet shattered the brick next to him, and the shards of it peppered the hand that held the baby. He
ran down the alley, slowing long enough to check the infant's smooth, finely-haired scalp. There was
only one, small cut, but he cursed as he brushed a thumb over it. Fear jangled his nerves in a way he
had not experienced since he was a boy. Would he be able keep this child safe?

Illya wrapped his other hand around the crying infant as he hurried over the worn cobblestones,
boot-heavy steps resounding over the close walls. Indecision pecked at him. He needed to give Gaby
time to find a vehicle, to keep these men off her back, but he was also the one with an infant in his
arms.

Through the mouth of the alley, he caught sight of her dashing in and out of the parked cars, her lithe
body making it seem like a graceful dance, and he sent a quick check up to the windows that faced
the street. It was as an ideal a time for lifting a car as it was un ideal. Everyone was home, settled
down in their apartments, sleeping or preparing for their day. But, it was also light enough to see, and
they were fully exposed.

He twisted and fired down the lane when he heard footsteps join his. It was narrow and straight,
lining his enemy up as an easy target. Unfortunately, the reverse was also true. Several bullets
whizzed past him, and he ducked out around the corner, tucking himself up against the wall as they
continued to fire. He looked to Gaby and caught her eye as she found an open door. Covering the
distance in a sprint, he placed the baby in the passenger seat and turned back the way he had come
just as the men poured out into the street.

There were five of them. A bullet ricocheted off the roof of the car Gaby was boosting and Illya
glowered. He pulled out his other pistol and started shooting, sidestepping across the street, drawing
their attention and their fire away from his partner and the child. He caught one man in the shoulder,
another in the head before they took cover.

The engine came to life, and Gaby pulled away from the curb. He lunged for the passenger door,
ready to scoop up the baby but the seat was vacant, the child laying across Gaby's lap instead,
bawling his head off. One of her hands secured him there as the other maneuvered the car out into
the street.

She aimed the vehicle at their assailants and slammed on the gas before Illya had even closed his
doors. The sound of the engine revving shattered the morning air in a way even gunshots hadn’t,
vibrating the windows and echoing off the brick walls. Two of the three men dove out of the way of
the speeding car, but she clipped the third, and he spun off to the side, rolling away under an old truck.

Gaby peeled off into the city, tires squealing over cobblestone as Illya took the baby from her lap and settled it in his arms.

"They really need to invent a way to strap one of those down inside a car!" she complained as they swung around the first corner. "This does not seem safe!"

"We will invent it together," he returned, checking their rearview mirror for a tail, and Gaby laughed.

Their extraction point was on the outskirts of the next populated area: a small village that sat on the border of Iestrye and Austria. They drove up into the mountains, Gaby at the wheel, stopping far more than they would otherwise in order to deal with the baby.

He needed to be fed.

He needed to be changed.

He cried and cried for no reason that Gaby could understand.

She was continually amazed at Illya's patience with him. She'd never seen this in him before, this sort of mindfulness.

No, that wasn't really true, she thought. He had been like this with her in Rome, when she'd told him she was scared.

Before they arrived in the small village, they ditched the car — off the side of a mountain. Gaby felt a twang of regret for the poor vehicle as well as its owners as she watched it roll toward its fate. They had taken whatever contents they'd found inside and added it to the knapsack. They might be on their way to an extraction, but Illya was a big proponent of being as prepared as possible. Over the year they'd been working together, she'd come to agree with that philosophy.

Illya took the backpack from her, despite her insistence she was fine with it, and they hiked into town. They took turns carrying the baby, however, and he seemed to cry the instant she was in her arms. She made a face and tried to hold him like Illya did, but it was no use. Her hands were simply not large enough.

At one point, he began to squirm and squiggle his way down her chest, rubbing his nose back and forth over the fabric of her dress until he found skin, and then started mouthing at her. It took several moments before she realized he was going for her breast. She blinked, stunned and a bit embarrassed, and lifted him to her shoulder, sparing a quick peek at Illya to see if he had noticed. Luckily, he was focused on the horizon, frowning at the gathering clouds, and it filled her with a modicum of relief.

The baby fussed, wiggling in her hold, and she rubbed circles over his back without conscious thought.

"I know you miss your mother," she murmured, a wash of sadness and sympathy clutching at her insides. "But you won't be finding any of that here."
“What?” Illya asked, turning back.

“Nothing!” The word rushed out of her, and she hoped the warmth in her cheeks didn’t give her away. “Just trying to calm him down,” she added.

His brow lowered, looking like he wanted to press her. He didn’t, instead reaching for the baby. “We need to hurry. I do not want us to be caught in the rain.”

Red-roofed buildings were nestled into the foothills, a church spire was outlined against snow-capped mountains that rose up in the distance. Gaby patted the sobbing baby in her arms as they entered the small village. She looked around at the people moving by, listened to their pleasant chatter. Despite the peaceful setting, something in the air felt off. A rustle of apprehension that trickled through her blood and along her skin. Her eyes darted to Illya’s face and his expression told her he sensed it as well.

He pulled her close, and they moved through the side streets as a couple. He took the baby, who quieted immediately, and reached for her hand. His was large and cool, and she accepted the gesture, squeezing his fingers unconsciously.

It was part of the cover, that was all, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t conscious of the zing that shivered up the length of her arm as they made contact. She lifted her chin and kept her eyes forward, setting herself against the desire it roused. Then a man and woman rounded the corner, and she remembered their situation, turning to smile up at him indulgently.

She tapped the baby on the nose lightly with her finger, trying to look like this was a normal day for her. He made a face like he might cry, and she tried not to scowl at him. Don’t blow my cover, little beast, she thought.

Illya came to an abrupt stop when they reached the end of the block, and Gaby glanced at him, then followed his gaze across the street. An Autobianchi Primula was waiting there, shiny-domed and engine running. Beside it, Agent Elena Accosta waited in the afternoon sun, her dark hair tied back at the nape of her neck. She was wearing a pair of rolled-up trousers with a sleeveless blouse and appeared as any other woman hanging out near the park. She was a familiar face, and Gaby felt a wash of relief at the sight of her.

She started to smile, but a movement in the park caught her attention and it fell away. A man, shaking out his morning paper. On the other corner, a broad-shouldered brute was pretending to walk his dog. That sense of foreboding returned, and Illya pressed into her side, moving her closer to the wall.

TH Rush was here, and they were not alone. She recognized one of the mafiosos from the night before and she swore long and fluent under her breath. Agent Accosta made eye contact and gave a very slow shake of her head.

Their extraction was blown.

Illya and Gaby pulled back as one, Gaby tossing a quick, regretful look over her shoulder at the waiting car, before hurrying forward with her partner, her eyes scanning for potential threats as she continued to grip his hand. They needed a place to be out of sight so they could figure out their next
steps.

Napoleon Solo whistled gently as he made his way down the hall to Waverly's office. He had one hand in his pocket, affecting an air of indifference, even as he smiled at two passing female agents.

"Ladies," he offered in greeting.

"Agent Solo," one acknowledged.

"Welcome back," the other added as they continued on their way. He followed them with his eyes for a moment before refocusing on his destination.

The walls were a warm, off-white, the space more open than the halls he was usually in at Langley. His shiny shoes sounded different on the hardwood floors than they had on the stark linoleum. Two people were waiting in the area outside the old man's office, and they looked up when he rounded the corner, both offering him a small, sociable wave. He nodded to them.

He wouldn't admit it if you asked him, but he was glad to be back.

Waverly's receptionist smiled at him as he approached, and he gave her one in return, his charm at full wattage. She blushed prettily, and her dark eyes flitted away.

"Good morning, Jun."

"Good morning, Agent Solo. Welcome back." She sounded breathless, and he allowed himself to enjoy the effect he had on her, soaking it up, his grin widening.

"Thank you." He smoothed the front of his suit. "He ready for me?" he asked, pointing at the closed office.

"He's on a phone call," she replied. "But he told me to send you in."

Solo thanked her and crossed the room at an unhurried pace, pushing through the heavy double doors and slipping inside his superior's inner sanctum. It was a large room, with a textured, taupe wallpaper and a row of windows that allowed a view of the city. There was a round conference table on one side of the room, circled with warm, leather chairs.

"I understand, Accosta," Solo heard before he had even taken in the room. Waverly stood behind his broad desk, one arm folded over his chest to support the other, a phone receiver held to his ear. He was dressed in his usual three-piece suit, this one a dark gray, the jacket unbuttoned.

"... And were they able to relay any information to you?"

There was a moment of quiet, and Solo could just make out the sound of Elena's voice on the other end of the line. Waverly turned to him as he entered and waved a hand at a near by.

"A baby?" Waverly continued into the phone, brow wrinkling. There was another pause. "That is a very disturbing thought, but I'm afraid I wouldn't put it past THRUSH to stoop to that level... No, come home, there is nothing else that you can do there. Agents Teller and Kuryakin—" at their names, he looked directly at Solo, "—will have to make their way to the backup extraction. Good
job, Agent."

Solo frowned up at his boss. He'd been expecting his partners to be here. "Where exactly are Gaby and Peril?" he asked as soon as the phone was replaced in its cradle.

Waverly didn't answer right away. Instead, he rested his chin in his hand, one, crooked finger pressed to his lips.

"I thought they were both here, training and assisting," Solo continued at the lack of response.

"That was the plan, Solo," Waverly said after another beat. "Unfortunately, something of rather extreme importance came up while you were away." He moved to a locked filing cabinet and used a key hooked to his waist by a chain to open it. He retrieved a file, bringing it to Solo, and taking a seat on the corner of the desk as he brought him up to speed.

"But something went wrong," Solo finished once he had the story.

"It would seem so, although with these things, it is difficult to determine. We had only a basic idea of what they were headed into and, therefore, minimal ability to account for contingencies." He pushed off the desk. "Something went wrong or something unexpected came into play. Considering Agent Accosta just told me they showed up at the extraction point with an infant and that both THRUSH and the Branković Family—local mafia—showed up right on their heels, rather indicates it was a little of both."

"I'm sorry?" Solo questioned, glancing up from the folder. "Did you say, 'infant'?"

That ironic Waverly smile met his inquiry. "I did. From the news coming out of Iestrye, there was a home invasion of a wealthy family outside of Gondri, which is where your partners were headed. The couple and their household staff were murdered, several known mafia members were found dead as well, and—" he lifted a photo from his desk and handed it to Solo, "—there was this fellow."

"Morgan Black." Solo recognized the man instantly. They had run into him before.

"Whom we know to be working with THRUSH."

"Alive?"

"No."

"And the extraction?"

"Blown. Agent Accosta said men were there waiting for them, but there is a secondary extraction point; unfortunately, it will require them to move through Slovenia to Trieste, where a boat will take them to Venice."

"Slovenia?"

"They do say it's lovely this time of year," Waverly said, but there was no humor in his countenance.

"I'm off to Italy then?"

"No." Before Solo could object, Waverly added, "France. I have a contact there that can, hopefully, give you more information and possibly some resources. I have a feeling we are going to need them."
Chapter End Notes

(See, I told you I didn't forget him. lol)
The small cottage was backed up against the rugged foothills, surrounded by trees and shrubbery. Its windows were dark, its red, tiled roof littered with several weeks of debris. The pile of mail and newspapers on the front stoop that indicated the owners were not at home.

It was perfect.

Of course, the residents could return any time, but it was a chance Gaby and Illya were willing to take. They had been walking for hours, and Gaby could hardly remember when the rain had first started. Illya had tucked the infant inside his shirt while Gaby had stolen a woman's raincoat off the back of a chair to keep the worst of it off him.

It was a miserable set of three that broke into that little house, shivering within its cold, lonely interior. Gaby went immediately to the fireplace and began setting logs into it.

"His fingers are like ice." Illya's worried tone drew Gaby's attention. She found him peering down at the baby, enveloping one of his hands in his own.

As if Illya's hands could warm anyone, she thought with an absent-minded fondness.

She lit a match and watched the flames lick at the tinder she'd placed there, taking hold, starting to grow. "He is sleeping though. That's good," she remarked.

"Actually." Illya's voice was soft. "Babies will often sleep when things are not good. If the world is too much for them, they—" he waved his hand as if trying to find the wording, "—shut down."

"Right. Over-stimulated... You mentioned that. So, maybe it's bad then?" She pushed to her feet. "I'll find a blanket. Keep him close to your skin."

There was a flicker of a smile on his lips. "I know."

Gaby said nothing. Of course, he knew. He was Illya. He knew how to survive a Russian winter, knew how to drive like a professional, knew how to stitch up a knife wound and hardly leave a scar, and apparently, he was a master of babies as well. "But God forbid he hold his temper when someone pushes his buttons," she muttered, as she turned down the hall in search of a linen closet. "Aha!" She opened the door at the very end and found a selection of quilts and blankets, all neatly folded. Seizing two off the top, she headed back into the living room.

Illya had removed his shirt and was standing near the fireplace, swaying gently with the now naked
infant in his arms. His hair was darkened with rain and flattened over his forehead. The fledgling fire touched him with its burgeoning light, while moonlight from the window behind him reflected off his damp skin, drawing deep shadows. It highlighted his hard planes, the curvature of his muscle, casting him in hues of blue and yellow as if by a painter’s hand.

She stopped in the doorway and stared, quilts clutched to her chest, a million thoughts skittering through her head as she realized he was singing.

She had often been nonplussed by the softness that Illya still had inside him, and it had taken her a long time to really trust in it. Based on what she knew of his life, she didn't know or understand how he had held onto that part of himself, but she knew it was one of the things that drew her to him.

That tenderness was showing through now, but on a whole, new level, and its effect on her was... unsettling.

Illya holding a baby.

Gaby had never really thought about children for herself. In Germany, the thought had seemed far too daunting, and she had been young. Then Waverly had come along, and she wasn't going to bring a husband into that scenario, much less a child, and now she worked for UNCLE. A family and children hardly seemed like wise choices for a spy.

But watching Illya comfort this child was doing things to her insides, and she wasn't entirely certain she liked it. She could do nothing to stop that treasonous part of her brain which set forth the idea of Illya as a husband, as a father...

Of course, that idea was ridiculous. Illya worked for the KGB. He belonged to them, and someday, he'd go back to them. The spark between them, the heat, the zing, and whatever it was that made her feel so much more... herself when she was near him, had to remain just as they were, walled off and separate.

She knew, as surely as she knew anything, that if she got any closer to him, it would kill her when he left.

"I found some blankets," she announced, pushing the thoughts aside and coming fully into the room.

She stepped up close, eyes skirting over Illya's bare shoulders. Very nice, broad shoulders which she knew could lift her above his head with ease. She hid them from view as she laid one of the heavier quilts over man and child. Her hands rubbed the fabric along the baby's little body in hopes of warming him faster.

"Thank you." Illya pulled the material tighter, his eyes scanning her from head to toe. She could feel the chilly, damp material of her dress clinging to her, and her body gave a traitorous shiver. Illya scowled. "You need to get out of those wet clothes."

"Let's be sure the Beast is all right first."

He frowned. "Beast?"

"Yes," she said. "I can't very well continue calling him 'the baby'. It's demeaning."

A soft chuckle. "And 'Beast' is less demeaning?"

"He is a beast," she insisted. "Always squalling and pawing at me."
"Pawing at you?"

She felt the warmth of a blush touch her cheeks and stepped away. "Never mind. I would say by the looks of this place, a woman lives here. I will see what she has for clothing." She left the room, turning back only once to find him watching her. He averted his eyes as soon as she caught him, and she wondered what, exactly, he'd been looking at...

The baby had remained asleep, a scant, precious weight in his arms, no longer icy-fingered. He looked down at the small face, pink and peaceful, and his anger roiled. It was not right that an infant should have to go through this ordeal. That people should use someone so tiny and helpless to meet their own desires. He remembered seeing the bodies of the parents, remembered distinctly that the mother had fallen facing the stairs as if her last instinct in life had been to get to the child and protect him.

*Her son would never even know her.*

"What has Beast done now?" Gaby asked, coming out from the hallway wearing what was indisputably the most horrific house dress he had ever seen. "You're glaring at him."

Illya’s frown deepened. "What are you wearing?"

She peered down at the swath of floral material that was two sizes too big and shrugged. "It was easy. Dry and comfortable."

"It is... difficult to look at."

She walked up to him, her chin raised. "Then don't look at it."

He rolled his eyes at her.

"There are men's clothes in there as well," she said. "You should go change too. " She was carrying the cotton dress from before, and he watched as she hung it on a rack to dry by the fireplace. Then, he turned and laid his charge down on the sofa, bolstering him on the open side with a pillow, and headed off to get out of his own, wet things.

He found a pair of trousers that were too wide as well as too short and slid them on, exasperated at the sight of his ankles sticking out of the bottom as he tightened the belt, so they would stay up.

When he re-emerged, Gaby was laying a map out on the table. She looked up and then did a double take, her hand flying to her mouth, shoulders curling in as if to try and suppress a laugh.

"Yes, it is very funny," he said. "For the woman who is wearing bedsheets."

"You really are entirely too tall." She turned back to her task. "Our secondary extraction is in Trieste, but I'm not sure how we are going to cross the Slovenian border without papers."

"It is definitely a problem," he agreed as he moved to stand beside her and gave his attention to the paper pressed beneath her hands. Her fine but very capable hands; he noted she was still wearing the fake wedding ring and ran his thumb over his own. "But I think I can write something up."
Gaby frowned. "That's risky."

"Everything is a risk at this point," he said, pulling the map closer and looking down at it.

"Perhaps we should split up," she suggested, voice soft.

"No.\)" It came out much too harsh, and she glared at him. Still, he shook his head, then let his gaze travel over her face and gentled his expression. "I do not want to split up," he maintained. "Maybe we will need to at some point, but not now. We are safer together."

Gaby's stance relaxed, tension leaving her shoulders, and he had a feeling she was relieved.

"Neither do I," she admitted. "But they are probably watching for a couple with a baby." Her tone was milder, but she sighed and rubbed her forehead. She took a moment to study the routes further. "I think we should cross into Austria instead." There was something in her tone he couldn't quite put his finger on, an unease he rarely heard from her. "Head to Paris that way."

"They will be expecting that," he told her. "They are likely already there, waiting."

"They can have the whole country covered, Illya. It's tiny." She put a finger down where Iestrye met the border of Austria. "This is the easiest entry and the safest route."

"Not with handwritten papers," he said, and Gaby stilled, catching on. If he hand wrote the papers, they would be Soviet. "Going into Hungary would be best."

"No!" Gaby responded.

Illya turned to her and caught the hunted look that came over her eyes before she managed to hide it. She didn't want to go behind that Curtain. He knew that. He just hadn't realized how on edge she was being this close to it. "You have crossed over before and made it home without incident."

A flare of anger and defensiveness had her straightening her shoulders. "Not like this," she told him. "You of all people know they won't need much of an excuse to bury me."

His jaw tensed. "I would not let that happen."

"Oh," she asked. "And you have that much pull, Mr. Soviet?"

Her tone was cutting, and he barely withheld growling back at her. Of course he understood her fear. Didn't she understand that, as a KGB agent, he ran that risk every day he was on this side of the Curtain? Non-Soviet-aligned countries would need no excuse to bury him.

He exhaled to steady himself. "It doesn't matter. We need to get to Trieste. That extraction is established and that makes it the safest. UNCLE will at least have some idea of our location. That means going through Slovenia. The border there is longer and—" he studied the map, "—we could probably avoid border patrol altogether by crossing here."

Gaby eyed where he was pointing. "You want to go through the mountains?"

"We will hike, yes."

"With an infant," she deadpanned. He raised an eyebrow since that part was obvious. "With no tent," she continued. "No warm gear."

"We will have to get supplies."
"That means going into a town." She chewed her lip thoughtfully.

"It is risky, but I think it is the best idea. We do not want to go completely off-grid unless we must. Waverly will have someone waiting for us in Venice."

Gaby peered at the map again, drawing a line with her fingertip. He watched her hand, those slender fingers, until they stopped on Trieste.

"Yugoslavia is not part of the Warsaw Pact," he said, an instinct he wasn't sure of, but a desire to soothe her that felt as natural to him as breathing. "They have no loyalties to East Germany, if..." He stood up. "If we are caught by them, they will be reasonable for Waverly to deal with."

She glanced up at him and then crossed her arms. "He is a very persuasive man."

The look on her face was encouraging. "He probably already has an arrangement with Tito."

She answered his smile with one of her own. "You are probably right."

Gaby stretched her back, and the terrible house dress she wore tightened over her chest. His gaze ran down her body and then quickly away. She didn't need him ogling her, and he didn't need the distraction.

"I will go see if these people have coffee," he said. "And... they have been gone for some time, but perhaps there is something in the cupboards."

"Yes, much easier to plan with a full stomach."

He started toward the kitchen, and Gaby followed.

"You know," she said, words hesitant in a way he recognized as meaning she was going to say something he wouldn't like. "There is also another option."

Cautiously, he turned back, his look saying 'continue' before he went to open the first cupboard. There was nothing inside but dust-covered dishes.

Gaby leaned back against the counter, her fingers tapping along the edge. "I can try to contact René."

Illya felt his body go cold and his blood go hot simultaneously. René Faucheux was one of Gaby's contacts. She'd picked him up on some mission Illya hadn't been involved in, and now the Frenchman was a part of her 'spy kit,' as Solo called it. He was a mercenary and an arms dealer. A bohemian who flirted incessantly... flirted with Gaby, in particular. Always touching her—hand on her knee, fingers lightly on her arm. Illya felt his own fingers tighten brutally on the cupboard door.

"No."

"Illya, he is closer than anyone else, and putting word out to him won't raise red flags with THRUSH whereas trying to contact anyone in America will."

"No." This time he growled it, twisting to face her with a scowl. Her back went up, and she moved into his space, completely unintimidated.

"You are not the head of this mission, Illya!" she berated. "We are a team. René has contacts everywhere—"

"Criminal contacts!"
"Who cares, as long as they get us and the baby out of here alive?"

"He is not trustworthy," he insisted, his voice a roll of thunder. "He is greedy, self-serving. A man like that would sell us out, easily, for the money they would offer for the child."

Gaby's eyes cut at him, but she didn't argue that point or throw his jealousy in his face. Because he knew, though he would deny it to hell and back again, that he was jealous, and so did she.

It also showed that she was smart enough not to fully trust the other man herself, which made his heart swell with ridiculous pride.

She let her hostility sink into him for a long moment, then sighed and turned away. "Let's just find something to eat."

Illya exhaled through his nose long and slow, turned back to the cupboard. "Right now, we have a sound plan," he explained, the belligerence fading. "We can get to Trieste on our own. We don't need outside help."

"And if something goes wrong?"

He looked at her face highlighted on one side by moonlight in the dark kitchen. Took her in, the unyielding set of her jaw, the curve of her cheek, committing the moment to memory. "We will cross that bridge if we come to it."

Chapter End Notes

And a quick mention. I didn't want to put this earlier because of spoilers, then I forgot, but I thought for the sake of full disclosure, everyone should know that the idea of a baby as a package came from an episode of the TV show Chuck. :) 

Also, on the personal front. I have a full schedule of travel that is going to prevent me from updating. Probably until September. (yikes I know!) I am really hoping I can get chapter seven out to you by then but, it might not happen. I'm sorry for making you wait!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Car repair, thieving, and a road trip.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I have managed to get one more chapter ready before heading off on my trips. I hope everyone doing well. I want to thank you again for all the kind comments and your patience! Special thanks to diadema, FestiveViolet31, and SydneyMo, for their continued help and support with turning this into an actually readable story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was a car in a shed at the back of the cottage. It wasn't in the best shape, but the engine purred to life after a few hours of care from Gaby's talented hands. She spent the night working on it, a shop light hanging next to her head, the ugly house dress catching the occasional oil drop or smudge. The sun was just peeking through the tall trees when she came in through the backdoor to find Illya in the kitchen. It was his second morning without a shave, and his jaw was already thick with dark gold stubble.

He was wearing his outfit from the day before, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows because they were too short. Gaby enjoyed the sight of his forearms as he bowed over the old stove, whisking the contents of a small pot.

"Are you making that milk mix for Beast again?" she queried as she leaned against the counter.

He nodded and lifted his head, taking in her grease-smudged face and mussed hair for a bit longer than she thought the look called for.

"Why can't he just drink the milk as it is?" she asked. "Isn't it for baby cows?"

"Baby cow is not baby human," Illya explained. "And this milk has had the fat removed. I need to add it back."

Gaby looked at the container on the counter and cringed. "Lard?"

Illya grimaced. "I am trying to make do."

Gaby shook her head. "I don't understand how you know these things. How do you even have any idea what is needed, or how much?"

"I learned."

Gaby opened her mouth to demand more detail but stopped herself as a horrifying thought entered her mind. She wouldn't put kidnapping babies past the KGB any more than she would THRUSH. If
Illya’d had to... well, she didn't want to think about it, much less know.

"I'm going to clean up," she offered instead, pushing off with her hip. "I hope he eats that. I think he is probably picky."

"We shall see," she heard him say as she left the room.

An hour later, she maneuvered her acquisition around to the front of the cottage to pick up her passengers. She was mostly clean, thanks to a sponge bath, and back in the light muslin from the day before. As much as she enjoyed Illya’s reaction to the house dress, she was happy to be wearing something more reasonable.

When she pulled to a stop by the front door, Illya considered the vehicle with an air of disapproval.

"What kind of car is this?" Beast was cradled in his arms, sucking happily away at the bottle Illya held for him. Apparently, he wasn’t picky after all.

Gaby smiled as she slid out of the driver seat. "It's a 'Frankencar,'" she said, running a hand over its rusty top. "Whoever lives here likes to make cars out of random parts."

“A man after your own heart.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Very funny.” She patted the fender. "I feel rather bad about stealing it."

"A prick of guilty conscience for taking from fellow chop shop person?"

“I did not run a chop shop, Illya,” she groused, not for the first time. “But yes.” She shoved off with a swing of her shoulders and came around the front end. She glanced at Beast. "He certainly is an eater."

"It is a good sign."

Gaby took in the way Illya watched the baby. There was no tapping of his fingers, no tension in his shoulders. The lines of his face were softened. The peace in him seemed significant, considering their situation, and she wondered at the effect the infant had on him.

Beast seemed equally enamored, staring up at Illya with wide-eyed wonder. Gaby had felt some of that herself when she'd looked up at the towering Russian for the first time as well. Awe with a healthy dose of fear mixed in.

"I'll go grab our things," she said, turning away from the tempting sight of them and heading back into the cottage.

Looking up at Illya no longer inspired fear in her. At least, not that kind of fear. Her life was not in danger from Illya.

Her heart definitely was.

Gaby drove them south and away from the border of Austria, deeper into the small country of Iestrye. The maps they had found indicated a small village nearby, and it was their hope that it would be isolated enough to be overlooked by THRUSH and the Mafia that were on their tail.

Her stomach rumbled loudly as she made her way along the winding road, and her eyes darted to
Illya who was *absolutely* repressing a smile.

The only thing he'd found in the cottage to eat had been two ancient cans of sardines. She hadn't been able to make herself eat them, and her inability to stomach the smell was what had sent her outside to look for the car in the first place.

Even with the complaint in her belly and the lightness in her hands that came with hunger, she didn't regret it. Sardines were repulsive, and the car had been a fun challenge.

"You need to eat," Illya commented, and she rolled her eyes.

"Are you sure? Perhaps I'm a robot."

"Then you will probably need to be charged." He tsked. "Very inconvenient. We cannot do that while we are moving..."

She scoffed, but a smile touched the corners of her mouth.

Illya rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe, I could put something together. A large yacht battery? What voltage do you require?"

Gaby smacked the back of her hand against his arm and heard him chuckle. She loved that sound. Illya’s laughter. Subtle and rare, it was a prize every time.

"Oh, you’re a comedian now?" She sighed, humor fading. “We will have to get food in the village anyway." "I'm not sure what kind of hit and run we are going to have to perform." She chewed at her lower lip and shook her head. "We need so many different things and we don't have any money."

"We won't go into the village," he reasoned. "We stay just outside. Most people will have gone into town to work."

"So, we will rob their houses," Gaby clarified distastefully. It was hardly the first time. Hardly the first time *that day*—she thought of the car she was driving—but it didn't make her feel any better.

Illya crossed his arms and sighed. He was slightly less intimidating with a sleeping baby sprawled across his lap. "We will do what we must," he said. "I am not pleased with it either. We will spread it out if we can."

Gaby nodded.

In the end, they managed to pull together two sleeping bags, some extra blankets, a tarp, and rope, as well as clothing for them and the baby. Illya was the one who thought of extra nappies and cans of milk. It hadn't even crossed Gaby's mind and, once again, she felt the sting of inadequacy where this mission was concerned. She wasn't prepared for this at all and she was getting more and more curious as to why Illya was.

At least they had both thought of food and cash, taking a small amount from each stash they found. Guilty fingers folding the bills and shoving them into pockets, or in Gaby's case, her bra.

Illya was leaning against the driver's side of the car when she returned the final time. She was carrying a basket of fresh foods someone had probably packed for their lunch and then forgotten in their rush. The sun was behind her, gleaming off the one, shiny spot of paint the Frankencar had and
making Illya's blond hair glow. His gaze swept over her as she approached, a very familiar look, though a bit more heated than usual. Hungrier. She pretended not to notice. It was something she did to maintain the balance and because she knew he wanted her to. Just like he pretended when he caught her looking at him the same way.

This time, though, there was something else to distract her. "You're wearing a suit," she said.

"It fit," he responded and looked down to where his ankles were not sticking out of the bottom of his trousers.

"You found the house of a man your size and you stole a suit? Not something more practical?"

Illya frowned. "This is all there was."

Gaby sighed. "You have stolen some poor, tall man's Sunday clothes." She tsked teasingly and moved to climb in the driver's seat.

"I will drive," he said, and she glared at him like it was a challenge. His face was gentle as he held her gaze, but there was a firmness in his eyes that brooked no argument. Not that that would stop her from giving him one. "You should sleep," he insisted before she could protest. "You were up all night working on the car."

Her eyes slid to the passenger seat and the wiggling, little mass of human waiting there. Arms waving, feet kicking the air. "I doubt I will be able to sleep."

"Rest then," he said. "You can close your eyes at least."

She started to lift her chin and then relented. She was tired. Tired enough that she'd be useless if they had to drive for their lives.

She looked at Beast again before reaching to pick him up. He stared back at her with those fathomless eyes, like he was assessing her, evaluating her competence, and then he started to cry.

It seemed she was useless here too.

She lifted him into her arms and set the basket on the floor before climbing inside. Illya slid into the driver's seat. He looked entirely too handsome in the textured suit he'd stolen. The earthy green was flattering to his skin tone, and Gaby took a second to appreciate it before Beast cut the moment short, grabbing onto her necklace and giving it a tug. Surprisingly strong for someone so tiny.

He wailed again, drawing Illya’s attention, and her pulse kicked up as she carefully untwisted the pudgy fingers. "No, Beast. That is not for you. You will hurt yourself."

The concealed ring slid from the collar of her dress, and sunlight caught the circle of diamonds that surrounded the faux pearl, scattering light throughout the cab of the vehicle as it dangled from the thin chain.

Her eyes darted over to Illya. She saw his drop to the ring then away and quickly tucked it back inside her dress. She occupied herself with checking Beast’s fingers for injury, instead of letting stray thoughts lure her in. The baby cried louder, his face turning red, and she held him out from her, both hands under his arms while her fingers still supported his head from behind.

"This is no way to treat your partners, Kleiner," she admonished. "We have a long way to go, and it would be much easier if you would cooperate."
"He is not our partner. He is more like an asset," Illya commented as he started the car and put it in reverse. He paused to look at her before he turned his eyes to the road. "And he is a tiny infant."

"He is a tiny tyrant, is what he is," Gaby rebutted, and Illya's muted smile was her reward. As the car pulled away from their hiding spot, Gaby continued to tell Beast, "Yes, you are a tyrant. I can see why THRUSH wants you. How better to destabilize the world? Agent of Chaos." The baby wriggled and bawled with no change, and she sighed as she tucked him into the crook of her arm. "Hopeless."

"He has had a very trying few days," Illya offered softly. "Can you blame him for being cranky?"

"I suppose not." She ran a palm over the baby’s head. His hair was surprisingly soft, and she ran it over him a second time. She noted a small scratch on his head and frowned.

Illya reached over and took one of Beast's hands. The little fist was dwarfed by Illya’s large, blunt fingers, and Gaby was transfixed by the sight of it. She thought then of the way Illya had carried him in the street with the enemy chasing them, how he had sung to him in front of the fireplace the night before, and every soft thing inside her stirred.

She cleared her throat, trying to quell the sensation, and reached down for the basket between her feet. "Let's see if he will let me eat some breakfast."

Gaby managed to eat a small portion of food with the cranky baby in her lap. A few pointers from Illya, which she tried not to resent, and she managed to hold him forward facing, her hand spread over his upper chest to keep him in place. She jigged her knee, almost on reflex, and his fussing seemed to taper off. He still didn't seem to be as happy as he had been in Illya's lap, but he wasn't screaming so she considered it a win.

In the bottom of the basket, she spotted something she recognized, and it brought a smile to her lips. She lifted the bottle of orange liquid and saw Beast turn his head as he caught sight of the intense color. She tilted her head and moved the bottle back and forth in front of him, watching him to follow it.

"I'm afraid this is not for you, Beast," she told him, drawing Illya's eye.

"What is that?" He scowled at the bottle like it was the enemy.

"It's a soda," she said, still watching Beast track it. "Surely, you have had an orange soda before."

Illya turned back to the road. "Not since I was a child."

"Well," she said brightly. "Now you can relive it. There is one for you too." She pulled out the second bottle and handed it to him. He turned it over in his hand for inspection. The action seemed overly cautious, and Gaby rolled her eyes. "It's not going to bite you."

"Is not very healthy," he murmured absently.

"Neither is getting shot at, but we seem to do that all the time."

Illya huffed a laugh, looking to her in surprise. "Well then," he asked, his demeanor changing. “Do you have a way to open this, Chop Shop?"

"Huh." She breathed, offended at his lack of faith and pulled a can opener from the basket, dangling
it in front of him. "Not that you don't have a dozen tools on you right now that could do the job," she
said as an aside. She opened it and handed it back, watched as he took a hesitant sip and then a
longer pull on the sweet liquid within. Something about his lower lip enchanted her, but she forced
herself to look away.

Beast chos that moment to start fussing again. She tried waving the bottle, but it was no use. Then
she felt the telltale wetness on her leg. "Ah!" she cried out, lifting him up. "He's wet again!"

Illya tucked the soda into his lap and maneuvered the car to the side of the road. Gaby climbed out
and laid the baby in the seat before going to the back for the nappies, and Illya automatically reached
over to secure him.

"There has to be a better plan then just getting peed on all the time," she said sharply as she came
back around.

"They make rubber pants, but I have not found any," Illya said. "Also, they tend to cause rash."

Gaby just stared at him, then shook her head. Who the hell was this baby guru?

She put Beast in a new gown, this one white with a duckling on it. She wasn't sure she understood
why there had to be baby animals on a baby’s clothes. She didn't wear adult animals on her clothes.
She undid the pins and slid it free of the cloth. This time, after watching Illya do the same that
morning, she had the new diaper ready before she took off the wet one. She slid it under his bum and
did a quick switch, covering his little attack penis before he could nail her with it.

"Ha!" she said in victory, and Beast waggled his arms as if he were offended at his plans being
thwarted. Gaby couldn't stop herself from smiling as she bent down to pin the fresh diaper in place.
When she had it snug enough, she pulled his gown back down and looked up to find Illya watching
her rather intently, his expression indecipherable.

"What?" she asked.

He was slow to respond, and when he did, it was a little shake of his head. "Nothing."

She frowned as she tied the ribbon at the bottom of Beast’s gown so his feet would stay covered.
Illya shifted in his seat. "You are getting the hang of this."

Gaby scoffed. "Right. I still got peed on, didn't I?" She returned to the back seat and their bag of
supplies, lifting out a pair of boys’ trousers, an undershirt, and button-up top. They were on a rather
empty stretch of road, so she pulled the trousers on under her dress, and then tugged it off over her
head, tossing it aside to quickly pull on the new shirts. When she returned to the front passenger seat,
Illya was staring stoically forward.

"Much more practical anyway," she said, lifting Beast and sliding into the seat. "Don't you think?"

He looked her over and lifted the corner of his mouth. "Definitely."

"You didn't like the dress?" she asked at his odd tone.

He shook his head just a hair too enthusiastically. "No, no the dress was fine. Well made..."

She narrowed her eyes. "What aren't you telling me?"

Illya took another drink of his soda and pulled back out onto the road. When she continued her
determined glare, he cleared his throat. "It was a little bit... see through."

Gaby's glare remained as she processed that information. Then her eyes widened, and she turned away. Well... She had a distinct memory of the way he'd looked at her earlier in the sunlight. She'd recognized the admiration, but now, realizing all that he had been admiring, it made her feel very warm. She also felt somewhat foolish for not noticing for herself.

"You could have said something."

"I—you didn't have anything else." He made a slight shrug.

"I could have worn the house dress," she refuted, lifting her chin.

He gaped at her, horrified, but then turned away shaking his head. "You are right," he said. "I didn't... it wasn't because I..." Gaby stopped the rambling with a hand on his arm.

"It's fine," she said. "The only person who saw me was you."

She felt the muscle in his forearm flex beneath her fingers and drew her hand back. She caught his eye and held it steadily for a few seconds before turning back to the window.

Nothing can come of it, she reminded herself, but there was no point in making him feel badly for looking when she didn't really have a problem with it, was there?

"So, how many more miles?" she asked, wanting to defuse the awkwardness that had fallen over them.

Illya exhaled as if in relief. "Is not far now. We will need to lose the car, then stop in one of the upcoming towns ahead for more milk. Head to the border on foot."

Chapter End Notes

See how nice I am? It's not even really a cliffhanger. :p See you in September!!
Chapter 8

I am back! Mostly back, lol (I have one more trip coming up.) I hope someone is sticking around for the rest of this baby but either way, it's going up. lol

Huge, tremendous thank yous to SydneyMo and Turningleaf for friendship, feedback, and lent ears. To Festiveviolet31 and especially diadema (who has read this too many times they poor woman) for beta work. I love and appreciate all of you so much.

To oceans_and_lovers, I'm sorry this has taken so long. I hope you are still up for the ride.

They ditched the car outside of the next town, rolling it silently into a copse of trees that lay between maturing fields of wheat and corn. Gaby packed up what was left of the bread and cheese, wrapping it carefully in a cloth and putting it in the top of her backpack while Beast lay on a blanket in the front seat, waving his hands and fussing. Illya retrieved a bolt of fabric he’d found during their last raid and rolled it out onto the ground to measure. Gaby straightened up when she spotted him. He hid a smile at the confused look on her face. Slipping off the stolen jacket, he handed it to her before winding the band of cloth around his body and over his shoulders using a precise pattern that, when tied around his hips, left him with a pouch in the front to tuck the infant into.

"That's clever," Gaby commented, arms crossed over her chest as she looked him over. He wondered if he imagined the flash of admiration. He knew he wasn’t misreading the inquisitive spark that showed there, her sharp mind questioning.

He supposed that, at some point, he was going to have to explain to her his experience with children. How would it be, he wondered, to speak with her about it? Talking, especially about his past, was something that usually brought a feeling of dread, tight fists, and anger but… somehow, with Gaby, the prospect felt different. Like maybe it would free him.

"Thank you," he offered, pushing aside that last thought. He straightened and moved toward the car. "But I did not invent it."

"Of course not," she returned with a scoff. "I am quite sure a woman invented that, and do you know what the really clever part of it is?"

Illya reached down to lift the child from the passenger seat. "What is that?"

"Now, he will pee on you."

Illya scowled half-heartedly but didn't hesitate to tuck the child in against his body, giving her an arch of his brow as he did so. He would deal with that if it happened. He adjusted the wrap, working to get a tighter fit around the baby's back to help support his neck, but he was a hand short. "Could you help me with—" he began, but Gaby was already there, turning his shoulder strap to make it lie
flat, pulling at the fabric to make it snug. He studied the crown of her head as she worked, taking in the feel of her hands on his body the scent of her hair, like sunshine, warm musk and the soap they’d found at the cabin. He took note of each detail, filing them away for future days.

When she gave his chest a final pat and tipped her face up to him, he smiled at her. "Thank you."

She didn't move away immediately, her eyes on his, and he took a slow, even breath, his pulse picking up a notch at the nearness of her. Her gaze swept his face, touching on his mouth, then she dropped her hand and turned away, brushing her bangs from her forehead. His gaze followed her retreat, skin cold where her hand had been, and watched as she swung her pack up onto her shoulders. She bowed briefly beneath the weight and he longed to take it from her but held himself back. Straightening, she shifted the weight into the most comfortable position she could find and fastened the belt at her hips. It was too loose and she tried to make it tighter, but she was simply too slender. She sighed, content to take it as it was, and Illya felt his ever-present admiration for her expand inside his chest.

"Come here," he directed, unable to keep the fondness from his voice. He took a few steps toward her and gestured with his hand. "Let me see if I can fix it." She moved to meet him and he tugged on the pack’s straps, managing to wrest a bit more tightness from them. A second tug brought her with it, and she fell against his chest, the baby pressed between them.

Gaby let out a sound of surprise as they made contact. She felt the warmth of Illya’s body beneath her hands, inhaled his spiced, masculine scent, and felt a flutter of longing spiral through her for the second time in mere minutes. Her fingers toyed with the fabric of his shirt as she warred with her body, then she pushed off quickly, righting herself and wiping her palms on her trousers as if it would stifle the low hum of need that touching him had created.

"Sorry," he rumbled, reaching out to steady her. The press of his strong fingers at her elbow did little to calm that buzz, and she pulled away, forcing her attention to the baby, who was now complaining against him.

"You'll have to say sorry to Beast," she rebutted. "I landed on him."

Illya peered down at the infant and began patting his back with a gentle thump. He quieted, but there was still an uneasy, restlessness to him. "He is being fussier than usual."

Gaby's eyes flashed with skepticism. "He's been fussy the entire time we've known him, which is all of two days," she said. "How can you know if he is fussier than usual?"

Illya frowned at her. She was teasing him. Again. It should bother him more, but he supposed he was getting used to it. There was something in her tone, the air with which she always delivered her mocking that seemed to lessen the sting. He refused to admit he might even have started to enjoy it.

She turned away to pull a big straw hat out of the car. All thoughts of her teasing, and what it might mean, fled when she turned back with a wide, sassy grin and plopped it onto her head. The brim shielded most of her face leaving only speckles of sunlight dancing across the bridge of her nose like freckles and he felt his heart pinch.

"Well, I’m ready," Gaby called, breaking him from his thoughts. “Do you need help with your pack?”

He shook his head and reached down to heft it over his shoulder. The movement was unstrained, and
he watched the small frown of jealousy touch her brow. He focused on his straps to hide the utter affection he knew was showing on his face. He would carry it all for her if she’d let him: carry her and the pack. She’d murder him just for the thought. There weren’t a great many ways he could be useful to Gaby, but this was one. He settled the weight of his pack, balancing it on his torso, and fastened the buckle around his hips, beneath the baby.

"Actually," he backpedaled. “Could you help me come up with an alternative for this?” He held up the chest strap that was used to help secure the two shoulder straps in place. He had been going without it but it would make his pack more comfortable. “This one has the buckle right in Beast’s face. I need it to be higher.”

There was a flair of life in her eyes. “Certainly. In fact, I think I have something that will work well,” she said, moving toward him with purpose and a smile.

…

On foot, it was easier to avoid the small towns and villages that were scattered over the Iestryian countryside. The two agents moved through and around farms, fields, and rocky terrain, taking winding paths and rural roads until they reached the last vestiges of community within Iestrye’s borders: a small village named Jana. They avoided the main streets and slipped into town through someone’s backyard, squeezing between close-set houses and a crooked wooden fence. Illya supposed they were not the least bit stealthy, with their large packs and the discontented baby on his front, but, if things went well, they would be in and out quickly enough.

The store they found was modest and cramped, forcing them to remove their packs in order to navigate the narrow aisles. The clerk at the counter eyed them warily as they entered, and Illya watched Gaby smile at him to soothe suspicion. He did the same. Though he could speak Slovenian, he didn’t have the accent down enough to hide his Russian roots. As long as they were in Iestrye, that could draw unwanted attention. He scratched at the stubble on his usually clean-shaven chin and glanced over Gaby’s masculine outfit. He had a feeling they were doing that anyway.

He patted Beast’s back tenderly and spoke to him in a low murmur. *Just a family out for an adventure*, he thought, in an attempt to make the sentiment show on his face. He tried not to let the way his chest tightened at the thought affect his countenance.

Gaby snatched up a large stack of nappies and held them up with a raised eyebrow as he approached.

“We’ll be needing all of these.”

He shook his head in amusement and then went in search of what they would need to feed the baby. She wasn’t wrong. The child was going through the diapers, and it wasn’t as though they had time, or resources, to do laundry. Once he had the milk in order, he quickly looked around for anything else they might need, grabbing up several items and carefully hiding them in his pockets before heading up the register. Their money was limited. He took a moment to think about his American partner’s reaction to his thievery and smiled as he laid out the things they would actually be purchasing.

They paid for most of the supplies with their stolen cash and paused just inside the open doorway to stow them away. Gaby had just slipped her pack back onto her shoulders when they both lifted their eyes to scan the street and stilled at the sight of the man out on the sidewalk. He was swarthy and
broad, a very large man with a shaved head and a dark clothing. He was also familiar. Illya quickly identified him as one of the men Gaby had missed with the car in Gondri. Gaby turned to him, her eyes wide, and he knew she recognized him as well.

As if they’d practiced the synchronization, they started away from the door, Gaby nearly silent on her dancer’s feet as she turned and headed toward the back of the store. Illya walked in reverse, his pack still in his hands as he kept the man in his sights. Another, smaller man came running up to the first, waving a familiar device recklessly through the air and pointing toward the store.

Illya swore under his breath and turned, picking up his pace. "They are tracking us," he hissed, coming up behind Gaby.

"What?" she demanded over her shoulder. "How?"

"You can't go back there!" the clerk shouted as they pushed their way through into the back room. Beast chose that moment to let out a scream of discontent, and a woman checking over inventory snapped her head up. She startled at their sudden appearance and let out a scream of her own.

"Where is back door?" Illya growled in Slovenian, towering over her, the language odd in his mouth.

She blinked, shrinking back from him, and then pointed a trembling hand. Gaby was already gone. He followed her, drawing his pistol before he had even reached the door. Gaby pushed it open and stepped out into the afternoon sunlight, gun raised, sweeping the cobblestoned alley. Illya burst out behind her, and they started running. He still hadn't strapped on his pack, and it was slowing him down as he tried to run and not hit the baby with it. Beast was still crying, and his voice echoed over the stone buildings around them, broadcasting their location like an air-raid siren.

"How are they tracking us?" Gaby had her PK up as she tipped around the wall, checking for anyone on the other side.

Illya shook his head. "I don’t know, but it explains how they were able to find us at the safe house."

"But how?" she insisted. "Where? And why haven't they found us sooner? Or at the cottage last night?"

"It must be short range."

"So," she bit out, acerbic. "They are here because they were expecting us?" Her voice tight with frustration, a feeling he could appreciate.

"It is one of few villages this close to the border." He swiftly lifted his pack into place on his shoulders.

Gaby’s free hand darted out to untwist one of his straps as she swore. "And now we've got to get far enough away that they can't track us. On foot."

Illya looked over her shoulder, something across the street glinting in the sunlight. He sighed. "Maybe not on foot."
Gaby’s thighs burned as she poured every ounce of strength into getting as much speed from her stolen bicycle as possible. Her straw hat was swept from her head and she let it go without a thought, adrenaline surging through her veins. Ahead of her, Illya was gaining a lead, the power, and the length of his legs more than enough to compensate for the extra weight he was carrying. They tore down a sidewalk full of people, sending pedestrians stumbling out into the street and various doorways. Gaby cringed at the attention they were drawing as the citizens shouted curses at them.

As they approached the corner, a group of people came around it, caught up in conversation. Illya was barreling toward them, the crying baby like a blaring horn, but Gaby called out a warning anyway to little use. A woman screamed, groceries scattered across the ground. Her partner swerved hastily out into traffic to avoid them, and Gaby's breath caught as a car slammed on its brakes, coming within an inch of his back tire. Horns started blaring all around them, more people crying out in anger and fear. Gaby’s only concern was that they were all in the line of fire.

She spotted their pursuers stumbling out of an alley to her left and tracked them as they pushed their way through the provoked crowd, one pointing a large pistol at Illya. Gaby yanked her own gun from her waistband, her hold on the handlebars wavering for just a moment as she rebalanced herself.

"Get down!" she shouted and fired off two shots over the heads of the innocent bystanders. The men ducked, along with everyone else, heads twisting back and forth before they spotted her. More chaos broke out in the square, people fleeing at the sound of gunfire. The henchmen turned their focus on her, both of their guns drawn, but they were jostled by the panicking crowd. Gaby didn't wait to see if they managed to get a bead on her. She stood up, her feet pushing into the pedals with all she had, swooping down the remainder of the street and leaning into the corner as the sound of gunshots cracked behind her.

Illya was watching with his gun drawn, stopped and ready to turn back for her. His eyes locked onto hers as she came into view. She waved her hand and flew past him. They didn't have time for worry, she thought, though she imagined she would have done the same if it had been him, and it wasn't just because he had the baby.

Bullets didn't care how big you were, how tall or strong or stubborn. They could take him down as easily as her, and the thought made her blood run cold.

They sped through the main part of town, dodging cars and people alike. Illya had just caught up with her when they rounded another corner and spotted several more men who fit the MO of the Iestryian mobsters they’d attacked in Gondri. If the huge revolvers strapped to their sides hadn’t given them away, the American car they were leaning on certainly would have. It took big money and heavy pull to get that car here, and only a specific type of person was going to show it off like that.

Five of them were gathered around the shiny, black, Chevy Bel-Air, hollering at each other indiscriminately. One of them shouted when the two agents rode into view. Illya skidded his bike to a stop, the tire squealing and skipping over the cobblestones, Gaby a second after him.

Gunshots echoed off the surrounding buildings, and Gaby felt a bit of debris kick up and strike the back of her leg, but she ignored it and careened down the nearest alley after Illya. Behind them, the huge American-made engine growled to life, and she cursed as she tried to get more speed.

Somewhere, a woman screamed, and the sound of the car trailed off, but Gaby knew it wasn’t because they were giving up. Illya glanced back at her, and she could see he was thinking the same thing.
He had his pistol out when they burst into the next street, their arrival raising a fresh chorus of shouts, drawing the attention of two police officers who jumped into action, grabbing their hats to take chase only to be nearly run down by their pursuers as the car lurched toward them. She watched Illya try to find a shot. He must have thought better of it because he yanked his hand back and refocused on peddling, steering into another alley. The Bel-Air was too broad to fit, and the driver gunned the engine and passed them by again.

The next block was the end of town, and Illya followed the curve of the lane, Gaby right on his tail, both their eyes on the wide-open road ahead where the Chevrolet would have full advantage. He looked back at her again, and she nodded.

They needed to stop that car.

They turned off behind one of the last buildings, and Illya dismounted. He pulled his second pistol and eased up to the corner as Gaby dragged both bikes out of sight. Her gaze ran over him: the grim line of his mouth, the steadiness of his hands. Strapped to the front of him, Beast was still squalling, and she wondered how he could think with those cries in his ears.

They heard the engine and Gaby shifted her grip on her pistol as they waited. The sound grew closer, and just when she was sure it would burst into sight, Illya stepped out into the road and opened fire.

Instinctively, the driver steered to avoid him, the Bell-Air slid in the loose gravel, and Illya fired at the front tire. The rubber exploded outward, and the wheel dropped, digging into the hard-packed earth. Gaby’s breath caught in her throat as the huge machine flipped into the air. Illya darted out of the way, wrapping his arms over Beast’s head and body and crouching behind the brick and mortar wall. The automobile hit the ground several feet away, an explosion of scraping metal and shattering glass. It rolled twice before scraping across the gravel roadway. It slammed into a building across the street and rocked to a stop, the engine still running.

“Mein Gott,” Gaby gasped, looking from Beast to Illya, her eyes wide with shock. “You have the baby!”

She watched as he pushed to his feet, jaw flexing as he set his Makarvos toward the rumbling wreck. “You would rather I wait until they run him down along with us?” he growled.

“Of course not but, Scheiße.” He caught her eye, and she could see that edge of fear behind his determination. She felt the tension and release of shared worry. Nothing about this situation was straightforward or safe. They were both doing the best they could. Illya started toward the ruined vehicle and, squaring her shoulders and pushing the images of what could have happened to the back of her mind, Gaby followed suit.

Steam leaked out from beneath the car’s misaligned hood. They heard a groan and one thug shifted, trying to crawl out of a demolished window. Gaby shot him in the head. Illya took care of the others and. The driver was already dead. They swiftly checked them for a receiver but found nothing.

“We need to move,” Illya said over the groan of the dying engine. “The others are still tracking us.”

“Right,” she replied, tucking the gun away and tipping her head to the disabled Bel-Air. “And that probably isn’t the only car they have.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Now where the hell is that tracker?

Chapter Notes

Firstly - warning for poop

Secondly all my love and appreciation to the usual suspects! diadema, my love, my darling. Thank you for reading this over 100,000,000 times. You ARE the best. To Festiveviolet31, who pulled out any manner of details, you tow have definitely made this story better. And last but in no way least SydneyMo for being a sunny light, always encouraging when I need it.

Also, to oceans_and_lovers for the EXCELLENT set of prompts that led to this story existing. Here is your next chapter! I hope you like it.

Beast seemed to quiet with the ride, or he had just worn himself out for the moment. Gaby wasn’t sure which, but she was thankful, both for his sake as well as their own. Illya took the lead as they whizzed past houses and fields, uphill and down and she pushed her legs for speed in order to keep up with him. She worried their pursuers would be right behind them with another car, that at any moment she’d hear the roar of an engine at her back, but it never came.

Illya angled them onto a tree-lined street, then an unpaved road. One turn, then another, and another. Eventually, they knifed right, off the road altogether and onto a path that twisted through a stretch of farmland, grass and weeds beating at their ankles. He gained distance on her as they went up a steep hill and waited for her to crest the top. She cursed his long legs and machine-like stamina then her heart was in her throat, the bike reaching a breakneck speed as they coasted down the other side.

The uneven trail rattled her bones, the wind stung her eyes and whipped at her hair. At the bottom, Illya turned off the path into a copse of trees and she carefully slowed her bike to do the same, hopping off before she had even come to a full stop. She gasped for breath as she took in the small, sheltered clearing. Spots of sunlight danced over the ground at her feet as the wind rustled the canopy of leaves overhead.

Illya was already pulling Beast from the carrier before she’d leaned her bike against a tree. The baby was crying again, his little lower lip jutting out in a pout after each breath.

"Is all right," Illya was telling him, his voice a deep, soothing rumble, barely winded. "You are safe. Yes, it was bumpy, noisy ride, but you are all right."

"Are you sure you got rid of the tracker they had on him originally?" Gaby asked, still short of breath as she pushed her bangs back from her face.
He gave her an insulted look. "Of course I got rid of the tracker," he said. "We burned everything he was wearing."

"Then how? Where could we have picked up another one?"

"Somehow we must have come in contact with one of them," Illya stated as he slid his pack from his shoulders.

"We’ve changed clothes, we’ve bathed," she insisted, then stopped, her hand flying to her neck as a wave of dread threatened to swallow her. "You don’t think—"

She hadn’t started the sentence before he was shaking his head, his gaze flicking to the hidden ring and then back to his pack. "No. It is shielded. You must know the frequency in order to find it, and then send a code in order to receive location."

Gaby stared at him as he lifted his pack and settled it again on a slightly more level patch of ground. She didn’t know why it meant anything, that no one else could track her but him, but it did.

"We will have to check everything," he was saying, pulling a blanket from his pack, and she watched as he laid it out and settled Beast on it. The baby cried harder, his face going pink, and Illya tried to shush him, the concerned look on his face managing to affect her even under the stress of the moment.

They stripped Beast first, finding nothing in the clothing they had dressed him in or the diaper, but examining it all twice anyway. They emptied their packs, going over each item, laying them out in order. Gaby searched every fold of fabric, every crease of paper. It was tedious work, and the crying baby in the background wore at her senses until finally, he fell asleep. Something that just made her feel worse. In the end, she had found nothing, and when she lifted her head, she could read on Illya’s face that his results were the same.

"Now, us," he said, clearing his throat and pushing to his feet. He started unbuttoning his shirt, and Gaby turned away, quickly doing the same. She stripped down to her underwear for the second time that day and traced her fingers over the seams of her shirt, then her trousers. Searched her socks, her boots, the knife sheath still fastened to her ankle. She checked the front of her bra, even her panties, and came up clean.

"Nothing," she said, dropping her hands. "Illya, there’s nothing." She turned to him and regretted it almost immediately. Standing there under dappled sunlight wearing nothing but a pair of striped, cotton boxer shorts, he looked like something from a dream. Defined muscles that rounded his broad shoulders and arms. The expanse of chest. A flat stomach with a line of dark, gold hair disappearing into an elastic waistband.

"We aren’t finished," he said, and she watched his eyes trace over her body just as hers had done to him. He cleared his throat. "I will check you and you check me."

Gaby blinked. Obviously, she hadn’t been able to check her own back. It made sense and she nodded, stumbling over the words as she answered. "Yes. Of course."

The idea of them being tracked had her nerves strung tight, but the thought of Illya’s hands on her overshadowed that fear completely. She held her breath as he stepped up to her, his hands turning her so that she had her back to him. She shivered at the contact, but it had nothing to do with the coolness of his touch.

"Sorry," he offered, his voice gruff, and Gaby shook her head.
“It’s fine.”

Gently, he tilted her head and slid his fingers into her hair, caressing with a firm but careful touch, fingertips parting her hair, prodding her scalp. He followed that with a glide of fingertips down her neck, over her shoulders. He lifted her bra straps and ran his fingers under them down her shoulder blades. Her heartbeat rabbeted in her chest as he pulled at the fastening at her spine, the band tightening along with her nipples as he checked it over and set it softly back against her skin.

She exhaled deliberately slow, hating the way it trembled as his hands swept down her back, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Cool fingers slid beneath the elastic of her underwear, and she sucked in a breath. Her body responded, the coil of desire in her belly twisting brighter and brighter with every touch.

Her every sense was heightened as his thick finger tips slid over her hips, calluses catching on her skin. He traced a line over her ass and along the crease where it met her thigh, up under the lace edging of her underwear and down just shy of moving between her thighs, silent as the grave, his motions perfunctory and methodical.

She was intensely aroused, her sex wet and her nerve endings raw with desire, and when his fingers touched low on her inner thigh, she jumped, inhaling sharply.

“Sorry,” he murmured again, and she heard it in him now, the dark, breathless tone. He felt it too, and it eased some of the anxiety that had been building up inside her but did nothing to cool the wanting. Nothing to calm that deep, intimate ache. It only added to it.

His hands smoothed over her legs, and she heard his breathing change as his wide palms swept over her calves to her ankles, first on one leg and then the other, stopping on the knife sheath still buckled to her, the leather warm and worn.

“Do you,” he started and then cleared his throat when the sound came out rough. “Do you want me to cut it off?”

Gaby shook her head, unable to get her voice to work for a moment. Finally she said, “No. I like having it there.” She took a fortifying breath and turned around, her eyes automatically sweeping his body. “Your turn.”

He twisted quickly away from her, offering his back for search, but not before she caught sight of the way his boxers were tented out in the front. She looked down at the ground as she warred with herself, both pleased and anxious at the thought of him being aroused by her. She looked up and noted his tense shoulders, the way he was purposefully flexing his fingers at his hips. At least she wasn’t the only one.

The thought of his arousal fed her own, and she ran her teeth over her lower lip in an attempt to steady herself. She stepped forward and set her hands on his shoulders, reminding herself of what was at stake. The reality of him being in danger was enough to give her some focus.

“You’re going to have to bend down if I’m going to reach,” she said, hoping she sounded unaffected enough.

Silently, Illya knelt on the leaf-strewn forest floor, and Gaby looked down at the top of his head, stared at the whorl of the hair on his crown. She wondered at the angle, at the vulnerability of it, of the trust he was placing in her and felt a nearly overwhelming desire to kiss him there.

Instead, she stepped between his calves and took his head in her hands, tipping it forward
unceremoniously before running her fingers through the strands. His hair was soft, softer than she had expected. She carefully divided it into sections, sliding her fingers against his scalp, looking and feeling for anything out of the ordinary. There was a hushed inhale, and she wasn’t sure if it was his or her own.

She checked behind his ears, along his nape where his skin was slightly more tanned than further down. His shoulders were wide and pale, and there was a smattering of freckles there she hadn’t noticed before. She set her fingers over them, tracing the line to a scar that angled over his trapezius and then dropped her hand.

“Up now,” she told him, her voice much more docile than she had intended. He stood to his feet, and she started again, checking the fold at his armpits then trailing her fingers down his spine. There were more scars, most of them cuts or abrasions, some with stitch marks left behind, some without. At least two were possible exit wounds. She slowed as she touched the curiously silky, puffed-up skin that marred his side, just above his hip. The most recent mark.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he said, the rumble of his voice startling her.

She peered up at the side of his face. “I bet it did at the time.”

He laughed quietly and nodded. “At the time, yes.”

Forcing herself not to dwell on the past that marked his skin, or his most recent brush with death, Gaby returned to her inspection and was immediately reminded of why she’d allowed herself to be distracted. She touched the waist of his underwear and then quickly pushed her fingers inside and pulled it away from his skin. She turned the band over, checking it carefully. She concentrated her thoughts on the men that were tracking them and kept on task despite the tempting sight the curve of his ass presented her.

Moving on, she squatted down, examined the loose fabric of his shorts and then pushed it up, checking the skin beneath. His breath caught when she traced the crease where his ass met his thigh. Her body reminded her of all the things she’d been feeling as he had been touching her, and she had to take a breath of her own as arousal sent a rush of heat to her core. She prodded his legs, fingertips gliding over crisp, gold hair, tracing over the backs of his knees. One of them snapped forward as if by reflex, and she grinned to think he might be ticklish. When she reached his feet, she realized she would have to stop touching him now, and the fact that she didn’t want to had her whipping her hands away.

Gaby felt suspended in the moment, in a hazy space where she could still feel him on her fingers and nothing else existed and she fought to keep her hands to herself. She pushed up to stand, stepping away from him and Illya exhaled a long slow breath, shifting on his feet.

“All clear,” she managed, her voice rough with the mix of arousal, worry, and self-recrimination.

There was a beat, his hands closing and opening again and then he growled, the sound a familiar one as he moved away without looking at her. He went straight for his trousers, keeping his back to her as he tugged them back on. “It has to be somewhere.”

“Maybe it wasn’t a receiver,” she offered as she pulled her own shirt over her shoulders. “Could it have been something else?”

He looked at her for the first time since she turned her back to let him search her, and it was a look of challenge. Obviously, Illya Kuryakin knew what tracking equipment looked like, and she wasn’t allowed to question the idea. He went back to dressing and she huffed.
“Well, what then?” she challenged. “They came into the house while we were sleeping and instead of just killing us and taking the baby they… I don’t know… put one inside of us?” She yanked her own trousers on as she glared at his back.

Beast chose that moment to wake and did so vigorously, picking up right where he had left off with a loud, screeching wail. Her insides ached at the sound even as her nerves jolted, and she turned and started toward him.

Illya was closer, and she stilled as he lifted the infant into his arms, his shirt still unbuttoned. “Something is not right,” he said over the sound of the nearly desperate crying. Gaby had to agree at this point but had no clue what could be happening or what they would do if the baby got sick. Helplessness clutched at her, tingling darkly at the back of her neck, lodging sick in the pit of her stomach.

Illya tried to settle him onto his shoulder, patting him with a hand that dwarfed the small body, but Beast wouldn’t be soothed. Illya frowned and lifted him to run his fingers over naked belly. They stilled suddenly, Illya’s whole body stiffening. His face was tight as he turned back to her.

“What?” she demanded, gaze darting between man and child.

"He hasn't defecated.”

Gaby looked at him as if that was a word she had never heard before, even though she understood it perfectly well. "What?"

Illya closed his eyes and took a slow breath. "The baby." His face fell into grim lines. "He has not pooped since we rescued him."

The realization of what he was saying became clear and Gaby felt her stomach fall to her feet. "Are you saying they put a tracker inside of the baby?"

He nodded.

"Illya!"

He scowled. "I did not put it there!"

"It is something the KGB would do, and that is why you thought of it," she growled.

He inhaled sharply, drawing back from her, and she felt an immediate rush of regret. He didn’t deserve the barb. Obviously, it was inside the baby. It had to be. There was nowhere else. Her mind would have gone there eventually too, but she was so on edge it was almost impossible to control her impulse to lash out, do something to release some of the tension.

She pressed a hand to her forehead and sighed. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for." She looked at the helpless little human in his arms. "How are we going to get it out?"

Illya exhaled. It was shaky, and the urge to reach out to him, to try and give comfort, swept through her. She held back, certain she was the last person he would want it from after what she had just said.

"You will have to check," he said roughly.

"How do we do that?” She looked around as if some magical instrument for doing such a thing would appear from the air. There was nothing to be found, just the trees, the leaf-strewn ground, and
a small stream nearby.

"You will need to insert a finger, see if you can feel it." Abrupt, succinct, practical.

"Me?"

He looked over his shoulder at her before smoothing the blanket and laying Beast down again. "You have the smallest hands."

"Illya, I am not putting my finger inside a baby's... inside his bum!"

"It is not great idea," he said quietly. The infant sobbed, and Illya rubbed a hand over his belly. "It could hurt him, but I do not think we have much choice. I am not even sure we have gone far enough that they are not tracking us right now."

_It could hurt him._ The words bounced around in Gaby's head like spilled bolts clattering on the cement. She looked at Illya's hands as he gentled them over Beast’s body, lifting him up to lay a fresh diaper underneath. Large hands. Huge hands, with fingers at least double hers in thickness.

"Fine," she said, unbuttoning a sleeve and yanking it unceremoniously up to her elbow, rattling of a few choice German obscenities. "Tell me what to do."

A few minutes later her pinkie finger was brushing against something hard and foreign inside of the baby's bottom, and Beast was bawling for all he was worth. She closed her eyes, grossed out, flustered and angry. "Yes, it's in there," she said, her voice tremulous, and looked over at Illya who was watching the path for any sign of their pursuers. His mouth thinned into a hard line as he turned back to her, and she heard him swear softly in Russian.

He had told her that just inserting her finger might encourage the baby's body to defecate naturally, so she grimaced as she withdrew her finger. Beast grunted and then cried some more, and Gaby quailed inwardly at the idea of going back in, furious that someone had done this to him. Every fiber of her being focused on hating the people who had brought this pain to a child for their own gain.

The baby grunted again, his face going red, and then there it was: a small, glass-encased electronic, just slightly larger than the tip of her finger.

Then there was poop. _A lot of it._ Bright, yellow, curdy stuff that just seemed to pour out of him, and Gaby drew back, gagging, as the sour, cheese-like smell reached her nostrils.

" _Ach du Lieber_ ," she gasped.

"What?" Illya said, hurrying over. "Is he all right?"

"It's done," Gaby said, and then looked up at him as he crouched down. His eyes widened at the sight, and Gaby found herself looking again despite her better judgment. "He's still pooping! How is there this much in something so small?" she exclaimed and then startled at the sound of Illya's laughter. It was deep and rich, though not overly exuberant, and it struck a chord inside her, undaunted by her disgust. Had she ever heard him laugh like this?

"Oh, it's funny to you!" she griped, but then a laugh welled up in her own chest, escaping breathlessly. "I _hate_ you," she told him, and he shook his head.

"No, you don't."

She sobered then, looking into his blue eyes. "No. I _don't._"
He held her gaze, and she absorbed the weight of it, the yearning there that echoed inside her. His attention fell to her lips for a beat and then away before he was pushing to his feet and moving.

"Where are you going?" she asked, feeling oddly bereaved.

"To dig a hole to bury that diaper in." When he looked at her, that humored, little smile was on his mouth again.

Illya did the revolting work of retrieving the tracker from the mess, as Gaby cleaned up Beast and then vigorously washed her hands in the stream.

"Aren't you going to crush it?" she asked when he came to stand next to her, pinching the beacon between his fingers and looking at it in the light.

"No. If they are following and it stops transmitting, they will know we have found it." He looked back, and she followed his eye-line to the naked baby on the blanket. He was waving his arms and legs, looking much happier.

"So, we use it to lure them away?" she said thoughtfully. She wiped her wet hands on her trousers, for lack of anything else, and then turned her eyes on him. "I suppose you have a plan for that?"

"I have an idea, yes." His eyes locked to hers.

"Float it down the stream?" she asked, tilting her head.

He smiled an affirmative. "What do you think?"

"Well, since I thought of it," she countered, sauntering off to put their things back together. Behind her, Illya huffed and she imagined he rolled his eyes as well. "I think it's brilliant."

"Hmm." The sound came from nearer than she expected, and it sent a little shiver over her skin. "You always have the best ideas." She turned and watched as he knelt down to re-diaper the baby. He did it in a few, deft movements, and she shook her head, still baffled by his proficiency. A few moments later, he had the squiggling Beast dressed in a clean diaper and a fresh gown.

"We should probably get rid the bikes," she reflected, hefting her pack onto her shoulders again. It was heavy, and after the bike ride, the place where the straps rested felt bruised and raw.

Illya looked the bicycles over pensively as he refashioned his wrap carrier. "There is another trail on the other side of the stream. I am not sure if it dips into any cover, but we could use it to ride back toward the border. Hopefully, avoid town."

"There's another trail?" Gaby stood on her tiptoes and tried to peer over the tall grass and shrubbery. She could see nothing but a bit of field and more forest beyond.

"Just trust me," he said, as he tucked Beast back into the pouch on his chest.

Gaby settled on her feet and turned back to him. "Of course, I trust you. I'm just irritated." She took up her bicycle, rolling it closer to his. "If you weren't here, I never would have known it was there."

"Well, I am here," he offered, and the look he gave her was fond in a way she had come to love seeing despite it being so very, very unwise. "So, you don't have to worry about that."

Gaby didn't hold back the urge to touch him this time, laying a hand on his forearm once he'd slid it into the straps of his pack. "I suppose we complement each other."
He looked down at her hand then back to her face. "We do?"

"Yes, I have all the ideas," she continued as she pulled away and maneuvered her bike toward the stream. "And you are tall."

She heard him chuckling as he followed after her and smiled to herself.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

A small ten, some sexual tension, and a goat.

Chapter Notes

All my love and gratitude to everyone who has been reading and leaving me comments. It's so encouraging you guys, thank you.

More love to my beta, diadema, for her continued help and support, first in the creation of this story (she kept me alive, people!) and in the fine tuning of it as we go. She's been amazing and so have all of you.

And to oceans_and_lovers: your solstice gift continues!

Be blessed everyone!

The path that Illya had discovered followed along the stream for some time before veering off into the trees providing cover, and though it passed by the outskirts of the town they'd been discovered in, they circumvented the place without further incident. Illya still had a size and strength advantage on the bicycle, but he stopped at the top of each hill to wait for Gaby, knowing neither wanted the other out of sight. When they reached the turn that would take them toward the foothills, the trees opened up again, and Illya felt an onset of nerves, spy instincts uneasy about being back out in the open.

Gaby glowered as she joined him atop one of the hills, sweat-damp hair clinging to her forehead, her cheeks pink. He tipped his head down the trail where the backside of a small farm was visible. "Come, drink some water," he said, offering her the canteen he had just been drinking from. "We will hide these in that barn and take the rest of the path on foot."

She nodded, breathless, and took several, long drinks. His eyes snagged on a little rivulet of water that escaped and ran down into the vee of her button-up shirt. Then she wiped her arm across her mouth, handed the canteen back, and took off down the hill without him. He smiled with a shake of his head watching her go, her hair flying out behind her like a pennant in the wind. Beautiful, reckless, and strong. He patted the baby's back, took the handlebars and rolled down the hill at a much easier pace.

They pushed the bikes into the old barn then started up through the edge of the field and into the trees again. The infant began to fuss when Illya stopped to check his compass and he bounced from
his knees in an attempt to soothe him as he worked to get his bearings. They had changed him not too long ago, so Illya assumed that wasn’t the problem. Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a little, red elephant toy, which he had picked up at the market and gave it a squeeze. It squeaked, and both Gaby and the baby reacted. The baby with wide, curious eyes and Gaby by searching around quickly for the source of the sound.

Illya tried very hard not to laugh at her. He repeated the action, and it squeaked again before wheezing slowly as it refilled with air and he held it up for her to see.

"What is that?"

"Baby toy."

She frowned. "Where did you get it?"

"The market," Illya said, wiggling the elephant about a foot from the baby's face, waiting for his eyes to focus before moving it up and down for him to follow.

"I saw those there and I didn't even think of that." She hooked her fingers into her straps and looked around as if the oversight meant nothing to her. "Which way are we going?"

Illya nodded in the direction indicated by his compass and watched as she turned and started walking. She was feeling very inadequate where the baby was concerned, and he knew it was bothering her. It shouldn’t. It was not her fault that she had not spent time around them. She should know he did not have any expectation that she should know these things just because she was a woman. But then, she was Gaby, and she did not enjoy feeling incapable in anything. He smiled a little at that thought. It meant that, by the end of this mission, she would probably be an expert.

They hiked for the rest of the day, making their way through unestablished trails, most of them made by wildlife or free-roaming cattle. Low-lying shrubs and gnarled branches blocked their path in many places, slowing their pace and occasionally tearing their clothing. Eventually, they came to the top of a peak and stopped, finding a small clearing and a view over the landscape where they were able to discern the small villages and farms, the squares of fields bisected by roads and borders.

"From up here," Gaby said, peering out at it all with the setting sun casting her face in soft, warm tones. “You wouldn't even know that the people on this side of the mountains are free and the people on that side are not."

Illya sighed. This was always a touchy subject with her, and one he was always loath to enter into. He could argue that, on both sides, people were just trying to live their lives, but she had her own experiences and... well, there was only so much he could say, could bring himself to say about his own thoughts, his own feelings and opinions, even here, on a mountain so far from anyone else's ears.

It had been necessary for so long to keep it all locked away, to hide it, to cover it. To open up now? He wasn't sure it was possible. Still, words filled his mouth and he spoke them.

"Workers in Slovenia own their factories," he said. "And they are free to leave their country and return if they like."

Gaby turned toward him but said nothing.

"I think we should set up the camp here," he told her, abruptly changing the subject. "We will cross over in the morning."

Gaby agreed and came toward him. "Let me take Beast off your hands so you can find the tent."

Illya opened his coat, where Beast had been kept warm as their elevation and the waning day had brought a chill to the air. Gaby reached inside and tugged at the material, finally pulling the baby free. She took him into her arms, and he immediately began to cry.

Gaby sighed, rolled her eyes and took to bouncing him, something that did actually seem to come naturally to her.

"Put him inside your coat," Illya said. "He is probably just cold after being so snug." Gaby's eyes flicked to him and then down to his chest before sliding away. She unbuttoned the top of her wool coat and tucked the baby inside. He stopped crying but still fussed, and Illya noted the way he wiggled in her arms as if trying to get deeper inside her jacket.

"Hey!" she said suddenly, shifting him up. Her cheeks went a bit pink, and the baby started to cry again at her volume.

"Of course, he is going to cry if you shout at him," Illya said, laying his pack down to access the tent that he had strapped to the bottom.

"He—" she started to exclaim, then turned away. "Don't worry about it. I'm going to get wood for a fire. I think he's hungry."

Illya frowned and went back to unpacking the tent.

Camp was not a glamorous affair. The tent was small and simple, a waterproof tarp over a lighter, breathable material. A wool blanket functioned as flooring, to help keep the cold at bay; on top of it, he'd placed two heavy sleeping bags, both green with red flannel lining. There would be only a meager fire, something that would not draw attention. And yet, it was still an improvement over any 'camping' Illya had ever done.

His nights in tents and under the stars had come in the military, surrounded by fellow soldiers, raucous and bawdy, by his comrades who could easily become his betrayers... He pushed that thought aside, as the stress it created in his chest tried to spread outward to the rest of his body.

He glanced up and saw Gaby kneeling down to work at the fire, keeping it just hot and bright enough to boil water to heat the baby's bottle. The infant was on a soft, flannel blanket, a safe distance away but still within reach. He was pushed up onto his elbows watching the light of the flames with wide eyes. The scene eased the tightness, the ball of frustration that often threatened to overcome him, but it brought its own tension with it. It was a taunting peek into a desire, a dream, that he worked hard to pretend he didn't have.

Gaby looked back at him, her dark eyes reflecting firelight, and for that moment, he let himself feel it. Let himself feel the way she had settled inside of him, the way she was a part of him. She held his gaze, drawing back just slightly, and then her eyes flickered over his face, to his mouth, and back again. She parted her lips as though she were going to say something, but the baby let out a cry and she turned away, the spell broken.

Illya felt the disappointment as relief. There wasn't anything to be done with that moment. There
wasn't anything but partnership that could happen between them. He was not safe, not good for her, not even really as friends, let alone the things that he was thinking. He turned away himself and went back to searching for the binoculars in his pack so he could watch the border and make a plan for the next day.

Gaby watched Illya retreat to the bluff. The broad width of his shoulders in the fading light, the clenching and unclenching of one fist at his side. She took a slow, deep breath and returned to her work, but she couldn't get that look on his face out of her mind.

What had he been thinking to look at her like that? She'd seen hints of it before, knew those feelings were there, but he'd never before shown it so nakedly. Not only had her body responded, but her heart had turned over and started beating madly inside her chest. It was still pounding at her ribcage as though it wanted to break free and go to him.

Stupid, stupid heart.

Her body she could forgive. Illya was handsome, tall and strong. He had large hands that worked diligently at whatever he did and a problem-solving mind that paid attention to the smallest of details. He had awe-inspiring stamina... The thought sent another little tremor of heat through her. Yes, she could forgive her body for wanting him, but her heart, her heart should know better by now.

Illya belonged to his people, to Russia. It didn't matter what soft feelings might try to grow and dwell between them, that is where he would return in the end. And she'd had enough of being left behind.

Beast squawked in her arms, and she jiggled him. He probably wanted Illya too. She smiled softly at the idea: huge giant of a man, KGB's best weapon, secret baby whisperer. "You will have to make do with me for now," she said. "He is making a plan to get us out of here." She looked around for the things that Illya had unpacked and spotted them just inside the tent. "Let's find your elephant, shall we?"

Cold pulled Gaby from her sleep. She could feel it like chilled fingers along her spine, creeping over her ass, down the backs of her thighs and making her shiver. She trembled inside her sleeping bag and tried to go back to sleep. A tremor started at her feet and shook its way up through her body, and she exhaled at the end of it. Damn it.

"Gaby."

Illya's voice was like a distant roll of thunder and, at first, she wasn't sure she if had heard or imagined it.

"Are you cold?"

She wanted to tell him she was fine, but the chatter of her teeth gave her away before she could even get the words out.

"I had not expected the temperature to drop this low," he said softly. "I have an idea, but you will have to get out of your bag for a moment."
"Get out, are you c-crazy?"

"Shh," he admonished, and she was just able to make him out in the dark. She realized he had Beast inside with him. She blinked at the idea of it, then gawked at the sleeping baby curled into his chest. "I will be quick," he continued, "but you will need to take him."

"He'll wake up," she whispered. "He hates me."

"He does not hate you. He does not know you."

"He doesn't know you either," was her retort and he sighed, exasperated.

"Do you want to be warm or not? We have a long day of traveling tomorrow."

"Fine," she snapped, though another shiver took the edge off her intended sharpness. She pushed out of her bag, inhaling at the sudden cold sweeping over her body. She was wearing a stolen set of long underwear that didn't do quite enough to keep the icy air at bay. She reached over and very gently pulled Beast into her arms, holding her breath the entire time, but he continued to sleep. Moonlight kept them from total darkness, and Gaby stared at the baby in her arms.

He was soft and warm and seemed so much smaller like this. His dark lashes fell over full cheeks, pale in the darkness, and his lower lip pulled in and out like he was dreaming of milk. She scooted out of the small tent, holding the baby close to her chest and looked up to watch Illya as he shifted things around. He, too, was wearing long underwear, and the way the material hugged his muscular thighs, the curve of his ass, drew her attention before she turned away. Those were not the kinds of thoughts that would help her go back to sleep.

She knew that from experience.

Eventually, he called her back inside, and she realized he'd changed the arrangement, combining their two sleeping bags into one. She thought about slipping inside with him, her body next to his, their legs touching. It wouldn't be the first time they had shared sleeping space, but every time was a new kind of torture. Still, she was freezing so she wasn't going to say no. Illya's hands might be cold, but the rest of him was usually quite warm.

She crawled inside, and Illya took Beast, laying him on the red flannel lining and tucking him into his side. Gaby maneuvered around them, shivering as she slid back into the now double sleeping bag. It was close, just room for the three of them, and she settled in, facing Illya, with Beast between them.

The material was cold again from being opened to the night air, and she tucked herself down inside, pulling it up over her shoulder. But with the baby there, she had to leave room in the front not to cover his face.

"Come closer," Illya whispered. "He will help keep you warm."

She looked over at him, at the arm he had extended out above their heads. "Are you going to be warm enough?"

"I will be fine. Now, come, we need to keep the heat inside."

Gaby rolled her eyes at him and moved closer, until Beast was against her chest as well, and her knees met Illya's thighs. She tried to pull back, but his hand slid down, skirting over her thigh, and took her knee, pulling her in close. His touch sent desire spiraling through her and she flashed her eyes up to his.
He cleared his throat, bringing his hand back up to curve around the baby. "There. Now you will be warm," he said, his voice a bit rough. Exhaling slowly, she relaxed into the contact of their legs and slid her feet over to his shins, seeking more of his heat. Then, because it seemed natural and because she didn't want his arm being cold all night, she reached up and took hold at his elbow, pulling his arm down and under her head so that she could use his forearm as a pillow.

"Ist das in Ordnung?" she asked, and he nodded. She felt his fingers brush through her hair where they were curled at the back of her head. It felt so starkly intimate that she had to swallow before she could speak. "Good night, Illya."

"Good night, Gaby."

She closed her eyes, warmth finally seeping into her bones. She breathed in the scent of Illya, heady, even mixed with the sweet smell of baby, and told herself to relax. She ached though, in all the sweet ways she always ached after spending time with him, but this time, she had nowhere to go, no private space in which to take a break and find some relief. She wiggled around a little, trying to settle and then realized that the backs of Illya's fingers were brushing her belly, where her shuffling had made her shirt ride up. Instinctively, she sought his face and found him watching her. His eyes darted away, then returned, settling openly on hers. There was *that* look again, the one she knew she was answering with her own, the one she knew couldn't happen, the one that revealed things that couldn't be. She sighed and closed her eyes again.

"Good night," she hissed, ducking her head. She did not see the quiver at the corner of his lips or the way he watched her a moment longer before closing his own eyes.

She fell asleep much faster than she thought she would.

Illya awoke before the sun, as he almost always did, his body calling him to his duties, his mind already preparing for the day. It didn’t seem to matter what part of the world he was in, his body somehow seemed to know the sun was on its way. This morning, however, something was different. He was used to waking up in unusual situations and random locations, but something about this morning’s variation tugged at the corners of his mind as being uniquely problematic.

He didn't quite register what was happening at first, caught in that space between asleep and awake, where he was very warm, and his mind was mostly free. It wasn't every morning that he woke up aroused - he was a man and he was human, so it happened often enough - but there was something very persistent about it this morning. He hummed deep in his throat, still mostly asleep. It was when he moved his right hand, his calloused palm catching on cloth, moving over a body that wasn't his, that he awoke completely, and his situation presented itself.

He was laying on his back with a baby on his chest. The little one was curled up, knees tucked up to his belly, little fist curled beneath his chin. Still asleep, a soft rise and fall of his back to accompany his breathing.

Illya flushed as he realized the state of his own body. It seemed incongruous, inappropriate even, to have an erection with an infant sleeping on one's chest, but he was rock hard inside the thermal underwear he wore. A heavy, throbbing ache that pulled at his belly and inner thighs.
And it wasn't going to go away anytime soon thanks to the other half of his situation.

Gaby.

She was laying against his side, her face buried in the crook of his neck where she was breathing steadily, each exhale a warm caress over his skin. Hot breath ghosting up to the sensitive place behind his ear. Her lips moving as she murmured in her sleep.

He closed his eyes, almost overcome with the sensation. He could feel the softness of her breast against his chest, her belly along his side. Her upper arm was parallel to her torso, but bent at the elbow, curving under the baby and over Illya's diaphragm, hand eased up underneath his shirt. Her fingers curled over his ribs, scratchy fingertips on his naked skin.

Adding to this already overwhelming status, her leg was thrown over him, thigh crossing his lower abdomen, knee bent, calf running down into the V of his groin, toes tucked between his thighs, and if she woke up now, she'd know... everything. He had often thought that her legs would be his downfall, and now, pressed very intimately against one of them, he figured that time had come.

He took a slow, careful breath and tried to look down at her, but all he could see was chestnut hair spread over her shoulder, the evergreen color of her top showing through the strands. He leaned into the side of her head, nosing gently and breathing her in, then quickly rolled his head away and stared at the top of the makeshift tent, his belly clenched and body humming, his mind spinning with possible next steps. That wasn't going to help his problem.

He needed to move, but doing so would wake them both, would bring this oddly sweet, tortuous moment to an end, and, even though he felt like he was in actual, physical pain, he didn't want that to happen. He often dreamed of holding Gaby like this. His thoughts didn't always involve sex either, they were, many times, just about having her near, having her with him.

Not that he didn't think about sex... about wrapping his arms around her, about kissing her deeply, pulling her naked body against his...

His breath caught, and he reigned in that train of thought. Again, not helping.

And Gaby needed her sleep. He knew well enough how precious it was to her. Knowing that she hadn't slept the night before or in the car as they drove, the exertions of yesterday and the long walk they had ahead of them today, she needed this rest. He could control his body and his thoughts long enough to give her that.

She shifted then, just a little, as if trying to get closer, and muttered something he couldn't understand. He felt a cool touch at his shoulder and realized she had been drooling on him. The realization along with her soft, sleepy vocalizations brought a whole other sensation of agony. A sharp, tight ache in his chest that stole his breath and overshadowed the hot, hard ache between his legs.

Gaby. The intimacy of seeing her like this, feeling her, being her pillow. Being the person she drooled on, clung to for warmth... it was part of that thing. The one thing he wanted more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. The one thing that was so far out of his reach, the idea of it should never have even entered his mind.

He set his jaw and stared at nothing, a mild burn to his eyes that he refused to acknowledge or allow. He felt that loop start up in his brain again. The white-hot frustration, running through scenarios over and over and coming to the same, dead end conclusions, only to start up again. It was getting hotter, the energy unable to escape, pulling him down into a dark place. His arm was curled against Gaby's back, and he made a fist at her hip to keep from tapping his fingers against her.
He was saved from further degradation by a jerk of movement at his feet demanding his attention. He blinked, wondering if he had imagined it when it happened again. Something was snuffling at the bottom of the sleeping bag, then another tug almost threatened to pull them out of the tent.

He lifted his head and looked down to see a brown, fur-covered face, a vee of white, lines of black running down along the snout. There were two horns, wide, sniffing nostrils and agile lips that mouthed at the sleeping bag and jerked it again.

It was a goat.

Illya toed at it with his foot inside the bag, trying to discourage it from having their bedding as a breakfast, but it was not deterred. He pushed at it again and this time it brought its head up, square-pupiled eyes staring directly at him, and let out a loud "Ma-aa-aaaa!"

Gaby jerked awake, her head coming up sharply and whipping around in an attempt to orientate herself. In a last, unplanned attempt to protect himself from humiliation, Illya hooked a hand behind her knee and hiked her leg up higher on his belly so that it was not longer lying directly over his still very-prominent erection. His hand then slid up her thigh, as if of its own volition, and that's where it was when she looked at him, her sleep-glazed eyes focusing on his.

"Illya?"

He yanked his hand back, dropping it to his side.

"Was that a goat?" she asked, her voice rough with sleep.

"Yes," he replied, very glad for the distraction. "It was trying to eat our sleeping bag."

She frowned. "Oh." She looked at the opening, where the goat remained, looking back at them like they shouldn't be there. Illya supposed that made sense. They were probably trespassing on her mountain after all.

"Oh!" Gaby said again, this time sounding far more awake. She shifted away from him, withdrawing her hand from inside his shirt, her leg sliding over his hips, his crotch (which had him clenching his teeth), before settling next to his legs as she pushed up to a semi-sitting position. She looked down the length of his body, and he knew she had felt it, knew that she knew the exact state he was in. He waited for her to pull away further, to perhaps be angry, but she did none of that. Instead, she looked at the baby on his chest, then at the place where she had been sleeping at his throat.

"Wow," she said, a teasing smile lifting the corner of her lips. "The two of us really imposed on you last night."

He lifted his shoulders in a shrug, trying to seem unaffected. "It is not a big deal."

She looked dubious and touched a place near his collar. "I drooled on you."

He loved the way she diverted it, not acting sheepish at the intimacy of their position, but edgy instead. He knew her well enough by now to realize she was embarrassed. "I have had worse," he offered.

She hadn't moved her hand and her eyes seemed locked onto that place at his throat, then her gaze shifted, seeming to skirt along his jaw and up. Her fingers followed, rasping along the growth of his beard, up to his temple and then into his hair, brushing it back off his forehead. He half-wanted to purr at the contact, half-wanted to retreat from it. Her eyes looked him over, dark, fathomless, and he lost himself in them, in her. Too weakened by the morning's experience, and yesterday's intimacies,
to be the one to pull away this time, to abide by that unspoken agreement not to let things go too far. He remembered far too well the way she looked in the broken sunlight beneath the trees, the feel of her skin beneath his palms, his fingers.

"Illya," she said slowly, her voice still hoarse and sleep-laden. Her gaze fell to his lips, and he held his breath as he waited, caught, mesmerized by her. Her nearness was a siren song, a call he couldn't turn away from. He felt like there was a vacuum of space between them that had to be filled, filled by her, her lips and body on his because they belonged there.

"Maaaaaa-aaaaaa!"

The baby on his chest jumped, little head coming up, eyes wide. Then his face scrunched up, and a pathetic, little, "kee, kee, kee," preceded a full-blown howl. Gaby pulled away, and Illya felt that space between them pull and tear, the moment lost to the vapor.

"I'll get a nappy before he pees on you," she said, pushing the sleeping bag off her legs and scrambling out of the tent, shoving aside the goat as though it were an everyday occurrence. The animal shoved its head back inside, and Illya looked from it to the baby. He reached up to pat the latter's back before releasing the breath he'd been holding and letting his head fall back to the sleeping bag.

Gaby stood off to the side of the tent, sunrise playing over her features as she took a deep breath, her jaw flexing as she lifted her chin to the sky. Her thoughts were reeling, her chest a mess of fluttering heart beats, an ache of arousal between her legs so strong she felt restless and desperate in her need to ease it. She gasped when a pressure on her calf had her stumbling sideways. Looking down at the goat nudging against her legs, she almost laughed, an edge of hysteria creeping in. She was apparently standing on the good weeds. She looked around, finding a heard of the beasts not too far off and this time she did laugh, unsure whether to resent them or be grateful for their intrusion.

The goat at her feet, bleated at her, the noise distracting her from the heady arousal enough to get her back on task. She went to the pack with the extra nappies, pulled out two and tossed them in to Illya, making sure not to catch his eye. If she did, who knew what she would do. Then she made her way into the trees to relieve herself.

She had to pee anyway.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Rough terrain and meetings with mercenaries.

Feelings, feelings everywhere!

Chapter Notes

Blessing and thanks to all the usual suspects. (aka diadema) By the time 40 chapters roll around, I am going to run out of new and creative ways to write this note. lol but you know who you are and I love you and this wouldn't be here without you. (oh yeah, you guys... I split a chapter and now there's 40. *shrugs*)

It was 16 kilometers from their camp to the border, a hike Illya could do in four hours, easily — had done, in worse conditions and with a heavier pack. But Gaby had not had his training, did not have his stride length either. Her pack was ill fitted, making even her smaller load more difficult to carry. Not that any of this would stop her from trying to keep up with him. So, he very purposefully shortened his steps and controlled the pace.

He looked back at her over his shoulder. Her thumbs were hooked into the straps of her pack, which he suspected were rubbing, and she had her face turned up into the sunlight. He felt himself smile at the sight. Uncomfortable, but taking a moment of enjoyment where she could. His Gaby.

He shouldn't think of her that way. She wasn't his, she never could be. He turned back to the path and thought of the tension that had been between them since that morning, all awkward angles and stop and start conversations. He wasn't sure what to do about it. They needed to focus on the mission and, in order to do that, they needed to communicate. He knew they both had issues with being completely professional when they were at odds with each other.

But were they at odds? He looked back at her again and she smiled at him. A small, soft thing that made his heart beat a little faster. He thought of her breath against his neck as she slept and stumbled over a rock in his path. She chuckled.

"Better watch where you're going," she cautioned. "I won't be able to carry you off this mountain."

He looked down at his feet and shook his head at his clumsiness. "You would try."

She was quiet and he thought the stilted conversation was still in play, but then she sighed. "Yes, I would try."
"You would succeed," he affirmed. "You are very determined."

"Sometimes determination isn't enough," she replied, something like resignation in her voice. "Will power and determination can only hold you for so long."

He frowned at that. He didn't like the thought of her trying to drag his unresponsive body off this mountain, or any mountain. It filled his head with a barrage of unwanted images, but he had a feeling that wasn't what she was talking about.

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The area Illya had chosen to cross the border was only sparsely patrolled. Yugoslavia allowed more open travel and, so far, Slovenia itself had presented little threat to the small country of Iestrye. Here, the border depended mostly on the extreme terrain features of craggy rock outcroppings and a wide river, Bovesh, to slow any potential, illegal border crossings. When the trio reached the steep climb down to the river, they had to stop and regroup.

"I guess we're getting wet," Gaby remarked, looking down at the rushing water, but it was mostly to fill the silence. Illya was taking off his pack and making a place to settle Beast.

It was late afternoon and Gaby's legs felt like jelly under her. Her neck and shoulders ached, and her collar bones felt raw and bruised from where the ill-fitting pack had rubbed against them. Her hair clung to her sweat-damp face and her clothing stuck to her body beneath her jacket. She pulled the pack off, thumping it down on the ground beside her with relief. Instantly the sweat on her back began to cool in the mountain air.

She looked at Illya as he unwrapped the makeshift baby carrier, securing the infant at his shoulder with one hand. He wasn't winded and moved as if he was fresh from a rest. No wobbling legs on him. He was sweating though, especially where the pack and the baby had been pressed against him, and she appreciated the show of humanity on him. His sleeves were rolled up, and she savored the view of muscle flexing beneath his skin, the lines of veins running past his wrist into his large hands.

He caught her watching him and glanced away, like he always did, but returned a moment later, his vibrant blue eyes settling on her face. She smiled and he returned it, then his gaze swept over her like an inspection.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Fine."

"Sore?" he asked, a knowing inflection in his words.

She shrugged.

"You have done well." He stepped closer and she tilted her head back to glare at him.

"You don't need to praise me, Illya," she admonished. "I'm not a child or a new recruit."

"No," he offered, "But..." his eyes fell on hers again, and her breath stuttered. "I want to."

"Oh." It was far too breathless. The unexpected admittance, the idea that praising her brought him
some pleasure…

His hand came up and she thought he would touch her face, cup her cheek, and she wanted it, longed for it. Their close call that morning should have made her pull back and be wary, but she found she simply couldn’t.

Instead of caressing her face though, he pushed aside the fabric of her shirt to look at her collarbone, his mouth drawing into a grim line at the sight of the angry, red skin.

"It's nothing." She brushed his hand away, the touch of his fingers and his concern almost too much in her current state. "Once we are over the border, we will steal another car."

"Is bad enough," he remarked. "And you still must carry the pack until we find this unfortunate car." That last part almost made her smile but she knew what was coming. "I will take more of the weight, and we will rig some more padding."

"Illya, I can carry it," she growled, insistent.

"I know you can," he rebutted, his gaze intent. "That is not the point. I can carry it without being injured because the pack fits my body better. That is all this is about."

She couldn't argue with that, she supposed, or she'd just be acting stubborn. "Fine. Take as much as you want. I certainly don't mind."

He smirked as if he saw right through her and held Beast out for her to take. "Change him while I get the ropes ready?"

She looked at the baby, and he frowned at her as he dangled from Illya's hands. "Of course." She lifted him into her own embrace and was immediately enveloped in the most abominable smell. "Illya!" she shouted as he walked away.

"I changed the one this morning!" he called back.

Gaby huffed, holding Beast out from her body. She looked at him with narrowed eyes. He scrunched up his face and started to bawl. She sighed. Why did he hate her?

She laid him out on the blankets that Illya had arranged and dug through the pack for what she would need. She wet several cloths with water from the canteen before opening the offensive diaper and grimaced when she saw what was inside.

"Pfui!"

Beast kicked his legs and cried. She tried to shush him but finally had focus on getting him clean, wrangling his flailing feet into one hand while the other did the dirty work.

Illya reappeared as she was finishing up, looking through his pack for something. Gaby glanced over, distracted by him, and then quickly brought her attention back to the baby, managing to catch the stream urine and cover his little penis just in time.

"Mist! Penises are dangerous," she groused, glaring at Beast who seemed a little too pleased with himself. She heard Illya choke and turned in time find him coughing, one of their canteens in hand. He looked away when their eyes met and she grinned, letting her gaze drift over him, settling for a moment on that place where she had felt him hard against the length of her calf that morning.

He caught her appraisal and she let her eyes flick back to his, held his gaze. He seemed to be holding
his breath. She flicked a glance at his crotch once more and then gave a little shrug as if standing by her words before turning back to finish Beast's diaper.

Some of her humor fled as she focused on not stabbing herself with the diaper pins. Penises were dangerous. Illya's especially so. Not the least because she wanted it, and all the rest of him, so very badly. The thought brought all the feelings she'd been warring with rushing back to the forefront.

She finished with the fastening on Beast's nappy and closed her eyes as she lifted him into her arms. Her mind was churning away, trying to put all these thoughts back into whatever box she had been keeping them in before she’d awoken with the hard heat of Illya’s body under her. Nothing seemed to work. Beast fussed and she tried to pat his back, but it seemed to make him more annoyed with her. Weariness, self-doubt, and suppressed lust turned into sharp, burning frustration.

"Augh!" she exclaimed, pushing to her feet. "This is hopeless! I am completely useless with this baby!"

Illya stepped forward, a hand held up as if to soothe her. "Gaby, you are doing fine. No one expects you to instantly be good at this."

"That is easy for you to say, Herr baby genius! You don't even have to try!" She held Beast out for him to take, but he just stood there, his arms at his sides.

"That is not what is happening."

"Oh really?" She groaned, disbelieving and pushed the baby toward him again. "Illya, take him!"

"Just hold him," Illya pressed. "Give him a chance to know he can trust you. I know you can do this."

"Hah!" Beast's cries were starting to creep inside her brain like tiny pinpoints of hot pressure. It wasn't only the noise, it was a desire to comfort him that seemed buried in the depths of her DNA, and the disappointment at her gross inability to do so. "Any children I have are going to hate me," she spat, reaching a breaking point. “And you will end up stoic father of the year!"

She went still the moment her words registered to her own mind. Though she had not intended it, the implication that they would somehow be together in that venture of parenthood was there, and it burned inside her along with everything else. She looked away from Illya, waiting for him, needing him to take this one, to be the one to hold the line this time. Abide by their unspoken truce.

After what felt like a century, Illya gently lifted Beast from her arms and she released him with a mix of relief and regret. Then she felt a sharp tug at her neck and looked down to find Beast's fingers tangled around her necklace. She stared at that telltale bit of jewelry, her face bleak.

Illya reached out and together they disentangled the baby’s fingers from the fine chain. When Beast was free, Illya settled the ring against her chest, touching the fake pearl with one blunt finger before, tucking it into her shirt out of sight and pulling away. When he stepped back, she looked up into his eyes, her stomach in knots, unable to shield the tumult of emotion she knew he would see in hers.

"If you should choose to have children, Gaby," he said, drawing back from her further, his posture almost formal. "They, and the man who gets to share that with you, will be very fortunate." His voice was rough, deep like a bruise, and there was a distinctly hopeless quality to it that made the storm raging inside her all the more painful. "You will be a fierce and amazing mother," he added, looking down. Her eyes widened as he turned away.

She opened her mouth to respond, to surrender, to ask him what he really wanted, but he cut her off
before the words to do so could even form in her mind. "I have the ropes ready," he reported over his shoulder. "I think we should lower you first, the packs, then Beast. I will climb down last."

His tone was detached, trying to regain some emotional distance. Gaby swallowed and latched on to the only thing she could. "You called him Beast."

"It grew on me," he offered and this time there was warmth in his voice again. He turned back to her with a halfhearted smirk on his lips. "Like fungus."

Gaby laughed breathlessly, her hand sliding up to the ring at her neck. She closed it in her palm and squeezed until her fingers throbbed from the pressure and the metal detail dug into her skin.

Napoleon Solo strolled down the darkened Paris street at a leisurely pace, simply a man out enjoying the night air. The street lamps overhead reflected off cobblestones left wet by a day of rain, creating an air of enchantment that seemed to affect the people around him, citizen and tourist alike. A young blonde woman wearing a sweet little A-line number and blocky-heeled boots hurried in his direction, slowing as she drew near. She lowered her head and looked at him from beneath long, fake lashes and he followed her with his gaze, giving her a charming smile before turning away.

Damn, Gaby and Peril were going to owe him.

More pointedly, he thought as he rounded the corner and took note of the figure waiting for him ahead, Gaby specifically was going to owe him. He wouldn't be here if it weren't for her.

Waverly's contact had been informative but had given him little information to assure him of his partners’ location. A mafia group in Iestrye had invaded the home of Mariana and Valter Korošec three nights ago. They had murdered them, and their household staff, but the couple's two-month-old son, Hugh, was missing.

That was most likely the infant Accosta had seen with his partners.

The police report listed several dead mobsters, in addition to the family, at the scene when they had arrived, along with a man they could not (or simply had not) identified.

Mariana Korošec nee Novak was the only daughter of Boris Novak, Prime Minister of Iestrye, and Valter was the son of a man with high influence in the Austrian Government, which meant that baby had the potential to give THRUSH an unprecedented influence over both men and in so doing, their countries.

A disturbing idea with their goal of global destabilization.

Later the same evening, a group of armed men had raided the Rdeča Vrtnica Hotel, searched his partners’ room and questioned the hotel staff. Waverly's guy'd had pictures. Solo hadn’t recognized any of the faces, but their MO was sharply familiar.

Now, his partners had gone off-grid, likely with the baby, and were hopefully headed for their backup extraction in Trieste, but any number of things could go wrong in the miles between, as he well knew. They had lost all their gear, their papers, and their first extraction had been blown before they arrived. Any communication aimed toward the US would most likely draw suspicion, meaning
they couldn’t call home to UNCLE. Peril's only contacts would be Soviet, making them less than ideal, and Gaby only trusted one person on this entire continent, that he knew of - besides Peril and himself of course - which was why he was here.

The man awaiting him was leaning back against the brick wall of La Dame Piente, a small, diverse, bar in an otherwise quiet corner of the city. Solo watched as he lit a cigarette, the flame momentarily casting his angular face in an orange glow. Prominent brow, a large, Roman nose, a square chin on a narrow jaw, and a pair of wide-set eyes. Dark hair fell over his forehead in a pile of artfully disheveled curls that Solo immediately detested. The man probably spent hours every morning trying to look like that.

René Faucheux.

Spotting Solo, the Frenchman smiled, pushing off the wall he’d been lounging on and coming towards him.

"Ahh, Napoleon Solo," René called, the name melting in the man’s mouth like butter on a croissant. "It is good to see you again, my friend."

"Unexpected, to say the least," Solo returned, taking the offered hand.

René laughed. "Yes, indeed. I must admit, I wondered what would bring you to contact me."

The man looked past Solo's shoulder, barely craning since they were nearly the same height. "I do not see my fair Gabriella with you this evening."

"Nope," Solo said, his mouth setting in a carefully flippant smile. "I'm here on my own." René drew back, looking serious, but Solo headed him off before he could ask any more questions. "I think our conversation is probably best saved for over a drink." He looked pointedly at the entrance to the bar where music and voices spilled out onto the street.

Comprehending quickly, René patted Solo on the shoulder like an old friend, and they headed inside.

La Dame Piente was packed with bodies, boisterous and noisy. Pink, orange and blue neon light shone on the hair and faces of its patrons, making them all appear befitting of the namesake. René pushed through the crowd to a table in the back where a couple was eagerly making out. Solo allowed himself to take interest in the amorous display before the two looked up to see René hovering over them.

"Dégages," he ordered darkly, and they scrambled out of the booth and past them, straightening their clothing and swearing in French at him as they went.

"Very accommodating," Solo remarked, sliding into the booth.

Mercenary, gun dealer, explosives expert and car enthusiast, René Faucheux was a man to go to when you needed to do some damage, but he was also connected. Almost everyone in Europe owed René, and René owed no one. But most importantly, the man knew and seemed to have at least some affection for the lovely Gaby Teller. Solo could only guess at it’s being genuine. The two had bonded somewhere at some point over bombs and a 1953 Corvette Stingray. If Gaby needed to reach out for help and couldn’t contact UNCLE, René would be at the top of her list.

René silently volunteered a cigarette, and Solo accepted, taking the offer of a light as well. He took the moment, relaxing into his seat, keeping up the facade of the evening, and took a few pulls. The burn of the smoke in his throat, the stretch of lungs, the mild, euphoric high of nicotine. He set his hand on the tabletop and let the cigarette rest between his fingers as he reached down to unbutton his
"You look well, René," Solo opened.

"I am always well," René returned, tapping the ash from the tip of his own cig. "But there is no reason for this small talk. Why are you here? You are in trouble maybe, need a little help?" He smiled wickedly, like a man who saw an opportunity coming his way.

"Oh." Solo smiled. "I'm not here for me," he said smoothly. "I'm here about our mutual mechanic."

René's countenance settled into something a bit more speculative. "She really is not here with you?"

Solo tilted his head, watching the man. He brought the cigarette back to his lips. Inhale, exhale. "And apparently, she hasn't contacted you."

"No." It was said slowly. "I have not spoken with Gaby since Budapest."

Solo felt a small wash of relief. If Gaby hadn't reached out, things must be going to plan.

*Or very, very off plan,* the devil on his shoulder said. He usually preferred the devil but, tonight, he was not pleased with his input.

"Have you heard about anything going down in Iestrye? Any recent deals, contacts?"

"I am not going to reveal my contacts to you CIA," René returned, but there was something there behind his eyes. Concern? Solo could hardly believe in that. "But I have not done any deals in that region recently, on either side of the blanket."

Solo pulled up his most detached smile. "Well, then, that's all I needed to know." He pulled out his wallet and laid a stack of bills on the table. René's frown was subtle, but he took the money, folding it up and shoving it into his inner pocket.

"Anytime." There was something careful in his tone and he looked up at Solo from beneath his brow before looking away as if he was unaffected. "You tell my Gabriella I said ‘hello’ when you see her."

"Of course," Solo replied, then turned away, moving toward the door with the same casual, unhurried air he'd entered.

As he stepped out into the street, he cast a thought to the man he had just left and sighed. He'd probably done more harm than good, especially with that last question, but he'd had to try. He aimed his feet back toward his hotel. His flight to Venice was in the morning. With any luck, he'd meet his partners when he landed, and it would be as simple as that.

Somehow, he had a feeling that wouldn’t be the case.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Worry, Wanting and a Case of the Croup

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all the readers out there. Thank you to all the commenters. Thank you to my dynamic, darling diadema for being the bestest, bodacious beta. To oceans_and_lovers, forever, for the inspiration. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Beast had been coughing for the last hour, and Gaby could see by the look on Illya's face that it wasn't a normal baby thing to do. It certainly didn't sound normal to Gaby. It was rough and barking, as though his throat was swollen.

"What's the matter with him?" she finally asked when Illya stopped and pulled him from the carrier. She watched as he lifted the baby up to his face, putting their cheeks together, then lifted the gown to press a palm to his bare back.

They had been walking since the border and planned to camp one more night, to put some distance between themselves and the border before they stole a car so that the immediate correlation wouldn't be drawn. The last thing they needed was a reported car theft leading their enemies straight to them.

Illya put his ear to the baby’s chest. "It sounds like croup." He started to remove his pack and Gaby stepped forward to help him settle it on the ground at his feet. "But I cannot tell if he has fever."

Gaby reached out a hand and laid it on the baby as well. "He is warm, not too warm," she said. "But I guess I wouldn't really know."

His smile was a tender thing and she tried not to be affected by it or to let feelings of inadequacy get to her again. She had only just managed to pull herself back together.

"Feeling is very inaccurate," Illya was explaining. "Plus, our own body temperatures are elevated from the walking." He pulled out the blanket they kept ready for changing purposes and laid Beast down to check his diaper.

"What are we going to do if he is sick, Illya?" Worry pulled at her insides. How much more could go wrong? She dared not voice the sentiment out loud. "It's not like we can take him to the doctor."
He looked grim as he deftly pinned the fresh diaper in place. "I know. I think we will have to go into town. Take a room."

"They might already have word out about us." She shook her head and pushed her damp bangs off her face. "People looking."

Illya nodded, sitting back on his haunches. "It is a risk, but I am not sure we have much choice. We need shelter and running water."

"What we need," she said turning around to look at how far they had come. "Is a disguise."

Illya’s eyes flitted over her then down to the baby in his arms before returning to her, looking thoughtful but hesitant.

“I have an idea for that.”

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Gaby made a face, shifting beneath the material he had wrapped around her, and Illya took a careful breath to steady himself. She was standing only in her underwear for the second time in so many days. A demi-cut lace bra that he, thankfully, could not see through (and was now, also thankfully, covered), and a pair of white hip-hugger underwear that smoothed perfectly over the curve of her ass and revealed the long, toned length of her beautiful legs.

He had managed to corral his rogue thoughts into a small corner of his mind as he focused on getting things just right, on keeping her, the baby, and their mission safe, but he had definitely noticed. The memory of searching her for trackers mixed with the memory and intimacy of the way they had woken up together was a severe challenge for his professionalism.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked. He stepped back and tried to concentrate on how the wrap laid against her skin and not the lovely, golden skin itself. "He is going to start crying the minute you put him near me."

Beast was, in fact, already crying, something that was only going to worsen his condition. Illya had been unable to get him to eat either, a fact that worried him even more. He wanted to deny her statement, but it was unfortunately all too true. He didn't know why the little one was so opposed to Gaby and could only think that her own insecurity while holding him was felt and being reflected back to her.

He turned and looked at the infant, wailing at the sky, breaking only to cough, a harsh sound that hurt Illya's chest just to listen to. He needed to calm him down.

"I have an idea for that as well, but…” He sighed, turning back to her. "I am not fond of it."

Gaby frowned. "What is it?"

"The medical bag we picked up outside Mariboor, it has an antihistamine. It will make him sleep."

Gaby's frown deepened. "Is it safe?"

Illya set his mouth in a hard line. The nurses had often used antihistamine to make the babies sleep,
sometimes with very negative consequences. "Debatable."

Gaby's expression matched his. "Safer than being shot at? Taken by THRUSH?"

His nod was not so much an agreement with her statement as with the sentiment, but both stood to be true. They could not safely take him to a doctor, nor could they easily regulate or treat him themselves while they were outdoors.

"I am open to another plan," he said, looking back at her earnestly.

Gaby's eyes shifted to the baby and he watched her face change, concern pulling at her brow. He had seen this side of her several times when she dealt with injuries on others, himself included, but there was something so much softer about this. "He's only making it worse for himself by crying," she decided. "This will be better."

Illya nodded. Having her agreement should have made him feel more secure in the decision, but it did not. If this went wrong, he would blame only himself.

Once he'd administered the drug, he lifted the child into his arms and began to pace while Gaby pulled on a loose fitting dress, leaving it unbuttoned at the front so they could access the carrier, which he had wrapped low on her torso.

He patted and soothed Beast, murmuring to him in a low string of Russian comfort words. "Sleep now, little one," he said soothingly. "Sleep and rest that little throat. Shh, shh, shh."

He turned and found Gaby staring at him. Her face was as stoic as always, but he had learned a long time ago that the more she was still, the more there was going on inside her quick mind. He couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking about when she watched him like that.

Beast settled on his shoulder, his little body relaxing into sleep, and Illya carried him over to Gaby. She took him carefully, handling him as though he were a small bomb just waiting to go off in her hands. Illya helped her open the wrap, trying to ignore the way his fingers brushed her bare flesh, or the inhale of her breath when they did so. Together, they worked to adjust the material until the baby was steady and secure, strapped to her body. Then she buttoned up the dress, closing it around him. The effect was a very pregnant-looking Gaby.

She put a hand on her lower back, settling into a standard pregnant stance. "How does it look?" He watched her smooth a hand down over what he knew to be the baby's back, but which looked very much like a pregnant woman’s belly, and something inside him jumped and twisted hard. He stared at that swell, her gentle hand, and a hopeless yearning sparked to life inside him. The sensation made his hands shake and stole his voice.

Illya knew he wanted to be a father. It was something he had come to accept, along with its unlikelihood, some time ago. And he knew he wanted to be with Gaby, an impossibility that kept him awake some nights against his will.

This was both of those things pressed together, and made into one. A taunting image of a future he craved but would never have and, for several beats of his heart, it threatened to take him under.

"Can you tell this is his head right here?" Gaby was saying, and her voice called him back into reality. The mission. The plan.

"No," he finally managed to croak out, shaking his head. "Only if you draw attention by putting your hand there." He squeezed his fists to stop their shaking and walked around her. "Most people will believe what you present to them. They are not going to be looking for the lie."
"All right," Gaby said, moving to lift her pack. "Let's get going before this stuff wears off."

Illya stopped her, taking the pack in his own hand. "Husband would not let his pregnant wife carry this."

"Illya," she admonished, and he knew she hated when he did these kinds of things for her. Thought it implied she was weak. He wondered if she would ever trust that he saw her as one of the strongest people he knew.

"It will draw attention."

She huffed and folded her hands so perfectly over Beast's back that his insides tried to twist around again. He held his breath to keep it at bay.

"Fine," she said dismissively, the best sign that he had won. He waited until she turned away to smile. Then he realized she was walking on without him and reached down to swing his pack onto his back, fastening it quickly before grabbing hers and following.

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Gaby was of the mind that this baby wrap thing was genius. Admittedly, they had placed it specifically low to emulate a late pregnancy, but she could tell that if she had it higher, as Illya had, it wouldn't be too uncomfortable. It put the baby at her center of gravity and the straps were set to hang from her shoulders and not her neck. It beat carrying him around in her arms, and both hands were free.

Of course, that didn't mean he wasn't heavy and the added layers, plus Beast's body temperature meant that the walk into town with the sun shining down on them had her sweating. She forced herself not to slow as they spotted the first people on the outskirts. They looked at her, and she smiled, settling a hand on Beast's back. He felt very solid and she could feel his rattled breathing. The couple nodded to her and moved on. Then Illya was beside her. She looked up at him, and he gave her one of those soft smiles of his.

"Mrs. Pleško," he said as he took her hand in his. She felt his wedding ring against her fingers and realized they had been wearing them all this time without even a thought. She looked down at her hand, at the gold band there, the way it caught the light and took a deep breath as she remembered him sliding it on to her finger four days ago.

She let the fingers of her other hand close around his and when she looked back up at him, she was caught, trapped in the gravity, in the gaze, his eyes so blue, so open and sincere. She saw his wanting and let herself want right back. All the little fantasies she hadn't been able to put away since she'd woken up that morning. It was a dangerous moment, but she couldn't bring it to an end.

An older couple walked by, the woman speaking loudly and ending it for them. Gaby whipped her head around, saw the woman give her husband's arm a smack and then turn back to them with a knowing smile.

"What did they say?" she asked quietly, and Illya started forward again, not letting go of her hand. There was a faint blush to his cheeks. "Illya, tell me."

"She said—" He cleared his throat. "She said, 'why don't you ever look at me like that anymore?'"
Gaby grinned as the blush in his cheeks deepened. "And then he said," Illya continued, his voice rough, embarrassed. "'Because how do you think she got in that condition?'

A flush of heat ran through her, a strange mix of embarrassment and arousal, and she felt the connection of their hands very keenly. She cleared her throat, took note of the fact that his eyes were averted and bumped her shoulder into his arm. "We better keep it up then," she remarked, and he looked down at her in surprise. She gave him a knowing smirk. "You know, to sell the cover."

He blinked and then huffed out a small laugh, his eyes flitting over her face quickly. She turned away and started forward again, tugging on his hand to keep him with her.

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They were standing in front of a carved mahogany counter, the young clerk looking them over as Illya asked for a room. Gaby let out a breath of exhaustion she didn’t need to fake. Closing her eyes, she leaned against his partner as she ran a hand over her ‘belly’ and tried to look pathetically weary. Illya put his arm around her, which added to the illusion, and she relaxed into it, taking advantage of the ruse to enjoy his touch. She couldn't understand what he was saying, but she appreciated the low rumble of his voice, the calm inflection he always had when he was playing this part. She loved the way he rolled his r's, the way his voice went into the basement when he was being very serious.

My wife is very tired, he was probably saying, and she was pretty sure she never imagined that little something in his voice whenever he was referring to her as his wife. Do you have any rooms for the night?

Then Beast shifted against her and she was instantly distracted from the situation. She stood up straight and held her breath, Illya’s arm falling away from her back.

The clerk had turned to go get some paperwork and Gaby took Illya’s arm in her hand, squeezing tightly. He looked to her with a frown of concern just as the clerk reappeared, laying out papers in front of them.

"What?"

She glanced at the clerk and then tried to paste on a smile as she patted her belly. "Oh, nothing," she sighed, looking up at Illya steadily. "The baby just moved."

A perfectly reasonable thing for a pregnant woman to say, right? Hadn't Bonnie said that to her just Monday? It took Illya a moment to realize the significance of her statement, his blue eyes widening.

Beast shifted again, this time pushing into her diaphragm and making her huff out a breath of air. Illya turned quickly and began filling out the paperwork, nodding to the clerk's comments almost absently. Gaby started walking toward the elevator, hoping the motion might soothe the Beast. Moving, they could get away with, but if he started to cry—and since Gaby was holding him she felt certain he would at any moment—then the gig would be up.

Illya said a few, final words to the clerk and then he was at her side, pushing the button to the lift and looking down at her warily. She watched his eyes go from her face to the hidden baby, and then his hand was out, huge and tan, over the soft fabric and the curve of the baby's back. Without thought, she put her hand over his, holding it there as if it really were her belly he was soothing and felt something foreign catch in her chest. The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open, roughly, vibrating
on their tracks and the couple stepped inside the small, narrow space, holding their breath as they waited for the doors to close. Beast shifted and pushed against her again and then coughed, a hoarse, bark of a sound. She tried to hide it with a cough of her own, covering her mouth as the clerk turned and the doors slid closed between them.

That sharp "Kee-kee-kee," sounded from beneath her dress, the start of a crying jag, and she quickly began unbuttoning.

Illya looked around as if it was instinctual to protect her from stripping down in public, but they were alone. No one else would have fit inside the tiny car with them and their packs.

Beast wailed, and it was awful to hear, not just because of the potential danger, but the croaky sound of it, the ragged way he drew in his breath.

When she had the dress undone, Illya took him quickly, and she was hardly aware of the way his hands brushed incidentally over her breasts and belly, her full attention on Beast’s suffering. Illya lifted him to his shoulder and began to pat him, bouncing from his knees, so huge and oddly graceful in the movement. Beast made another croaky cry and then started coughing again.

"He sounds so awful." She caught Illya's eye, her own wide with concern. "What are we going to do?"

His hand wrapped around her fingers, giving them a soft squeeze. "Don't worry. It's going to be okay."

She could only hope that wasn’t just wishful thinking.

Chapter End Notes

A disclaimer: don't drug your babies. K? Or try to make your own formula, lol. Just felt like I should probably put that out there.

And, quick business stuffs. I will be doing NaNoWriMo this year! (Anyone else giving it a go?) AND I signed up for the Winter Exchange! I have through chapter 17 prepped for posting, which should get us through November but after that, there will be a short hiatus as I wrap all of that up and then get back to the polishing on this baby. I just want to let you all know and tell you how thankful I am for your patience. Talk to you soon!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Hotel rooms, confessions and pressing your luck.
(Things get a little steamy (¬－－) = ★)

Chapter Notes

Notes. Noooootes. Diadema (cap because start of sentence?) is AMAZING! A-maze-ing. Who else is amazing, SydneyMo who did not help me write this at all but DID encourage and motivate me when I was editing and rolling on the floor in dismay. Important things. Awesome friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The room was small but clean, the bed larger than she had expected. There was a dresser against one wall with a tall, ornate mirror and a floral wallpaper that wasn't as bad as one would assume from a description. Illya threw his pack onto the quilt covered mattress and went straight into the bathroom with Beast, pulling towels off the racks and tossing them in her direction as she joined him.

“This bathroom is tiny.”

“Is perfect for what we are doing.”

"What are we doing?"

"Steam," he explained. "It will soothe his lungs and throat, help him breathe. But we must keep it inside the room. Close door. Use towels to block it."

She did as he asked and Illya turned on the water in the narrow shower to full spray, pulling aside the curtain and leaning back against the wall next to it. When she had finished her task, Gaby settled against the sink across from him. Their knees touched, and she jostled one of his with hers. He glanced down at their legs, then up to her chest and away. A smile teased his lips and she looked down and saw her dress was still undone, revealing an expanse of torso and the now empty carrier bunched at her waist. She rolled her eyes but smiled as well.

She stripped off the wrap and hung it on the shower rod before re-buttoning the front of her dress. A few moments later, she was tempted to unbutton it again as the steam began to crowd her in. Hot sticky air filled her lungs and clung to her skin.
Illya stretched out his legs, sliding one of them between hers to press his toes beneath the sink and better brace his stance. He was wearing the green slacks from the suit he had stolen. The fabric was soft against her bared skin and she imagined she could feel the solid strength of him beneath.

Slowly, Beast’s cries tapered off. First to a fuss, then to steady, mildly labored breathing. Her partner held the baby out from his body now, cradling him on his forearms, little head and shoulders balanced in those enormous hands, tiny feet tucked against his broad chest. The infant was staring up at him with wide, entranced eyes.

Gaby felt like she could relate.

Illya was speaking to him in Russian, low and soft, a rumble of sound she could feel as well as hear. It seemed to dance along her nerve endings, teasing her, tempting her. The steam clung to his skin, making it glisten in the dim light. His stubble, darker than the hair on his head but still deep gold, was approaching beard status after only three days without shaving, and she found the scruff distracting, wanting to feel it under her fingertips again, see if it had become softer since that morning.

With greedy eyes she watched the water bead up on his skin and run down the exposed hollow of his throat. The ache of wanting she’d been battling since they’d woken up together, sat like a low hum beneath her skin and it resonated with the sound of his voice. She could smell the musk of his skin, stronger now, heavy in the humid air, and shouldn’t she be repulsed by it? Instead, it only called to her, tempted her to slide into his space, to tuck her face into the crook of his neck once more and breathe deeper. She held herself back with the faintest thread of self-control. Each breath, each heartbeat she remained in place, an act of will.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed like that. She let herself be present and lost at the same time. Lost to the world around them, but present in this moment. This man who had made a home for himself inside her breast. She couldn't keep him, she reminded herself for the millionth time. He doesn't belong to you. He doesn't even belong to himself.

Eventually, Illya reached over to turn off the water. Beast's breathing seemed easier, and he was calm and looking around.

"I will try to feed him now," Illya said. "If he will eat, it is a good sign."

Gaby nodded. Broken from her trance, she turned away, pulling the towels from beneath the door. "I'll call down and see if they will send warm milk," she said, then looked back at him. "And maybe some cream?"

Illya hummed in agreement as he carried Beast to the bed. He stripped the baby out of his now damp gown and changed him with that same efficiency that still made her jealous. Then he took off his own shirt, and she tried not to stare, noting again the lines of muscle in his abdomen and the newest scar, puckered and pink above his hip. Clearing her throat, she lifted the phone to her ear and focused on the numbers as she dialed the lobby.

When she'd finished ordering what she hoped was warm milk and some food for them as well, she turned back around to find Illya stretched out on the bed with Beast beside him, both of them naked to the waist. The image did strange things to her insides, but she didn't pull away from it this time. She took in the vision and the notion it presented her.

Illya really would be some kind of father of the year, she thought. Attentive and mindful, just the right balance of indulgent and stern. Steady, reliable, present… barring the KGB calling him away for year-long missions, or worse, her traitorous brain threw in, hauling him off to the gulag as they had his father.
She inhaled sharply and turned away, playing with her fingers at her side, running her thumb over the ring on her finger. Illya's voice rumbled quietly behind her and she listened. He was singing again, but she didn't know the words. After a moment, she realized she recognized the tune as that of a song she'd learned as a child. Eine Kleine Spinne, about a spider. She looked up and saw him walking his fingers up over the baby's belly very slowly as he sang, then sweeping his hand back down, saying 'okazalsya'. Beast smiled, kicking his legs, and Gaby tipped her head to the side, completely drawn in.

She climbed onto the bed with them and stretched out too, propping her head in her hand, mirroring Illya. She worried Beast might object to her arrival, but he simply looked at her, those dark eyes wide and curious. Illya stopped singing, and a part of her was sad that he felt self-conscious with her there.

"We have that song too," she said.

Illya nodded, focus still on Beast. "Little ones seem to like the hand motions."

Gaby looked at his hand cradling Beast's hip and then back up into his eyes. "How do you know so much about babies, Illya?" she asked. "You keep avoiding, but it's all right, I just… I want to know this about you."

He brought his eyes to hers and reached over, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Many things about me are not nice to know."

"You think I don't know that?" she asked, an edge creeping into her voice. "I know where you come from. I know what uniform you wear when you go home."

"Gaby…"

"Tell me."

He sighed. "I will tell you," he said, "If only because now I think you are imagining things much worse…" He looked down at the baby, brushed a palm over the light dusting of hair on his head.

"You know about the home," he began. "Where they took me. After my father was sentenced."

"Yes." The assurance was given carefully. "I know."

He hummed first and something about it yanked at her heartstrings.

"I was a favorite among the other boys," he said quietly. "Because of what my father was accused of, I was a favorite punching bag."

Her breath caught, but she kept from making a sound.

"I had not yet learned to defend myself," he continued, and then looked at her from the corner of his eye. "I was short and little bit… pudgy."

She couldn't stop the lift of her lips into a smile at the look on his face with this confession. "What?" she exclaimed in a low voice so as not to startle the baby. "You have not always been two meters tall? I feel betrayed."

A smile pulled at his lips as well. The words came a little easier after that.

"I was in the infirmary often. It was just off from the nursery, and there were many babies. Far more than the nurses could care for. They were often left to cry, neglected… sometimes intentionally, but
sometimes not… like all of us."

Gaby wanted to say his name but she had a strong sense that any sign of pity would close him right back up again, so she shut her mouth, her lips drawing into a thin line.

"One woman, Nurse Golovina, she was…" he seemed to struggle with the right words, lying back and looking at the ceiling. "She cared. She tried. Tried to… make us feel safe. One night, when I was in the infirmary, there were several ill babies, and she handed one to me. I had no idea what to do at first. It was so tiny but also heavy." He held out his hands as if remembering the weight. "She showed me what to do and… I don't know," he said softly. "After that, she would often ask for me, when I wasn't there for other reasons…" after a moment, he shrugged. "That is all that it is."

"I," she wasn't sure what to say, how she should respond, to keep this warm and open thing between them but protect them both at the same time. "I will always picture you that way now," she said with a little, aloof-like lift of her chin. "Short and chubby and cuddling babies." He chuckled and shook his head. "Yes, your image is entirely tainted in my mind."

He looked at her then, blue eyes so sincere. How did he still have it in him, this aching, wholesome sincerity? How had that been preserved through everything else? To lose his father, to be taken from his mother… she certainly hadn’t managed to hold on to her own.

She opened her mouth to say something more to him, though what she did not know, when there was a knock at the door. They both turned, Illya moving toward the gun he'd set on the nightstand. Hers was strapped to her leg under her dress, and she had her hand on it almost instantly.

"Room service," she observed after a second. "I'll get it." She climbed out of the bed and moved toward the door.

"Your stomach," Illya hissed, and she turned back.

"Pillow!" she whispered, and he tossed her the one from beneath his head. She stuffed it under her dress and quickly tried to smooth it over. There was a short entry hall that would block Beast from view, so she opened the door with the chain in place, braced and waiting, out of habit. Always a check that whoever was there was who they should be. When he didn't try to bust in, she peeked out to see a uniformed young man with a food trolley.

"Sobna strežba?" he said, seeming a little unsteadied by her door-answering routine.

"Hvala vam," she said, having picked up at least that much from listening to Illya, and then quickly undid the chain, pulled the cart inside and closed the door in his face.

Once Beast's bottle was prepared and Illya was feeding him, Gaby looked longingly at the bathroom, thinking of how good a hot shower would feel. To be clean.

"Go," Illya said, reading her mind. "We should take the chance while we have it."

"I will put a plate together for you first. You can eat while you feed him."

"Thank you. Save enough for yourself."

"Oh, don't worry," she tossed back, walking to the cart. "I will. I am famished, but I would rather be clean when I eat."

Illya smirked at her. "I think I have just discovered your girly side."
"Very funny." she waved a slice of meat at him. "Don't make me throw this at you."

He chuckled and went back to attending to Beast, who had pulled off the bottle to investigate their conversation.

Once she had made his sandwich, she set it on the bed within his reach and stepped away, just managing to control the urge to touch him. Her emotions from the day were still in a tumult and she had not yet managed to re-compartmentalize her desire for him.

He was laying there half naked, muscular arms on display, looking and smelling decidedly male. She remembered how it had felt to be pressed against him in the tent, solid and strong. The trust of his confession, the added compulsion to comfort him... It was taking so much energy to resist and yet here he was seeming perfectly unaffected. She bunched her hand into a fist to keep her fingers in check and headed for the bathroom.

She was stripping out of the dress before she reached the door, her skin feeling sticky and encrusted from the sweaty walk. She was bending down to remove her boots when she caught movement from across the room. She turned sharply only to find her own reflection in the tall mirror there.

The reflection also revealed Illya, leaning over Beast as he fed him, showed the lined of his face, his torso disappearing into the waist of his trousers. She turned away as a pernicious little thought entered her mind. Illya might not think he was taunting her with all this shirtlessness, but it was definitely its own kind of sweet torture. Why shouldn't she give him a little of it back?

Illya looked up at a flash of color in the mirror over the dresser, a flick of his eyes which caught almost instantly on the expanse of Gaby's nude shoulders. She was tying her hair up into a pile on top of her head, and the position highlighted her slender but muscular arms, a flex of bicep, her rounded deltoid. His gaze drifted down the expanse of her skin pausing on the fastening of her bra. When her fingers came into view, reaching back to unfasten it he quickly averted his eyes, but much to his shame, he couldn't keep them away. He lifted them back up to the reflection, watching as she turned aside to set the bit of lacy garment on the chair at the bedside. He caught a peek of side breast and felt his body flush hot. He swallowed and looked away again, back down at Beast who was sucking happily away on his bottle.

He tried to focus on the infant, on the fact he was feeling better, and that it must have been an allergen that caused the croup and not a virus, instead of what he knew was going on behind him. Still, his eyes drifted back up to the mirror just in time to watch her slide her fingers inside the waist of her panties and push them down off her hips, over the perfect curve of her ass, and it was a moment before he could make himself look away again. Her skin was paler there, on those round cheeks, the skin unblemished and so soft looking that his hand actually burned with the yearning to touch her and feel it for himself.

She kicked the undergarment away and stepped into the bathroom, and he was sure the torture was over, that she would close the door and cut herself off from view, but instead, she moved to stand at the sink, one hand braced against the porcelain, a knee bent casually forward, presenting a devastating side view of her dancer's body but with perfectly-positioned censorship. She started brushing her hair and he yanked his gaze away this time as his body started to respond a little more intently.

Was she doing this on purpose? He frowned, felt that pulse of want in his belly, and lifted his gaze once more. She was still brushing her hair, looking for all the world like a woman comfortable in her ablutions. She couldn't be... she wouldn't. After the close call that morning and what had happened
at the border… except that she would. He inhaled sharply, thought of the look in her eyes before the goat had interrupted them, the way she’d watched him outside the city.

Unable to think on it any further, to wonder at her thoughts and her intentions, he set the baby’s bottle aside and rolled out of the bed. She looked up when he appeared in the doorway of the bathroom but didn’t shy away or try to cover up. She held his gaze, her brown eyes curious, questioning, and he wondered if she wanted him to come inside with her, wanted him to surrender their truce, to pull her in, to kiss her and more. He wondered if he would oblige. Desire twisted inside him so strongly it stole his breath. He was hard and his entire body demanded he reach for her but he didn’t move. His eyes however - almost against his will - drifted downward, bouncing off her chafed collarbones to the rest of her body, soft and strong, tawny and perfect. Small breasts topped with rosy, brown nipples, flat stomach leading down…

He brought his attention back to her face quickly and saw she was watching him look, accepting it. He stared at her. A small smile played at the corner of her lips, a knowing, a tell, and he felt himself return it as he managed to step back. “You should put ointment on those abrasions,” he said, his voice a rumble in his throat, before finally closing the door between them.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading. I would love to hear what you think and I hope you are all doing well!
"He might lose the eye."

"Illya—"

"Don't sew it. Let it scar. It will remind him of who - of what - he is. Of where he stands."

"Illya," a warm hand on his shoulder jolted him awake, but some deeper instinct reminded him not to thrash or lash out. The voice, as well, was familiar, comforting. He rolled sharply onto his back as he drew in a breath, his eyes open to find Gaby leaning over him. She was frowning slightly and pulled back at his sudden movement. "You were talking in your sleep."

He looked her over in a swift assessment of her well-being. The helplessness and panic of the memory clung to him but true awareness was dawning. He exhaled and turned to find Beast lying beside him, still asleep.

"What did I say?" he asked then, trying not to sound as concerned as he was. He didn't usually talk in his sleep. It would be a very bad habit to develop. There were too many things he needed to keep inside his own head.

"I don't know," she said. "It was in Russian and it was more of a mumble. I couldn't make it out." Her hand was still on his shoulder, warm and reassuring. She trailed it down over the curve of his tricep before moving away. And echo of her touch remained, as much a stimulus as it was a balm.

His eyes followed her as she came around to the other side of the bed. She was wearing another pilfered outfit, this one a sheath dress in a soft, yellow fabric with crystal pleats down the front. It was slightly too large, but the color was nice against her skin.

The thought of her skin reminded him of the display she’d put on earlier, and a flush of heat and embarrassment washed over him.
He watched as she climbed onto the bed across from him, the baby between them again, feeling wary. She laid back on the pillow, looking at the ceiling, a hand tucked beneath her head.

"Do you talk to Dr. Poole at all?" she asked, her voice soft, contemplative. The mention of the UNCLE therapist sent a jagged pulse of anger through him.

"How do you know about that?" he demanded. His last session with the woman was still very fresh in his mind. The idea that this had gotten out, that others would know and see it as weakness, or worse, that the KGB might find out, misunderstand—One of his fists tightened in the sheets next to the baby. "Does Solo know?"

Gaby turned her head to him and frowned. "Why? Did you pass him on his way out?" Her voice had taken on a sharp, impatient quality.

It was Illya's turn to frown. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said pointedly, rolling to face him, propping up on her hand. "That Waverly has ordered all of us to see her. All of us."

"All of us…"

"Yes. The other agents too, not just our team. Everyone."

"You go and… talk to her," Illya asked slowly, the word almost a curse. Surely Gaby would not find it acceptable to let someone into her mind like that?

She gave a little shrug. "It was difficult at first, but she has a very soothing personality."

Illya made a gruff sound in his chest. "I don't like it. There is no need to go and talk, to be analyzed by someone looking for…" he closed his mouth, his lips settling into a thin line as his jaw flexed. "It is unnecessary and a security risk."

Gaby looked him over. "You really think Waverly would allow that?"

He opened his mouth to answer but stopped. He didn't, in fact, believe that Waverly would allow that, but he knew the organization he belonged to, knew the lengths the KGB would go to to get inside UNCLE or any other entity they felt was a threat to their agenda. They were already trying to use him for that purpose.

If they ever suspected he were talking to someone from outside…

"He does not control everything," Illya ground out instead. "I think you have too much faith in him."

Gaby frowned. "Illya, it's not—"

"I will shower now," he said, rolling off the bed. "You should rest while you can." He shut the door to the small bathroom and took a moment to steady himself.

He immediately regretted how he had spoken to Gaby and exhaled his exasperation. She wasn't some gullible, young girl, he knew that, but his own past made trusting anyone difficult. Even her. Trusting that look in her eye from that morning, trusting whatever she had been up to earlier… teasing him or taunting him? There was always this dark thing inside that insisted it was the latter.

He shook off the thought, taking the three steps needed to reach the shower, and turned on the spray with a shaking hand. Something brushed his cheek, and he batted at it without thinking. Whatever it
was fell onto his shoulder and he lifted it with his fingers. White lace, damp and smelling of the hotel soap… Gaby's panties. She'd washed them and hung them up to dry.

His eyes widened at the sight of them in his hands: very small and delicate, pretty but practical. Then he closed his eyes as a rush of images from earlier came flooding in. Gaby standing under the forest canopy as he searched her body for trackers, Gaby leaning over him in the tent, her eyes focused on his mouth, Gaby at the bathroom sink, allowing him the view of her naked body.

He quickly hung the underwear up on the towel rack and moved away, stripping out of his clothing and climbing into the shower. The water was too hot, as he'd forgotten to check it, and he hissed as it hit his skin, hurrying to adjust the knobs.

He felt like he was on a roller coaster ride. The danger they were in, the feelings that flooded him whenever he lifted Beast into his arms, the questions of his past and therapy — he did not trust that word — and then there was Gaby. The deep, unshakable feelings he had for her and this constant, intractable arousal.

He never thought he would say this, let alone think it, but he needed Solo. He needed the American to offer some remark, some innuendo that would make things awkward and have them pulling back from each other. His presence alone would have kept much of these things at bay. Distracting them both with his irritating overconfidence and astute gifts of observation.

Illya wondered, absently, where Cowboy was, if he were safe. What the CIA had him doing and if it would lead to trouble later.

He leaned into his palms, his weight pressing them into the tiles, and let the hot water run over his body. The heat and pressure of the spray soothed muscles that ached from a night spent on the ground, tight shoulders from carrying the pack and the baby, his neck, his lower back. He opened his eyes and the glint of the ring on his finger drew his attention. He had forgotten it was there until the walk into town.

Thinking of Solo had helped with the arousal problem until those thoughts came full circle. To the fact that he wasn't present, wasn't a part of this particular journey. Gaby wouldn't have pulled that stunt earlier if Solo were here. If she'd ever needed to undress in front of them, it had always been quick, efficient and practical. As things had been in the forest the day before. The indolent way she had leaned against the sink, the casual way she had lifted her dark eyes to his, had not been any of those things.

That had been something else entirely.

He felt his body once again respond to that image. Her lithe body and tawny skin. He remembered the warm weight of her on his chest, the electrifying touch of her fingers on his skin. The look in her eyes. It all mixed so easily with every fantasy he’d ever had and all the stress and tension of the last several days twisted and pulled, swelling up and merging into this one overwhelming need.

His cock throbbed as he thought of what might have happened when he’d followed her to the bathroom. What if he hadn’t pulled away? What if he had accepted her challenge and stepped inside with her? Would she have let him kiss her? Slide one hand into her hair as he did so, angling her so he could deepen it?

He already knew what her mouth tasted like and he let himself remember as the images in his mind morphed into that alternate reality. She kissed him back and clung to him as he slid his fingers down over her flat belly and into the dark curls between her legs.
Would she be in here with him now?

One hand drew into a fist where it pressed against the shower stall, a last bid for self-control, then with a groan, he surrendered to the demands of his body. He reached down and took himself in hand, hanging his head beneath the spray, guiltily thinking of Gaby as he sought release.

She was asleep when he exited the bathroom sometime later, her hair spread out on the pillow to dry. The little, red elephant rested loosely in her hand. She must have been entertaining Beast. The baby was awake and, knowing him, probably ready for another bottle, but it was the woman who held Illya's attention. She looked so young when she was asleep and yet, somehow, no less fierce. He often thought of that night in Rome, when he'd carried her to bed, the way she'd reached for his hand. He didn't understand it then, he wasn't sure he understood it now, he only knew that when her fingers had slipped away, he felt like she'd taken some part of him with her. He was pretty certain she still had it.

He made Beast a bottle and climbed into the bed. Gaby was curled up, and when he slid beneath the blankets, her knees were against his thighs, much like the night before. He let himself enjoy the contact as he tried to coax the baby into eating a cold bottle.

"I know it is not how you like it," he said, voice a rumble in the quiet room. "But you will have to make do."

Gaby awoke at the sound of his voice, blinking into the space between them. Her eyes fixed on him for several seconds, then drifted down to the baby. "You didn't shave," she remarked absently, sleep still clogging her voice.

"No razor."

She made a hum of acknowledgment and then shifted, looking down at where their legs were touching. She started to pull away, and he reached down to keep her where she was. Her bare skin was warm beneath his palm, and he slid it a little way up her thigh, enjoying the sensation.

"It's not very cold tonight," she said, dropping her head onto the pillow and looking up at him with those eyes of hers.

"I know." He looked back at her, challenging, asking permission as he took in the lines and curves of her face.

Her feet slid forward, one wiggling her toes to tuck them between his calves. "I didn't shave either," she told him, her voice a mix of sharp and soft. He smiled as he squeezed her leg just above the knee. He didn't care about the stubble there but pulled back when he remembered her panties were hanging in the bathroom. He covered the withdrawal by using his hand to adjust the bottle he had balanced on his chest.

Gaby scooted closer, one of her arms splayed out to rest on his pillow.

"He's a little eating machine." Her eyes were on Beast.

"He has a lot of growing to do."

They were quiet for several beats, the silence easy and comfortable in a way that always surprised him.

"Illya," Gaby said eventually. "Have you ever thought about children?"
He looked up at her, surprised. "What?"

"I never really did," she continued. "Not in any sort of concrete way. And I certainly never spent much time imagining myself as a mother, not since I was a little girl with dolls."

For a moment, Illya imagined her that way, small and innocent, holding her dolls, twirling in the sunlight.

"So, did you?"

Her question pushed at that bruise inside him, a place that, despite his best efforts, was always tender and sore. He would never have children. His job, his history, his plans… the risk for any child of his would be far too high, and he would not be allowed to be a father to them anyway.

"No," he lied, because it was easier. "Children are not a possibility for me."

She turned and looked right at him, something knowing in her eyes but also a question. She didn't get to ask it.

The clatter of some debris being kicked in the alley outside broke the stillness of the early evening, and both agents went still. There was no obvious reason for the sense of foreboding that trickled down Illya's spine at the sound, but he could see that Gaby had felt that same sense of awareness.

_Danger._

She spun out of bed and carefully looked out the window into the alley, keeping herself concealed behind the curtains. Illya watched her, took in the tense line of her body, the intent look on her face. He wanted to look for himself but, if they were going to have to run, it was better to get the baby fed. He would trust her.

"_Scheiße, _" she hissed, drawing back a little more into the curtain. "Someone is showing around a picture."

"Do you recognize him?"

"No but—wait," Gaby narrowed her eyes and leaned forward a little, then she rushed over to his pack and pulled out his scope. Returning to the window, she peered through it. "Damn it, I'm pretty sure it's them. Another man just joined him, and he has a nicely wrapped up wound in his arm."

"_Yobanoye dnishche, _" Illya swore, pulling the bottle from Beast's mouth and rolling to his feet. The baby waved his arms angrily and let out a loud wail. Gaby jumped away from the window and turned toward him.

"They just looked up here!"

Illya was in the midst of shoving things into the closest pack but paused to glance her way. "Grab him."

"That won't stop his crying!" she nearly growled, scooping the baby into her arms anyway.

"Does not matter. We have to go."

"How did they find us this time? They aren't using a tracker."

"We are too close to the border," Illya said, swinging his pack onto his back and then lifting hers. "It was always a risk."
Gaby studied the infant in her arms. He had stopped wheezing, but his crying was probably not going to help his recovery. "Will he be all right?"

"We will have to cross bridge when we come to it. Come."

"Wait!" Gaby said and scrambled around the bed into the bathroom. She came back out a second later, and he watched with wide eyes as she shoved her underthings into the pack in his arms.

He blinked, realizing the implication but having no time to process it. Gaby hurried out the door and he followed her.

The elevator was cramped and slow, so they skipped it and headed for the stairs. Since the thugs were in the alley, Illya took a chance that they had not yet come inside the hotel, that they might be trying to keep a low profile. He gritted his teeth as Gaby burst out into the lobby before him. She had her gun ready at her side, but he hated every moment he wasn't covering her.

They hurried across the lobby, past groups of people gawking at their rush. They were almost to the front door when they nearly collided with the young man who had checked them in earlier. He stumbled back as Gaby lurched away, keeping her and the baby safe. Illya skidded to a halt, feet sliding on the carpet beneath his weight. The man gaped at Gaby, eyes bouncing from the infant to her belly, then her face, and back again.

"You, you, but you—" he said, pointing.

"She is very good woman," Illya said, sidling past him, taking Gaby by the arm as they went. "Gives birth very quickly."

They rushed out the door, and the young man turned to the woman next to him. "I feel so sorry for her," he said in Slovenian. "That baby was gigantic for a newborn."

"Well," the woman replied, "Look at her husband."

They shot straight across the street and pressed into the wall. Illya took a moment to check behind them, scanning the hotel frontage for their enemy. He spotted one hurrying up the steps and cursed under his breath. It was only going to be a few moments before they were discovered.

"We need a car," he said.

"I'm already on it," came Gaby's voice. It was moving away from him, and he turned to see her hurrying off down the street. There was an old, rust bucket of a car parked at the end of the sidewalk, and she hurried to it, trying the door and finding it unlocked. He moved to block her from view as she set Beast on the seat and reached under the steering wheel to access the wires. He split his attention between the hotel entrance and watching her work. She huffed and slid further inside and Illya's gaze swept over her. He took note of how the hem of her short, yellow dress rode high on her thighs with the movement and swallowed. Setting his jaw, he turned back and glared down the street, angry with his weakness. A moment later the car’s engine roared to life behind him.

"Easy as pie," she said, appearing beside him. "As Solo would say."

He nodded, hurrying to the passenger side. "Let's get to Trieste."
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The kindness of strangers and the cold light of day.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting. I'm sorry I am late with this, but it is still Friday where I am! Special thanks, as always, to our darling den mother diadema, who has held my hand and edited all my mistakes.

They drove the dilapidated car out of the city and into the hills: Illya with an atlas and a baby in his lap, Gaby at the wheel. They headed toward the sea trying to avoid all the main highways. It wasn't easy. Some of the roads they passed were unmarked, and it was growing darker, making the situation even more frustrating. Beast was fussy and discontent in Illya's arms and Gaby's thighs drew his attention each time the hem of her sheath dress rode higher. He wished he could just forget she wasn't wearing anything underneath and focus on the mission. What had happened to him? He was used to being distracted by her, had gotten good at compartmentalizing it so he could work. Where had all his discipline gone?

"We should ditch this car before too long, I would think," Gaby said as the last colors of sunset faded from the sky behind them. Illya was thankful for something else to think about.

"Agreed. Perhaps we can find another at one of these farms."

"I'll take the next side road I find. We'll put it in a ditch."

It was fully dark an hour later as they made their way through one of the fields toward a light they believed to be that of a house in the distance. A sharp, herbal scent tinged the air, along with the scent of nearby livestock and the woodsmoke from a chimney.

In was a nearly moonless night and they could only just make out the vines that surrounded them, climbing up their wireframes and shielding the little trio from view. Illya tried not to disturb the crops in any way as he moved through the narrow rows with the wide pack on his back. They had left the wrap behind and Beast was asleep in his arms.

Sleep. Something he and Gaby probably wouldn't be getting tonight. He wanted to get them to Trieste now, better yet Venice, and then home to New York. He felt a small pang at the realization that, reaching that goal would mean saying goodbye to Beast and looked down at the soft, chubby
A bright light in his eyes caught him off-guard, and he had his gun halfway up before a voice shouted at them.

"What are you doing in my hops!" Angry Slovenian and Illya did not fail to notice the rifle pointed at them, the well-tended barrel reflecting the light from the flashlight. He quickly tucked his pistol away and held up his free hand, turning so that the baby was in full view.

"Our car broke down," he said in the man’s own tongue. "We were just walking toward the light of your house."

The guy looked him over. "You Soviet?"

"Yes, my wife and I have come to study some of your architecture. We are on our way to Koper."

Gaby stepped out of the shadows from behind him, hooking her arm in his. She was curled in on herself, demure, and averting her eyes, flicking them up to the gun occasionally as if she feared it. The man looked them both over cautiously and then lowered his weapon.

"Well, that's another hour's drive," he grumbled. "You shouldn't be making that in the dark with a child. How long have you been walking?"

"For some time now," Illya lied, adopting a sheepish countenance. "I am afraid I may have gotten turned around."

The man smiled, softening even more. "Been known to happen with these roads. Come. Come up to the house," he bid, with a wave of his hand. "We just finished our dinner, but I think there is something left to share."

Their meal was a thick, barley stew which had one, small piece of smoked meat on top. It was simple but flavorful and settled comfortingly in Gaby's belly. She looked up and across the cozy table at Illya, hunched over, also eating. His eyes caught hers, and he gave her a subtle, knowing smile. This was an interesting development.

She was far from comfortable. They could hardly deny the offered kindness, alone in the dark with an infant in tow, but she worried over how they would extricate themselves in the morning without suspicion. There was also a minor, niggling worry in the back of her mind as to what might happen if their pursuers were to find them here. What harm might they bring to these people who were offering them food and shelter?

In the kitchen doorway, the man was speaking to Illya again, and she felt a pulse of frustration at the language barrier. She needed to up her game if she was going to catch up with her partners. She watched Illya as he answered back smoothly and felt a flip of pride in her chest. She might never catch up to him.

"They have a room upstairs," Illya told her, switching to German for her sake when the man had finished. "We will stay the night, and he will give us a ride to Koper in the morning."
"Really?" she asked, not quite trusting. "That seems overly generous."

"He says he is going that way tomorrow anyhow."

Gaby avoided drawing her mouth into a line of uncertainty. A wife and mother in her situation would be grateful, not suspicious. She smiled, but she could tell Illya wasn't quite buying it. He reached out and took her hand, dragging his thumb over her knuckles. It was meant to look like a comforting, husband-like gesture, but the effect on her was shocking. Her stomach twisted, her thighs jumped, and she became even more aware of the fact she wasn't wearing any panties. This man was going to be the end of her.

"It will be all right," his voice rumbled gently. "I'm sure they do not want trouble and are willing to get rid of us the easiest way possible."

"Yes," Gaby replied, pressing her legs together when he didn’t release her hand. "I'm sure that's true."

Illya nodded, then looked down at her hand in his. His thumb brushed across her knuckles again, this time slowly with much more intent. Then he pulled away and went back to eating his soup and Gaby focused on not bursting into flame.

…

The bed in the extra room was very narrow, not quite enough room for all three of them. Gaby hated the idea of Illya sleeping on the floor but assumed that would have to be the case. He'd never let her be the one to make that sacrifice, and even so, it would look odd to their hosts. Even if Beast would likely sleep better with Illya than her.

Then, the wife pointed out that she had made a bed for the baby from a dresser drawer.

Well, that would certainly change things…

Illya nodded his thanks and crossed the small space to lay Beast in the makeshift cradle. Gaby gave a little wave as the couple left them alone and then turned to take in the situation.

Their packs took up much of the space, Illya basically the rest of it. She smiled at that thought, noted that he had to lean forward to fit beneath the angled part of the roof.

"So tall," she said, shaking her head at him.

His eyes trailed down the length of her body for a quick second and then cut away. "You probably want to change," he said, and she realized, for the first time, that he was fully aware of the status beneath her dress. "I will go out—"

"Don't be ridiculous," she hissed. "Just turn around."

He nodded and did so. She grinned at his back then opened her pack for her underthings and something more comfortable to sleep in. Taking her panties in hand, she sighed. "Still damp," she reported because he knew exactly what she was after and she thought he was owed a heads-up. The way she had teased him back at the hotel seemed so much riskier now.

The way he had looked at her before closing the door. How she had held onto that look as she had made herself come in the shower… she inhaled through her nose to control her body's reaction to the memory. She was playing with some very combustible material and if she weren't careful, she would be the one to spark it and they would both get burned.
She didn't really know when they had struck this unspoken truce, she only knew that it had felt right, necessary. It had kept peace between them, protected them, but now she was pushing at its limits, testing for cracks. It wasn't fair, to either of them, but she couldn't seem to reign herself in.

She hung her panties from the back of a rail-back chair and pulled on the thermal underwear she had worn the night before. At least they could cover her.

"All safe," she said when she had finished. "You can turn around now." She waited for him to look at her before climbing onto the bed. "Your turn."

He nodded, and she watched as he went to his pack for his own clothing. She took in the arc of his back, the way the fabric of the shirt he wore stretched across his shoulders, then she slid beneath the homespun blanket and faced the wall.

A few moments later, she felt the bed dip as he climbed in behind her and braced herself for contact, but it didn't come. Turning to look over her shoulder, she frowned at him.

"Are you hanging off the bed?"

"Is not a problem."

"Don't be ridiculous," she scolded and reached back to pull at his side. "Get on the bed. You'll never sleep like that."

"I can sleep anywhere," he said, and she groused internally because she knew it to be true.

"Well, I won't sleep thinking about you over there dangling. We've slept together before," she said, then cleared her throat. "We're adults and partners, and it's just sleeping." She stopped, her hand stilling on his hip. It had been 'just sleeping' last night too. She huffed and gave him another tug.

"Illya, please."

This time he shifted closer. She felt the warmth of his body align with hers, his chest to her back, thigh to her thigh.

"There, I am on the bed. Are you satisfied?"

Satisfied was not the word she'd use, but she did feel better. Even though the change meant she was now trapped between two walls: one made of wood, the other of Russian. "Good night, Illya."

She took a moment to try and get comfortable, wriggling in the bed several times, making it creak and groan. A large hand settled on her hip, sliding around to her belly, and she squeaked as he pulled her in, gathering her body snuggly to his.

"You are too restless," he said as an excuse, and she could feel his voice rumbling in her back, his breath along the top of her hair. She realized she was tucked perfectly between his knees and his chin, like she was made to fit there, and even as her heart threatened to push right out of her chest, the rest of her body surrendered to the embrace.

"I thought you could sleep anywhere?" she teased, breathless.

"I'm already halfway there," he murmured, his voice deep and slow and soft. "You try."

She hummed, not sure she would be able to rest at all with his warmth at her back and his cool hand on her belly. She took hold of it on a whim and brought it up to her chest, curling around it. His breath caught, but after a few seconds, he relaxed again. "Okay," Gaby said and closed her eyes.
Sunlight filtered in through the small window over the dresser, shining through lace curtains, creating a quaint, shifting pattern on the wall. Gaby felt warm and safe, not quite relaxed, slightly aroused, in fact, but in a soft, dozy sort of way. There was something niggling at the back of her mind, something waiting, but it didn't seem terribly urgent. A body stirred against her, and awareness came drifting in.

Illya was there.

She was surrounded by his scent and weighed down by his arm. She had turned sometime during the night and now she was curled into his chest, his arms around her, holding her in place. One hand was in her hair, cradling her head, the other was wrapped around her hip. She sighed and breathed him in, letting the tip of her nose drag along the fabric of his thermal top, thinking of browsing higher, questing for skin, of following that scent to where she already knew it was strong and sweet in the crook beneath his jaw.

She was as close to him as she could get, their legs entangled, touching from chest to hips, and she could feel he was hard against her thigh. It had happened before, and she had a feeling most of it was just male physiology, but that traitorous voice inside wondered if maybe, a small part of it was her.

She smiled, still a little sleepy, still a little dazed, and tilted her head up, seeking the line of his collarbone, the curve of his neck, so she could bury her face there. They had held this line for so long, walking the edge occasionally, but never crossing. An unspoken agreement. A truce.

Consequences far from her mind, Gaby couldn't help but wonder what would happen if she broke it first.

She exhaled against the open v of his t-shirt, and he moved, pulling back suddenly. She looked up, blinking, to see his face. his blue eyes staring at her, his long lashes spiky from sleep. The hand in her hair tightened and the arm wrapped around her from beneath pressed her impossibly closer.

"Gaby." The guttural, husky sound bolted through her, lighting her body up like a spark to tinder. Her breath caught, her gaze fell to his lips, and she felt his fingers shift against her skull. So big. So strong they could break her, but she knew they never would. She watched him come near, moving in to meet him, breathless, for the touch of his lips.

They were stopped cold by a loud wail that split the heady, fervent moment in two. They both jumped, and Illya bolted away from her. Gaby sat back against the wall, her brain sifting through the fog to remember what that sound was. Right. It was a baby crying.

Her heart was pounding as wakefulness came upon her fully and reality washed in like a flood. What was she thinking!? Illya was hunched over at the edge of the bed, his elbows on his thighs, his hands gripping at the side of his head like a vise. She made herself look away.

Beast was still crying, so she scrambled around the hulking Russian body, careful not to touch, and bent over the drawer where he'd been sleeping. She knew she wasn't the one he wanted to see, but she lifted him up anyway, standing to her feet and bouncing a little as she tried to shush him.

There was a knock at the door, and Illya's head jerked up to stare at it. He seemed to finally remember where they were and called out something in Slovenian, a bit of a bark. He glanced at
Gaby but immediately looked away, running a hand over his face, and regret jabbed at her hard.

The door opened, and the woman of the house poked her head inside. She smiled at the sight of them, giving a nod to Gaby and then speaking to Illya.

Illya responded, and Gaby recognized 'thank you.' The woman started to leave, but then Illya raised a hand and spoke again. This time, his words were stilted and awkward, and Gaby wondered what he was saying. The woman frowned, looked at her again and then the baby before turning back to Illya. After a few more exchanges, she left, closing the door behind her.

Gaby frowned, annoyed at the self-consciousness welling up inside her to accompany the regret that was already there, thick and nauseating.

"What did you tell her about me?" she demanded.

Illya's eyes flicked up, looking at Beast, then over her left shoulder and away. "We need milk for the baby," he said, pushing to his feet. "She expected you to…" He scrubbed a hand over his face again and then went to his pack, retrieving his clothes from where he had left them neatly folded on top. A flush crept up his neck to light up his ears. "I had to explain why you didn't have any milk."

Gaby glowered at his back, her brain taking several turns as it deciphered that information. She knew, of course, how babies were usually fed, it was just that she didn't spend much time thinking about it. The realization that he'd had to explain that she couldn't breastfeed was slow to come.

"Oh," she said, feeling embarrassed and oddly insufficient for no reason. Obviously, she couldn't feed Beast. He wasn't her baby. She didn't have a baby…

He was still crying in her arms and she focused on him instead of the awkwardness that filled the room, brushing the soft fuzz of his hair off his sweaty forehead. "Maybe that is why he hates me," she mused.

Illya sighed. "He does not hate you." She looked up and realized he was dressing. She spun away. His bared chest might as well have been full nudity in the state she was in.

"Well, he certainly doesn't like me."

"He is hungry and probably needs to be changed."

Gaby made a huffing sound. She should have thought of that. She snatched up some clean nappies from her pack and laid Beast on the bed. That, at least, she could do.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

A truck, a lullaby and Illya's favorite view.

Chapter Notes

Sorry that this is late. I hope you are all well! I want to thank you for the continued comments and love you are all sending, it means so much. Also, much much thanks to diadema, my darling friend and beta, whom I appreciate beyond words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zdravko Kašpar, as they learned the farmer was called, drove them into Koper the next morning. There wasn’t enough room in the front, because the seat was broken, so the trio road in the bed of the old work truck with the hay and sacks of hops headed for market. The air was saturated with their pungent scent and it had Gaby longing for a nice, cold pint. She hadn't had a beer in so long now. Not good beer anyway. She thought of the American brews Solo had offered her on several of their nights out and almost shuddered. No, she wanted a good stout. Something with meat on it. She could use it to deal with the tension that persisted between she and her partner, heavy and thick, as the truck rumbled down the road.

Illya was sitting as far from her as the space allowed, and the conversation between them had been stilted at best. He had an excuse, though. He was focusing entirely on the baby.

She looked the man over with a quick glance, his ankles jutting out of the now worse for wear green trousers. The velour had rubbed off in several places and the seam was wearing at the knee. Sitting like this, with those legs out in front of him, there was an expanse of hair-dusted skin visible between the top of his dark socks and trouser hems. It should look ridiculous, make her laugh, but it didn’t. Instead, she wanted to slide her hands inside, feel the curve of his calf, run her fingertips over the blade-like bone of his shin.

He lifted the baby up, large hands entirely encompassing his little torso, and then lowered him back down, playing with him, speaking to him in those low tones, in Russian. No, she suddenly realized, he wasn't talking. He was singing again. Her heart rolled over inside her chest and she turned her head away to avoid the longing the sight of him stirred. A mix of lust and other intimacies which felt even more dangerous. The sound of his voice was enough though. She'd known that since the beginning, from the first time he spoke to her.

"My woman would never wear anything like that."
Under the startlement, and the wash of fear at seeing her pursuer standing behind her in that Wessie
dress shop, there had been a little ping of something. Something low, something deep and visceral.
The fear was long gone now, but that ping remained and she recognized it for the arousal it was.

She thought she had gotten used to it, but, apparently, she had lulled herself into a false sense of
security. This was the longest amount of time they had spent together, uninterrupted, since they had
become partners. The longest time spent, just the two of them, no Solo or other agent to stretch and
deflect or break the tension that always built between them. It had never occurred to her that a
mission alone with him would be a risk. Now, here she was, staring at all the chinks in her armor.

She thought of how it had felt to wake in his arms, warm and soft with sleep, both of them. The way
he'd looked at her…

She inhaled slowly as her heart tripped over its rhythm and stared out at the passing countryside.

It was getting to be too much. Gaby only hoped that they would have space for themselves on the
boat. She wasn't sure how much more of this she was going to be able to handle.

She looked over again to watch him playing with Beast, the subtle, very Russian, smile on his lips,
the faces he made as he formed whatever words he was saying. Much more animated then she had
ever seen him as he sought to entertain and stimulate the baby, who smiled and tried to grab his nose.
It was such a domestic scene, that tender thing inside of her was stirring again, shifting and
whispering to her about a life she never before realized she wanted. To wake up to a warm body
every morning, to share all her moments with someone, to have a child… Not just any someone, not
just any warm body, not just any child. His. Always his.

Illya.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the burlap sacks behind her and tried not to
think about the day he would eventually leave her. Like they all left her. Whether it was by choice or
not hardly mattered. In the end, she was left all the same.

The road was unpaved, and dust rose up around them as they rattled along, but it was swept away by
the wind before it could cling, leaving a churning trail behind them. She forced herself to relax into
the odd rhythm of the ride. Soon now, they would reach their extraction. A boat ride to Venice and
then they would be on a plane for home. She let herself smile at the thought.

Illya's voice drifted to her once more over the sound of the truck, Russian words, but she was
learning. Several of them began to register as she listened. It sounded like someone sneaking in,
creeping up on someone else. She frowned.

"What are you singing?" she demanded, turning to look at him. He had Beast tucked on his shoulder
now, playtime apparently over.

"Is a lullaby," he answered with a little frown of his own.

"That's a lullaby?" She shuffled her position to face him fully, her face drawn in incredulity. "You
mean you would sing that to a child you were trying to get to sleep?"

"That is what lullaby is for," he affirmed, and she was sure she saw a smirk to go with the deadpan
statement.

"It's so creepy!"

"All lullabies are creepy."
"No, they are not!" She didn't really know very many, but certainly, Germans did not sing such things to their children. "Some man is creeping around? Coming to get them?"

A change came over his face, and she saw a spark of pride in his eyes. "You understood."

She shrugged, trying to appear unaffected by his reaction. "I'm working on it."

He hummed. "In Russia, mothers sing to their children about death as if they are not afraid," he told her. "It is an old belief that she, Death, is much more likely to come for those who fear her."

"I see," Gaby acquiesced, still creepy, but she supposed it made a weird, superstitious sort of sense. "And Tili bom?"

"Just words to sing."

She nodded. "And briska?"

"Blizhe," he corrected, saying it slowly, and Gaby felt goosebumps prickle along her arms. His smoky voice made her think of dark rooms and strong whiskey. "It means 'closer.'"

"Blizhe," she repeated and inwardly cursed the breathless quality of her voice.

His gaze was on her lips as he said, "Good."

The truck came to a stop, and the moment was broken. Illya and Gaby watched their driver exit the vehicle and come around to the tailgate.

He spoke to Illya, arms crossed over a rounded belly, and Illya nodded, turning to her when they had finished.

"He needs to take his load in to be weighed. The weigh-station is around the other side of the city," he explained. "We will have to walk from here."

Fun, more walking, Gaby thought but kept it to herself, instead nodding and helping to gather their things.

Illya held out his hand to help her down from the tailgate, and she looked at that hand, the broad calloused palm, the long fingers, before jumping down without his assistance.

…

Gaby in sunlight.

Illya could hardly think of anything more beautiful. He watched as she leaned against the stone wall, the mist of the sea rising up around her as she tilted her face into the warm rays. Her dark hair was knotted behind her head, but much of it was coming loose and the strands played in the gentle wind, glinting as they caught the light.

For once, things had gone right. They were in Italy. No one had been waiting for them in Koper, or at the border, and no one seemed to be following them here in Trieste. Their stint with the hops farmer seemed to have worked in their favor.

They had changed clothes outside the city after raiding a neglected clothesline, and spent the day being cautious, moving around, never staying still for too long. Though they had stuck to the less-populated areas, the city was crowded, and Illya could only hope they had blended in with the tourists and semi-locals on holiday. Now, they waited for their contact. They had a time, a location, a
registration number and the bench they had found gave them a good sight-line to the dock and a nearly breathtaking view of the Gulf of Trieste at golden hour.

But even that couldn’t hold his attention with Gaby nearby. His gaze drifted over her again and he longed for a camera to capture what he saw. A photo to keep, to hold onto in later times.

Not that such a thing would be wise.

Beast wiggled in his lap, and he glanced down to see a bird had caught the baby’s eye. Illya told him the name of the bird in Russian, without thought, lifting him up so he could see it better.

Gaby turned and leaned her elbows on the wall, facing him now, and he tried not to stare at the stretch of her legs extending from beneath the hem of her skirt, long and tan, crossed gracefully at the ankles. He was still recovering from the morning’s incident, and the feel of those legs entangled with his, along with the rest of her, was still fresh in his mind. His body felt almost raw from it, anxious, edgy, unfinished, and he hadn't been able to shake it. It was not the best state of mind for him to be in. Especially not now.

They had walked through the markets and each time someone so much as brushed against him it was like they had pressed a bruise. One of the vendors had bartered aggressively with Gaby on the price of some berries, and Illya had nearly strangled him. He was definitely less than stable right now.

He had almost kissed her. Or he had wanted to, and she certainly hadn't been pulling away.

It was hardly the first time it had happened, but he had believed he'd gotten things under control. Apparently not as well as he had assumed.

She had been keeping her distance today, they both had, and while it was probably for the better, it felt like a piece was missing. The former ease between them had shifted, changed and he could only hope they could get it back to how it had been before.

Soon they would be home, she would be safe. They would be in their separate apartments, in separate neighborhoods, back to their usual routines. Solo would be waiting, along with other coworkers, paperwork and new missions. No more tents on mountain tops or narrow cots in farmer’s attics…

"Do you feel nervous?" Gaby was asking, and he blinked away thoughts of warm bedding and her in his arms.

"No more than usual on a mission," he offered. Sitting around always put him on edge, but today, he was obviously more distracted by other things. "Why? Did you see something?"

She peered out at the city behind him. "No. It is just that… Italy. For some reason, I feel like THRUSH is that much stronger here… because this is where the Vinciguerras were based, I guess. It just feels…"

"Eerie?"

A corner of her mouth lifted, and he wanted, achingly, to kiss her there.

"Something like that," she admitted. "I suppose it's silly."

"Not at all, you are just being cautious and aware." He looked out at the sea. "There is a reason, I think, so many spies end up superstitious," he told her. "No matter how rational we may be. We learn, over time, that there are very few true coincidences, that insignificant things can be the most
important. Things such as this make us think too much."

"I suppose that's true." There was a pause, then, "Do you have any superstitions?"

"No," he said easily, but then a little voice in his head called him on the lie.

Yes.

His eyes roamed quickly over her face. It was almost like a tic, automation done without premeditation. And that was his superstition. He didn’t know when it had started, he only knew he had to take in the sight of her face every chance he was given. If he didn’t… If he didn't, then he may never have another. Any time, any moment, she could be taken from him. More accurately, he would be taken from her.

Beast made a happy, gurgling sound in his arms and Gaby looked down at him with a tender expression. For all that they had not gotten along, her soft spot for the child was already visible, and it haunted him, put ideas in his head. Such foolish ideas.

Someday, she would probably choose someone to share that with her, and in the sequestered, secret places of his mind, he wanted very much for it to be him.

But he was not for her.

He was not worthy, that much was more than obvious. His past, his plans the trouble that clung to him… No, he was not worthy of her, but what man was? Gaby needed someone who was strong. Not physically strong, that was not as important. No, Gaby needed a man who was strong enough to accept that she would never really need him.

Not many men were capable of that.

I am, he thought, watching her tear off a corner of bread and toss it toward the bird that had caught Beast's attention, coaxing it to take a few steps closer to them. He could make her happy. He could make her smile, make her laugh. He could hold her close, share her life, share her bed, please her…

But only for a time. Then he would leave. He had no choice in that. He would hurt her, he would be one more in a long line of people who had abandoned her. That was something he could not do.

Pulling himself from the grim thoughts, he turned his wrist to check the time. He watched the ticking hands and realized his heart was racing. He took a long, steadying breath, inhaled the soft, sweet scent of baby and looked down at the top of Beast's downy head.

"I think I see our ride," Gaby said, and he lifted his gaze to find her leaning out over the stone wall again, her eyes on the dock below. He stood up and joined her, peering out at the fishing vessel. The number on the side matched the one they had been given, and he nodded to her.

“Venice, here we come,” he said, and took another ‘snapshot’ of her face as she smiled.

Chapter End Notes

тили тили бом (Tili tili bom) a Russian lullaby is extremely creepy, lol. Gaby has a right, perhaps, to be shocked. You can find a few version of it on youtube if you want to
hear it or look up the lyrics. :) The one I listened to was here: https://youtu.be/BDMmj5WgB8c (I'm sure Illya sings it in a much lower register.)
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

A boat, a confession and the inevitable...

Chapter Notes

Listen, if you know nothing else but this, diadema is a wonderful lady and without her, this fic wouldn't be here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The boat was sound but modest, designed for a small, single man fishing operation. Down below decks, there was only one extra room: a cramped space with a single, narrow cot, a spindly chair, and a table where a radio and a hot plate with a kettle awaited use. It would likely take them several hours to reach Venice with the ship's captain moving at his usual, trolling pace so as not to raise suspicion and Illya looked around their allotted quarters with an edgy, caged desperation.

They had sneaked on board in cover of darkness to conceal their location and their presence. In order to maintain the solo fisherman appearance, Illya and Gaby would need to stay below decks until after their arrival in Venice.

Which meant, it was going to be a long night.

Beast had started fussing in the middle of boarding. They'd had to put off his feeding, and he was not happy about it. Illya had managed to assuage him temporarily, but now he was done waiting and he tipped his head back and let out a holler to make it know.

"I know you are hungry, malen'kiy," he said, running a gentle hand over his tiny head. "I will make your food, but you must go to Gaby."

Gaby looked askance at both of them but held out her hands to take the baby. Illya watched as she pulled him in close, and his crying kicked up a notch. She made a face.

"It is not you," Illya said. "He is hungry."

"I still say it is at least a little bit me," Gaby returned. The baby wiggled in her arms like he was trying to scootch down her torso and Gaby rolled her eyes, shifting him round, trying to make him comfortable.

Illya went to his pack for the milk they had picked up in town. Beast went quiet and, for a split
second, Illya thought Gaby had succeeded in soothing him.

He was about to turn and congratulate her when she shouted in pain. He yanked his head in her direction, worry shooting through him. He watched as she took the baby and held him away from her. Illya scanned her body for injury as if it were second nature and then his eyes settled on the wet spot over her left breast, the thin, orange material of her blouse clinging to her skin, a dark crescent of her areola visible through the damp fabric.

"I told you," she was saying to Beast, her voice exasperated. "You will not find what you want there."

Realization dawned as Illya spun back around, his hands seizing onto the milk as he connected the dots. A mix of humor and arousal stirred within him, along with that undaunted element that longed for impossible things.

Beast's cries kicked up again, and Illya quickened his pace, taking the things to the kettle. "If only we had a pacifier for him," he said absently.

"I am not going to be his pacifier!" Gaby said sharply then snapped her mouth shut, realizing what she had given away. Unbidden, Illya's gaze fell to her breasts before spinning quickly away again.

"That is not what I meant," he growled, his voice tight with embarrassment.

"Oh mein Gott," Gaby said under her breath, but he didn't look at her this time, focusing on his task of preparing a formula for the baby. "Ich glaube du hast mir einen Knutschfleck gegeben."

The words sparked and sputtered inside Illya's brain, making him spill the milk. He cursed himself as the idea of Gaby's golden skin, marked by his mouth, filled his mind.

Gaby continued her attempts calm Beast as Illya prepped his food, but as soon as he approached her with the prepared bottle, she tried to hand him back. He could sense her agitation, though she was clearly trying to keep it under control.

"I think you should try," Illya decided, holding out the bottle to her. "Perhaps it will help. It is good bonding time."

"Illya, I don't think that is going to work."

"Please, try."

Reluctantly, Gaby took the bottle from his hands and shifted Beast into a cradling position. She moved to sit on the cot and offered him the bottle. Beast latched on, sucking vigorously, and Gaby's shoulders relaxed, a faint lift appearing at the corner of her mouth that made Illya's heart squeeze tightly. Then Beast pulled off with a wail and her face fell.

"Take him," she said, standing to her feet and all but thrusting bottle and baby at him.

"Gaby…"

"Just take him, Illya! It's all right." Illya acquiesced, scooping the baby into the crook of his arm. He was stopped from bringing him close, however, by the fact Beast had once again managed to entangle his fingers in the chain on Gaby's neck.

Illya took a moment to carefully extract the pudgy digits, letting the ring fall back to her chest. Then he set Beast over his shoulder and stepped away. When the weight of the infant was gone from her
arms, Gaby dropped them to her side. "I am obviously just not the mothering type."

"That is not—"

"Just feed him," she said, brushing him aside. "I'm going to go through the packs and take an inventory."

Illya watched her back as she distanced herself, then looked down at the baby. "You could give her a break," he admonished quietly, though there was no way to speak without her hearing, the room was too small. He switched to Russian, though that was no longer a guarantee that she wouldn't understand, and he felt a swell of pride mixed with mild disappointment at the thought. Gone were the days he could comment his feelings freely to her in his own language without fearing she would know.

"She is a very good person," he told Beast. "Strong, beautiful. You should only hope to have such caregiver. Much better than me. I am not a good person." He watched Gaby's shoulders still, and knew he had been right in thinking she would understand. She had been working very hard.

Once the baby was fed, Illya laid him down on the cot and sat beside him to remove his boots and shake out the small stones that had gotten inside throughout the day's travel. Gaby had finished going through their limited assets and was pacing the meager floor space like a wild thing that had been imprisoned.

"What is wrong?" he asked, his eyes chasing her like the ball in a tennis match. She was not helping his own sense of anxiety over the close quarters.

"Nothing is wrong."

"You are going to wear a hole in the floor," he commented, trying to distract her from whatever it was, distract himself as well. She rolled her eyes. "You will sink the boat."

She shook her head, toying with the ring at her neck. She pressed a hand to her belly for a moment, and he frowned. "Are you feeling sick? You have not been seasick before."

"I am not sick, Illya," she said, through gritted teeth. "I told you, I am fine."

He huffed and crossed his arms. "You are not fine. And I am not going to stop asking, so you might as well tell me what it is. You are my partner. I need to be sure you are in good shape."

"Hah!" Gaby barked. "You hardly need me on this mission. I've been completely useless."

"You know what I am talking about."

He set his jaw, wanting her to stop talking around the issue. He wasn't good at games. "Just tell me."

"You know that I am useless with the baby. You have to make me say it?"

"Maybe it is because you are so stubborn?" he said darkly, rolling his eyes.

Gaby turned on him, her eyes wide and angry. "I'm stubborn!? I'm stubborn? You are so stubborn you can't even see the truth of who you are past your own self loathing!"

"What is that supposed to mean?" he demanded, setting his shoulders back.
Gaby shook her head, frantic. She twisted away and moved toward the door. "I'm going up on deck."

"No. We cannot be seen," he insisted, standing to his feet, reaching a hand out for her. She pulled away.

"I don't care," she spat. "I need to get out of here."

"You are seasick."

"I am not sick, Illya!"

"Then why? What is really going on?"

"I need to get away from you!" she ground out, and it was as if she'd thrown a dagger at him, struck him square in the chest. His breath caught, his stomach plummeted. Now he felt sick.

"What have I done, then?" he asked, cursing the way his voice shook. "Hmm, I am the one at fault here?"

"Yes," she hissed then pressed a hand to her forehead. "No."

His tone was imploring despite his effort to control it. "I don't understand what you want."

She looked up, her eyes dark, hot and piercing. Not only with anger but also blatant, naked desire. "Don't you?"

He felt like the floor had dropped out from beneath him and every raw, unfinished thing that had been buzzing along his nerves since that morning - no, before that, in the tent, in the woods when they had searched each other - came rushing to the surface.

"Maybe we should just fuck and get it over with," she snapped, the hand on her belly twisting in her shirt as her eyes ran over the length of his body.

"What!? No!" he bit out, voice tight, harsh.

"You don't want to fuck me?" she asked, taunting, cynical.

"No—Yes—That is not what I mean!" They didn't talk about this. It was an unspoken rule, a rule he had been so sure she had wanted. He shook his head, fists clenching at his sides.

"Then what do you want, Illya? What do you mean?"

He growled, taking another step toward her.

"I think you know full well that I am completely in love with you!"

As soon as the words had left his mouth, he felt the pain of them, the shock. He snapped his jaw shut, flexed it hard. He couldn't take them back now.

But Gaby didn't pull away. He held his breath, expecting some sort of incredulity, a denial of his truth, but none came. Instead, she stepped closer, her eyes wide, still fixed on his, full of hunger and fear and all the things they never allowed to pass between them. He felt the tension coming off her body, and he was sure she would bolt, but then she was in his arms.

The boat seemed to shift beneath him, and the weight of her threw him against the bulkhead. There
was a loud sound of some kind, something deep, but all he could see, all he could think, was Gaby. She was pressed against him, looking up at him with her hands on his chest, and he knew he was going to kiss her. Kiss her and more if she would let him, if she truly wanted this too.

"Illya," she said breathlessly, and his stomach twisted hard with arousal.

"Gaby," he groaned, sliding his fingers into her hair. There was a rumble and the boat pitched hard again. Wait, his brain inserted. That wasn't right.

"No, Illya!" She pushed her hands against him and pulling away. "I think we're under attack!"

The BOOM of a cannon punctuated her words, and suddenly, the real world was rushing in around him.

So was the water.

"Beast!" Gaby cried as the sound of another impact reverberated along the side of the metal boat. She snatched the infant up, clutching him to her chest, just as the roll of their vessel would have sent him to the floor.

Illya grabbed her by the blouse, and dragged her back to him as the seams between the bulkheads bowed and split with an ear rending screech. Water came flooding in through the opening, lifting the cot Beast had been on and sending the table and kettle flying.

"Come on! We have to go!" Illya had to bellow to be heard.

Gaby clung to Beast, who stared up at her with eyes the size of saucers. Stunned but too young and naive to understand the danger. "The packs!"

"No time," he growled, hauling her in and anchoring her against him. He already had to reach up to get to their cabin door and he pulled them through it as more water rushed inside.

They fought against the flow that swirled and swelled around their legs, almost thigh deep on Gaby as she scrambled up the stairs to the deck. She fell backward once, the pressure of the water overcoming her smaller frame. Illya caught her, pushing her forward as the sound of gunfire filtered through the roar of the water.

He stopped her at the door, pulling out his pistol before pushing open the hatch. Rain pelted him, falling hard and fast from the night sky. He braced himself on the angled deck and did a sweep for enemies before stepping out and signaling Gaby to follow.

Their captain lay dead several feet away, his corpse drifting with the rising water. A pistol slid from his lifeless fingers. To the port side, Illya saw another boat had latched onto them with grappling hooks. They would be boarded soon.

Checking quickly to make sure Gaby was behind him, Illya headed toward the lifeboat, then stopped. They would be sitting ducks in the water.

"We're going to have to swim for it!" he shouted over the storm.

Gaby stared back at him, her mouth a grim line. "Are we even close to shore?"

He took in her face quickly, dark hair plastered to her head, rain running off her chin in rivulets. He shook his head. "I don't know."
Gunfire broke up the discussion and Illya spun around to see someone on the deck of the other ship, one foot braced on the railing, preparing to cross over. He returned fire, nailing the guy and sending him tumbling over the edge into the Gulf below. A moment later, more men took his place.

The boat beneath them seemed to drop, pitching hard to starboard, and he stumbled backward. Gaby let out a hoarse cry, and Illya yanked around just in time to watch her go over the railing with Beast in her arms. For a moment, his heart stopped, then he was running, throwing himself over to follow her.

The water that closed around him was warmer than the falling rain. For too long, he was enclosed in its darkness, its dampened sound, then he was bursting through the surface to the roar of rain on the water, the creaking of the sinking boat, and the shouts of people he couldn't see.

"Illya!"

He whipped his head around and spotted Gaby quickly, her orange blouse setting her apart from the blacks and grays of the night. She had Beast on her chest and was stroking back with one hand, fighting the suck of the sinking boat in front of them. He swam toward her and wrapped an arm under hers, taking both her and Beast in his hold and pulling them away from the doomed vessel, reaching out with one long arm into the water, moving them through it as quickly as he could.

"We need to hide," he said, letting her go and taking Beast from her once they were far enough. He looked him over quickly, checking that he was breathing. The baby gawked back, eyes blinking wide as water trickled down his face.

"Hide? In a few minutes, we're going to be in open water!"

"I know," he snapped. "But they are boarding. They will find us."

"We've got to hide by their boat," Gaby concluded, and he nodded. She was treading water, looking like a floating, orange poppy. "How? They aren't going to give up searching, and we certainly can't swim that distance underwater with Beast!"

"Give me your blouse," he directed, and she eyeballed him like he was crazy. "The color stands out. It will draw their eye for a while, give us time."

Gaby stripped out of it quickly, leaving her in a barely-there chemise that clung to her like a second skin. Illya forced himself to focus on keeping that skin intact, not admiring it or even berating himself for noticing. There would be enough time for the self-flagellation he deserved when Gaby and Beast were safe.

He tossed the blouse off into the water and then swam in the opposite direction, around the sinking boat, using it as cover as much as he could. He had to work to swim forward with one arm and keep Beast's head above the water line, and it slowed him down. Gaby passed him and, using one of the ladders as leverage, reached out and pulled him in.

They worked in tandem, moving through the water, the rain and darkness covering them until they were huddled in the shadow of the enemy's ship. They were on the opposite side from the shore now, and it would be their only advantage. Their enemy wouldn't expect them to swim further out into the Gulf.

He checked Gaby again, gauging how tired she was. She appeared sound enough, just wet and on edge, but he realized he had no idea of her swimming prowess, and exhaustion could sneak up on you when dealing with a prolonged time in the water. She caught his look and their eyes held, but
hers were once again shielded. He ignored the twisting drop in his gut and tipped his head out toward the open gulf. Gaby nodded. Rolling onto his back, Illya began to swim away from the boats, watching as she followed.

Solo sipped gracefully from the cup of strong, dark coffee and leaned back, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair. His legs were stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankle as he gazed out over the canal. He appeared, in all ways, to be a relaxed but dapper gentleman on holiday.

He heard the voice of a gondolier serenading his passengers, his voice preceding him down the waterway. Then Solo saw his long oar, his straw hat and striped shirt. He followed the passing vessel with his eyes as the sound of the man's melodious voice surrounded him.

Io non ho mai capito niente
Visto che oramai non me lo levo dalla mente
Che lei, lei era
Un piccolo grande amore

He had been in Venice for over twenty-four hours. He'd booked a suite of rooms at the Plaza de Costituita. They were the most lavish rooms he could find, meant to spoil Gaby and annoy Peril. He smiled at the thought.

Still, there had been no word from his partners. They hadn't reached out to Waverly in any form, which meant they were worried about drawing attention. They were being followed or tracked, but even an average driver should be able to get from Iestrye to Trieste in a handful of hours. If Gaby was driving, well, even if they were ditching the car every few miles, they should have been here days ago. He'd met with their contact to be sure they hadn't already been and gone. The fisherman had assured him they had yet to make contact.

He furrowed his brow and tried to ignore the hollow feeling of worry in his chest.

No, they were fine. He refused to think otherwise, since he was useless to do anything about it. The fact they hadn't tried to reach him in any way, niggled at him like a pebble in his shoe, but he tried to put the petty feeling aside. They didn't know he was back. They certainly weren't going to reach out to him while he was under the influence of the CIA.

He finished his coffee and leaned forward to return the cup to its saucer. The waitress appeared at his side to clear it.

"Vuole qualcos'altro, Mr. Solo?"

She was very pretty. Dark hair that was twisted and piled atop her head, a long, straight nose, and a Mona Lisa smile. He lifted his head, his eyes settling on hers. "I don't know about food or drink, but I would certainly enjoy talking to you a little while longer. When do you get off?"

She gave him a look, arching one, fine eyebrow, before a smile pulled up the corner of her lips. "I suppose if you stick around long enough, you may find out."

"I guess I'll have another coffee then," he returned, his smile all honey and sin. She nodded, moving away, and he followed her with his eyes, taking in the shape of her form. Particularly her high, rounded bottom.
"Ah, that is a very fine piece of God's work right there."

Solo jerked his head around at the sound of the nasally, French accented voice to find René pulling out the chair across from him. "Yes, indeed. But then, He did an amazing job with most of them, didn't he?"

Foppish hair, standard white, wide-necked t-shirt, cigarette in hand, René sat down and leaned back, watching Solo with a steady gaze.

"What are you doing here?" Solo asked calmly, as though it wasn't at all a shock to see him. Like he hadn't slid his fingers to where his pistol was waiting inside his jacket.

"I have followed you," René replied. "Your questions the other night intrigued me, and I simply had to find out more."

Solo exhaled in a quiet sigh and René settled a little more comfortably in his seat.

"Are you going to shoot me with that thing then?"

"I'm still thinking about it."

"Before you even receive my information?"

Smoke rose from the ever-present cigarette in René's hand, curling about his head and then drifting off into the Italian air. Solo waited a beat, studying him, reading him.

"All right," Solo allowed, raising his gun hand to rest on the table. "What information do you have?"

"My Gabriella has not reached out to me," René started with a pout. "I can only imagine this is because your other partner is too stubborn to know sense."

Solo wanted to deny it, but the Frenchman wasn't wrong. If Gaby was dying and René was the only option, Solo imagined even then, Illya would be loath to make contact. Jealousy was a bitter, ugly thing.

"Or she has her own plan well in hand," Solo offered as an alternative. Gaby was smart, a survivor, and though he'd never admit it to his face, Peril was a strategist of the highest order. Their current predicament was started from a lack of information, not a lack of skill.

"I suppose that is possible," René admitted. He leaned forward as the waitress returned with Solo's coffee and ordered a simple meal in French-accented Italian. Solo briefly wondered if the accent worked as well on Italian girls as it did on American ones.

"Yes, indeed, she is a very fine thing," René observed again when she had walked away. "If you are not going to take her to bed, then I will have to," he said. "Or perhaps we would share?" He raised an eyebrow but Solo ignored him.

"What's your information, René?"

"Ah, all business. It is always so with you people. Gaby, at least, would tell me of the latest car she is working on." He took another drag and then settled, becoming serious. "There was a mess in Gondri, Iestrye several days ago. It involved the mafia, an infant who is the grandson of Prime Minister Novak, and any number of foreign agents."

He checked Solo for a reaction, but the American just sipped his coffee like this was the plainest of
tales. "There was a shootout in one of the quieter neighborhoods which led to the city officials uncovering what they believe to be a KGB safe house."

_That was new information_, Solo thought. He spent a moment wondering how Gaby had felt about that.

René watched the canal as another gondolier passed, sending a smile to the young woman perched in the bow.

"There was another incident in Bursha, just near the border of Slovenia."

So, they _were_ headed toward Trieste and the backup extraction. They must have been doing most of their traveling on foot. A ghost of a frown pulled at his brow. Or, he was just underestimating the drawbacks of traveling with a baby.

René sat forward. "You really are not going to give me anything, are you?"

Solo sighed. "I think even you can piece together most of it from the information you have," he replied. "Why even come to me?"

René frowned and drew back, blue eyes assessing. Then he gave a soft laugh. "I suppose you won't believe me," he observed, calm. "But I care about Gaby. So do you. Therefore, I thought you should know. And if she is in trouble, I will do what is in my power to help her."

"You do know," Solo replied, narrowing a gaze at the man. "That she's head over heels in love with the Russian, right?"

"Of course," René said, scoffing. "Anyone with eyes can see that. Are you saying I must want to fuck her to care about her? Is that how _you_ operate?"

Solo thought about his gun again.

"I mean, don't misunderstand me," René added with a smile. "I would absolutely fuck her if she wanted me to."

"I think this conversation has run out of usefulness." Solo's attention had shifted, tracking an older man as he took a seat at the table across from them. Solo narrowed his eyes as he opened his newspaper, folding back one of the inner pages where a lesser headline seemed to stand out from the page.

_Local fishing boat attacked in the Gulf of Trieste_, it read in Italian, and Solo felt his stomach sink.

René followed his gaze, but it was another moment before his mind pulled the information together for himself.

"They were on that boat?"

"Considering someone sank it—and I doubt that's a common occurrence for simple fishing boats—I'm going to go out on a limb and say, yes."

"So, they are captured, dead, or they swam to shore."

Solo's face darkened for a moment. "We're going with the latter." He set down his coffee, pulled out a wad of bills and tossed them on the table. "I need to pick up a newspaper."
Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter I managed to finish editing before NaNoWriMo! (I did it! btw) Now that November is over, I have a fic for the exchange to complete and then this will have my full attention again. There will be a, hopefully very short, hiatus and I apologize greatly for that. Feel free to stop by the somedeepmystery[dot]tumblr[dot]com if you would like to yell at me or to keep track of any delays since ao3 doesn't really have a way to do that. Thank you all so much for reading and thank you in advance for your patience!! Be blessed and happy, happy holidays (or regular days if you do not celebrate.)
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

All ashore that's going ashore.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year everyone. Sorry for that lengthy hiatus but the good news it, it's over now and there in nothing coming up in the future months that should bring on another one! Hope you are all still here because I am ready to share the rest of this story with you.

So much love and thank yous to diadema, my beta girl, my sweet friend and constant support. Love you girl!

Gaby dragged herself onto the shore by sheer force of will. Pebbles clattered beneath her, their smooth surfaces shifting beneath her palms. They felt like daggers on her chilled skin. She inched away from the water's edge and dropped onto the rocky beach, gasping and coughing, her lungs burning, her body hollowed out of anything but pain and weariness and cold.

There was a grunt of effort from Illya coming to shore behind her. The stones rattled, once twice and then altogether as Illya collapsed. Worry slashed through Gaby's chest at the sound. Pushing with her toes, she managed to shift her body so she could look back down the beach. It took her several seconds to spot him, a dark outline in the early, morning light.

He was so still she couldn't see his breathing, and Beast was nowhere in view. Fear finally forced her to her feet. She immediately slipped and fell, pain slicing into her knees, and crawled the remaining distance to where her partner lay. He remained half in the water, the waves lapping at his thighs, one arm wrapped around the baby, the other stretched out ahead to pull them a shore. Dread caught in her throat at the sight of Beast, before his dark eyes blinked up at her, and she could breathe again. She touched his face but could hardly feel his skin beneath her icy fingers. She lifted him into her arms, and for once, he didn't start to cry.

"Illya," she said, setting a hand on his shoulder. "Illya, come on. Get up. We can't stop here." There was no response at first, and she pushed at him, shouting hoarsely. "Damn it, Illya, you have to get up! We can't stop!"

He groaned and turned onto his back, dragging in a deep, shuddering breath. His wet lashes were spiky against his cheek, and his hair was swept back from his face in the fashion of a movie star. Or
a movie star's corpse. His skin was paler than usual, and his lips, like Beast’s and probably her own, were tinged violet. He opened his eyes to stare up at her, and the blue of his irises was almost shocking.

They had been swimming for hours, the physical effort draining their strength, and the water, though not particularly cold, had sapped the heat from their bodies. She didn't know how she had kept going herself... and he had done it one-armed, with a baby.

She looked around with gritty eyes, salt water dripping from her chin. They were on a small, stony beach surrounded by boulders and a wall of granite that rose hundreds of feet to a grassy top and a slowly brightening sky. She had no idea how they would manage to climb up, but she knew that, even if they weren’t exposed to their enemies from here, if they weren’t in danger of losing this beach to the tide, they would die from exposure if they didn’t try.

“Get up, Illya!” she demanded, looking down into his eyes, oblivious of the tears in her own. “Get up now.”

He took a deep breath, body shuddering, and rolled onto his side with another loud groan. Gaby dragged herself back to give him space. He shoved a fist into the rocks and pushed, almost getting his knees under him before he slipped in the loose material. Her heart stuttered as he went face-first into the stones.

He let out a long stream of Russian in a low, hoarse voice. Most of the words she didn’t recognize and the ones she did, she had learned from Solo. If the situation weren’t so dire, she might have found humor in hearing such vulgar language from her more gentlemanly partner.

She carefully stood, unsteady on weary, trembling legs. She held Beast close, and felt a shiver run through his tiny frame. He was cold and her own wet, frigid body was no help to him.

Illya struggled to his feet and looked around, his gaze rising up that daunting wall and then falling back to her. “Are you all right?” he asked, gravel in his voice. His gaze swept over her and then centered on Beast. “Is the baby all right?”

“We’re still breathing,” she offered with a wobbly smile. “Counts for something.”

He exhaled and reached for her, his arm wrapping around her shoulders and dragging her into him. She tripped forward, but his body supported her, hugging her with relief, and she wrapped her free arm around him, fingers clinging to the wet shirt at his back.

Steadied by the assurance of the embrace, they both turned to the wall: the next obstacle in what seemed to be a never-ending line of them. Some sort of luck or providence led them to the mouth of a path on their first try, and it wound its way upward toward the grassy summit. The ascent was brutal, and several times Gaby felt sure her body would simply give out, or that she would lose consciousness and fall to her death with Beast in her arms. Illya followed behind them, and she couldn't stop herself from turning back to check on him every other second, to be sure he was still there.

At the top, an expanse of grass stretched out before them and the path directed them to a small, rustic villa. The windows were shuttered, the garden was overgrown and neglected. Gaby stumbled forward, disbelieving, and Illya’s hand came up to steady her at her back. They each peered inside one of the crooked shutters and found the furniture within was covered with dust cloths, cobwebs decorating the window sill.

It took more effort than it should have for Illya to break into the back door, and his breathing was
labored afterward. Gaby followed him inside, and together, they went straight into the bedroom. Illya pulled the cover off the full-sized bed, filling the air with fine particles of dust, while Gaby searched the linen closet, coming back with towels and more blankets.

Stripping Beast of his wet gown and saturated nappy, she quickly rubbed him down with the towel, trying to use the gentle friction to warm him as well as dry him off. He looked even smaller completely naked, and she felt that niggle of dread in her chest, a heart-clenching fear that this might turn out to be too much for him.

She and Illya stripped next, quick and perfunctory. No room for modesty or worry, no space in freezing and weary bodies and fatigued minds for mixed-up feelings and sexual tension. Gaby was finished first, the skirt that had hindered her swimming, aiding her here, but Illya’s numb fingers struggled with the buttons of his shirt. Gaby reached out and yanked at the fabric, shredding it, and pulling it off his shoulders. She quickly dealt with his belt and fly next, then grabbed one of the towels and started drying his back and shoulders as he dealt with the rest.

When he was ready, he took over drying himself, and she started on her own body, gritting her teeth at the sandpaper-like feel of the texture on her raw skin. A few moments later, Illya was coming at her with another towel, squeezing the water from her hair with his huge hands. She took it from him and finished herself before climbing into the bed with Beast. Illya was there a moment later, curling up on the other side, the baby between them.

He pulled the blankets up over them and then reached across to pull her closer. Her hand settled on his bare, icy side, his was pressed against her back, spread broadly over her spine, and for once, his fingers didn’t feel cold. They felt like nothing. She looked up at his face to find him watching her and shifted closer, intertwining their legs, lining up their bodies until there was as little air between the three of them as possible. Beast was cuddled between Illya’s chest and her breasts, eyes closed but breathing evenly.

This was about survival. There would be time for awkwardness later. The thought was fleeting in Gaby’s mind as sleep pulled her under.

Maybe they would even talk about it.

... 

Illya awoke to a ray of late afternoon sun streaming in through a crack in one of the shutters. As usual, there was a moment of disorientation as his brain caught up. It was made longer by the pain in his body, the ache of his muscles that went deep into his bones, and the itch of his skin.

He remembered cold, fear, danger.

Opening his eyes, he looked around quickly, taking in the walls of the house they had found after coming ashore, the pieces of memory joining together. His gaze quickly settled on Gaby, checking that she was there, that she was all right.

At some point, he had scooted back from their bodies, probably trying to regulate temperature, and he could see now, from his place on his pillow, Gaby’s face, soft with sleep.

Her cheeks were pink with warmth, her hair a mess about her head from drying as it had, the salt water adding even more bulk to its fullness. She looked so beautiful, it made his heart ache. The line of her nose, the curve of her bare shoulder, the length of her side, the swell of her small breast - she was perfect. God, how he loved her.
Beast was cuddled into her, and her hand cradled his tiny bottom. His little fist was once again caught on the ring at her throat. The ring he knew she still wore. The ring she knew he knew was there but which neither of them ever spoke about.

It was a vision from a dream. A dream of a future where he woke up like this each morning. Gaby there with him. A child, *their* child, asleep between them. They might sleep in on a Sunday, let the day pass them by. If the baby slept well, perhaps, they would put him in his cradle, and he’d make love to her, long and slow. They would take time enjoying each other completely before finally getting up to make breakfast together in the afternoon.

It was so clear in his mind, so easily pieced together that for a brief flash, it felt true.

But it *wasn’t* true. It would never be true.

Rolling from the bed, Illya tucked the blankets around Gaby and the infant, taking a moment to press a kiss to her temple, to drag the tip of his nose along her cheek before leaving the room in a rush.

He checked the flue and started a fire in the large fireplace. The chill of the gulf permeated the house even as closed up as it was, even in the afternoon sun. He rinsed their clothing in the sink, pumping fresh water to do the job, even though his shoulder screamed in protest. He hung the items up by the fire to dry and then walked outside with a sheet tied around his waist, one of his pistols tucked into the back. By the time he reached the cliff's edge, his hands were shaking.

Details of what had happened on the ship kept flashing through his mind, and he clenched his jaw. He could not forgive himself for such an error. How could he have been so foolish? Not only had he allowed himself to speak too freely, he had been so caught up in her, so lost in Gaby that he hadn’t even noticed they were under attack. He had thought she had come to him, crossed that line in response to his words, but it had been the roll of the ship that put her in his arms. And while he had been scheming where and how to make love to her, she had been listening for their attackers.

He squeezed his fist until his nails bit into the flesh of his palm. Such a loss of awareness was unacceptable. He had compromised the mission, endangered their asset’s, as well as his partner’s, life.

*He had endangered her life.*

Just twenty-four hours ago, he had been telling himself that he could make her happy, even if it were just for a time. He had been wrong. No man may be worthy of Gaby, but he was the least worthy of them all. Had he forgotten that his hands were cursed? Whatever he touched was destroyed.

He had been cursed since the moment his father had said too much amongst friends he thought he could trust. Illya’s existence had been used, he knew now, as a threat to his father when he had fought to defend himself. His safety and protection in the years that followed had cost his mother, over and over, in ways that he couldn’t think about without falling into a rage.

And afterward, he himself had done what was needed to keep them both safe, turning a blind eye, working against his own conscience, the innocent blood he had spilled, all just to keep them alive and free. A dangerous walk on a razor’s edge, a rug that could be pulled from beneath them at any second.

He could make no one happy.

For a moment, Dr. Poole’s face came to mind, unbidden. “*You know you are safe here, right?*” He had scoffed at her then and he scoffed now. The very idea was impossible, the arrogance, the
gall, to think that the KGB could not find its way into their precious sanctum. He sneered at the thought.

And yet, a voice inside, one that sounded so very like his mother, offered, isn’t it equally arrogant to assume that they will? Aren’t you putting more faith in the KGB than in UNCLE?

Illya took a deep breath. UNCLE was his life preserver. Waverly had come and plucked him out at a time when things could have gotten particularly bad. He’d risked everything to burn that disk with Solo, choosing his ethics over his orders. At the time being assigned to UNCLE had seemed another nightmare, another entity to control him, but now, he realized it was a refuge.

But he couldn’t live there, and he couldn’t afford not to see the KGB as an organisation capable of infiltrating that sanctuary. They viewed him as compromised enough already. Any day now, he expected they would call him home, send in another agent to fill his place, probably someone more willing to betray the trusts he built there.

No, he couldn’t let himself settle here. Not with UNCLE and definitely not with Gaby. He couldn’t stand the thought of hurting them, her, more than he was already destined to. It was time to get things back on track. He’d crossed the line, but the damage could not be too extensive. They could ignore the slip. He’d step back into his proper place, hold the perimeter the two of them had established, and keep his shit together.

When they got home, maybe he would talk to Waverly about being put on another team more permanently.

...  

When Gaby woke to find Illya absent, worry sent her scrambling from the bed. She ran from the room, her bare feet slapping on the cold, stone floor, to find a fire in the grate and their clothes hanging up to dry. The heat soaked soothingly into her skin as she relaxed. Knowing Illya, he was doing a perimeter check and setting up booby traps.

She glanced at the clothing, his trousers hanging beside her skirt, and wondered what he was wearing. One of his Makarovs lay on a chair that was pulled close to the fireplace. The other was gone, its holster laying empty.

She moved to the front door and opened it a crack, the wind whipping in around her, making little goose pimples rise on her arms. She spotted the shape of him in the distance and was satisfied that he was alive and present. She felt a smile tug at her lips, a swelling warmth in her heart as she shut the door and leaned her forehead against it.

Turning to go fetch the baby, she felt an odd sense of euphoria well up. They had made it! Remembering the night before, the misery, the struggle, she realized that she hadn’t expected to survive. Not that she had expected to die, she had simply been unable to expect anything, to do anything except move forward, forward, forward. Now, here they were on the other side, and despite the pain that still haunted her body, the relief was like a drug in her veins.

She cooed down at Beast, smiling at him even when he cried at the sight of her. “Hallo,” she said, lifting him up to her shoulder and patting his back, running a gentle hand over his soft skin and then cupping his tiny, round bottom. He squalled and tried to wriggle down her chest, and she chuckled as she brought him back to her shoulder. “Let’s get you some sort of nappy before you pee on me.”

The thought stopped her in the doorway because he hadn’t peed on her in the bed… and they’d been there for hours. She gasped as he arched his back to cry harder and caught his head so he didn’t
throw himself out of her arms. He hadn’t eaten since the boat. “Mein Kleines Beast!” she cried. “You are probably so hungry!”

The linens in the closet were stale but clean enough, and she hurried through the steps of manufacturing him a nappy and then fashioned herself a quick toga from one of the sheets before moving on.

The kitchen was small and rustic, a huge, wood-burning cook stove with a water tap overhead, and a long, hand-hewn table with matching benches. There was a pantry off to one side, and with the still-crying baby in her arms, she opened it in hopes of finding something she could make into the formula that Illya had been preparing.

There were two cans of evaporated milk and an unopened can of shortening. She checked the integrity of the cans and then gathered them up with one arm and carried them into the kitchen. She didn’t know what Illya was up to at the moment, but she wasn’t useless. She’d seen him do it so many times now, she could figure it out. She tried her best to soothe Beast while she gathered the items together, her own stomach twisting at the thought he might be in pain.

She had a pot on the stove and was feeding the fire beneath the burner when Illya came in the door. Her heart did that ridiculous, swooping thing it always did at the sight of him, and she smiled as she turned to look at him.

He stood in the doorway, bare-chested and bigger than life. Her eyes traveled over him, quickly reassuring herself he was indeed well. They had made it through this. She was remembering what he had said on the boat, how he had said it, and a thrill ran through her. Maybe this continual holding back was pointless? No, it couldn’t last and it would hurt when he left, but people left you in all kinds of ways. Why should they just throw away the time they did have together?

She opened her mouth to greet him -- these other confessions needed to wait until the baby was cared for -- but when her eyes met his, her breath caught, and her heart nearly stuttered to a stop in her chest. He wore a mask of indifference.

She turned away sharply, inhaling through her nose in a quick burst of air as her throat closed on all the words she had wanted to say. He’d put his walls back up, and now, she was left scrambling in the rubble of hers, trying desperately to form some kind of barrier.

Her fingers squeezed around the small piece of wood in her hand as pain sliced through her. A realization, true and real and bright with anguish came to mind.

People could leave you in many, many ways.

They didn’t even have to go away to do it.

She shoved the wood into the flames and then set her jaw. Lifting her chin, she turned to him and held out the baby. “You are the one who knows how to make his food,” she said, the calmness in her voice a very thin veneer. “I will try to figure out what he will eat it from.”

She put the baby into his hands and then left the room, sweeping a long train of white sheets behind her.

Gaby’s mind spun as she searched through the villa, her heart racing now, her blood hot. How had she let this happen? She’d had such a defined plan! How had she let her walls become so compromised? Her hands shook as she checked her clothing for dryness. Her skirt was still damp, but she turned it in front of the fire, shaking it out and put it on anyway. She had only a thin chemise
to wear on top, and it was not nearly enough armor for the situation. She grabbed up Illya’s shirt and pulled it on over the top, rolling up the sleeves and tying it at the waist since the buttons were long gone.

When she came into the kitchen, Illya was sitting at the table with Beast in the crook of his arm as he tried to feed him from the bowl of a spoon. He lifted his eyes, and the starkness and indifference were gone. He looked more like Illya, her partner, again, but she wasn’t ready to see him like that, so she turned away.

“No luck,” she said. “I’m going to follow the other path outside and see if it leads to a village.”

“No,” Illya said over the sound of the baby’s cries. “That is a bad idea. We will go together.”

She yanked her head back to him with a glare. “You don’t get to decide that. You are not in charge of this mission.”

The sound he made was just shy of a growl. “I do not think we should split up.”

“If I go into town alone, it shouldn’t raise any flags. They are looking for us together.” Illya shook his head and opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. “I’m going whether you approve or not, so don’t bother trying to intimidate me.”

He took a deep breath and looked down at Beast, whose little face was covered in the milk his immature tongue kept pushing back out of his mouth. Then Illya stood to his feet, and Gaby had to suppress the impulse to step back away from him.

He reached behind him to the sheet at his waist and pulled his pistol, holding it out to her handle first.

“Yours is at the bottom of the gulf, I think.”

She stared at him for several seconds and then stepped forward to take the gun, automatically checking the chamber, the safety. “Like everything else,” she said, thinking of more than their possessions.

“If you are not back in one hour, I am coming to find you,” he said. “Screaming baby or not.”

She lifted her chin. It was reasonable, but she didn’t like his tone, didn’t want his practicality right now. She tucked the Makarov into the waist of her skirt and pulled the material of the shirt down over it. Without another word, she left him behind, rushing out the door and breathing in the cool, salt air outside. She looked at the sky for a moment, blinking back the sudden, stupid stinging in her eyes and then hurried forward on the path that led away from the sea.

Luck, which seemed to mock them at every other turn, was on her side in this. There was a little, georgic village about twenty minutes’ walk, a place that seemed a little set back in time. The path had curved back around and followed the coastline as best the rocks would allow, and now, she was once again near the water’s edge, not nearly as enamored of it as she had been the day before.

She tried to ignore the heaviness of her heart, the traitorous thing, and focus on the task at hand. Ahead there was a small market, stone walls weathered, wood door thrown open to allow the breeze to come in. She stepped inside and waited for her eyes to adjust.

Her gaze immediately fell on a line of postcards neatly displayed in a rack by the door.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Let's call it a rough patch.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Happy Friday!

~As always I want to send out thanks to diadema for everything she did to help me get this thing written.

Another Exchange has come and gone and I am still posting this from the Summer Solstice! Remember how it only had to be 500 words? *laughing* If you haven't already, be sure to check out the Winter Exchange but only after you read this Update! *snerk*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Illya was cleaning his pistol when Gaby came in through the door. His shoulders relaxed instantly as he wiped away the timer that had been counting down in his head. He tried to focus on what he was doing, rather than look up at her, drink her in the way he always did, but she defused his plans by plunking a canister of something on the table in front of him.

He peered up at her, watched her lean a hip against the tabletop and give him one of those arch looks she was so good at. He surrendered to the urge and did a quick scan of her features, taking an updated snapshot of her face.

“I found this at the market,” she said sharply, gesturing to the canister. “Why have we been making it all this time?”

Illya frowned and looked down at the object she was referring to. “Infant formula”, it said in Italian between a large brand name logo and a picture of a smiling baby. He picked it up and turned it, scanning the label. “I have not seen any before now,” he said simply. “Have you?”

“I don’t read Slovenian.”

“You don’t read Italian either.”

“It is baby milk, right?” She shoved one fist onto her hip and with the other she pointed to the label. “That’s a baby and that says milk.”
“Yes.” He nodded, a little spark of affection igniting inside him. He needed to watch that. “You are right.”

“Thank you,” she replied, terse as she turned back to the bag she had carried in.

He was surprised at the number of supplies she’d managed to bring back. “Did you use pistol to hold them up?” he asked, smiling at her haul.

“No.” There was something in her tone he could not decipher, something cold. “I picked some pockets, paid for most of it. Once I had bags to carry…” she shrugged and then held out a neatly-folded pile of men’s clothing.

He accepted the pile with one hand. He was wearing his trousers from the night before but, in spite of his rinsing, the material was still stiff with salt. “Thank you.”

Gaby raised an eyebrow. “Don’t thank me yet,” she said. “You have no idea the fashion offense I may be forcing on you.”

She was teasing. It brought a pulse of hope. Maybe she wasn’t as mad as he thought. She should be. She should not forgive him easily for his unsolicited confession or the level of distraction that could have gotten them killed. He laid the clothing in his lap and turned away as a fresh tide of shame rose inside him. “I am sure I will live.”

Gaby grabbed the other pile of clothing and headed toward the back room. “I also contacted René,” she tossed back, the words settling on Illya as she disappeared into the bedroom.

Illya blinked, shock bolting through him. “What!?”

He shoved to his feet and stormed down the hall, stopping to glare at the closed door.

“I think you heard me,” she called from inside. So light, so indifferent.

He growled, his hands fisting at his sides. He did not trust that man. It wasn’t jealousy, he insisted to himself, then backtracked as he remembered watching Gaby laughing with the Frenchman one night while he and Solo played odd men out. It wasn’t only jealousy, he corrected.

“I thought we agreed that we would not contact him!”

The door opened, and Gaby looked up at him with dark, fiery eyes. She’d brushed her hair and pulled on a pair of dark trousers and a flannel shirt of her own. “No. We agreed that if something went wrong with the secondary extraction we would reassess!”

“This IS NOT REASSESSING!” he shouted, and she shoved past him, catching him by surprise so that he staggered two steps back. She walked away like he hadn’t just yelled at her. He sucked in a deep breath and followed. “This is not reassessing,” he tried again. “This is you deciding for the team. We are partners,” he spit out, stressing the word she had thrown at him earlier. “We should decide together.”

Gaby whirled around, the anger flashing in her eyes much more personal than it should have been. But then, so was his. “So far, it has been all you deciding and me going along. SOMEONE needs to know we are alive, that we need help—”

“We do not nee—”

“YES! We do!” She took a step forward, into his space. “We can’t send word to Waverly, any kind of communication with America or other law agency is going to raise a red flag,” she reiterated.
He gave a low growl of response. He didn’t need her reminder, these were things they had discussed from the beginning.

“But someone has to know we’re still here, dammit!”

The stood there, glaring and breathing for several heartbeats.

“You should have discussed it with me,” he said in a low tone. It felt like a strike of betrayal that she had done it without so much as consulting him. Is this what his mistake had cost him? Her confidence? From the other room, the sound of Beast crying broke into the tense moment. He was most likely still hungry, had only fallen asleep as a way to deal with the stress.

They turned in unison at the sound of his cries, and then Gaby whirled back, her brow furrowed.

“You would only have said no.” With that she walked away leaving him standing in the middle of the room alone.

He couldn’t deny the truth in what she had said. He would have said no. He was still saying no. He paced a few steps, right to left and back again, his hands flexing at his side.

Beast’s cries elevated and he heard the murmur of Gaby’s voice and clenched his jaw. Let her deal with the baby. It was good for her, he thought, unable to cool his anger. Now there was one more unknown factor involved in an already messy situation. He glanced at the light coming in through the shuttered windows. Late, golden light. It was too late to move on from here. Too dangerous to travel in the dark over unfamiliar territory with the baby and no proper equipment.

He snatched up the pile of clothing she had brought him, determined to change and be ready, but stopped when he caught sight of the boots on the floor with the other things she’d collected. He grabbed them up and checked for the size, but there was none listed. He inwardly grimaced at the idea of wearing miss-sized boots but, as his had been left behind on the boat, he would have to make do. It would not be the first time.

He moved to the bedroom to change, shutting himself inside. He could hear Gaby in the kitchen now, Beast’s cries carrying more easily down the short hall. It made him feel a wave of guilt. Gaby would have her hands full sterilizing the bottle, and she wouldn’t know how to prepare the milk—although perhaps he shouldn’t underestimate her—and even though he was still fuming, Beast didn’t deserve the suffering.

He quickly shucked out of the old trousers and reached for the new ones. As he unfolded them, he found a pair of fresh boxers as well. He paused on them, on the thought of her picking them out, and then pushed it aside, stripping out of the salt-stiff ones he was wearing and yanking the new ones on.

They fit perfectly, and he looked in the direction of the kitchen, his thoughts on all the times he’d picked out her clothing. Mission after mission, even some events. He had picked out of dozens outfits for her. This was the first time she had picked out his.

He pulled on the trousers next, a dark gray denim in a military style with large front pockets. The hem rested neatly at the top of his foot, no small achievement. The shirt, likewise fit well: another cotton work shirt, this one in a dark blue. No droop at the neck, no exposed wrists.

Apparently, he wasn’t the only one paying attention.

The thought made something inside him perk up, interested, hopeful, but he ignored it. He couldn’t think about those things now. They had a mission to complete. After, well, he would remove himself from temptation.
His insides twisted, stomach plummeting at the reminder. Setting his jaw against his own weakness, he pulled on the wool socks she’d brought and slid his feet into the boots, stopping the minute he was standing in them with all his weight.

They fit him just as well as everything else.

…

Gaby slept in the bed with her back turned to him and Beast, whose now-full belly meant he’d fallen into a deep, satisfied sleep. Illya dragged his eyes away from the lines of her back to look at the baby. His hands were resting next to his head, little fists curled softly.

*He has gone through too much,* was all Illya could think. Some of it, the loss of his parents, wouldn’t hurt him until later on in his life, but the cold, the hunger… these were things no child should have to endure, though many did.

He lifted his eyes to Gaby again. She was fully dressed, but so was he, since they intended to leave immediately come dawn. She was angry at him, and he wondered if there was anything he could do to bring back the equilibrium of before. Sure there had been tension and an occasional argument, but it hadn’t been like this since the beginning of their partnership. Back then, they’d misread everything. It wasn’t until the kiss in Jordan that things had settled into the odd truce they’d had between them.

It was a cover kiss. There had only been cover kisses—and on that front, she had kissed Solo as well—but there had been something in the moments just after that first one that had eased the bonds between them. Whatever Gaby’s feelings for him, she wasn’t mocking him. That had been the most important realization at the time.

Now the tension coming off of her was sharp and choleric. Once again, every word coming from her mouth, every gesture to him, seemed to be speaking of two things at once. A code, but he was lacking the cipher.

He had made a tactical error on the boat but she would not harbor this kind of anger over that. She would tell him to his face. All he could think was that he had broken the truce on the boat, that he had crossed the line, and it was something she didn’t want, something she was holding against him. Over the last year, there had been several times he had thought… had been almost sure that she… He had obviously been wrong.

He squeezed his eyes shut as his finger started tapping on the mattress next to Beast. It didn’t matter. They were partners and needed to get back to working together as such. Everything else was unimportant. He needed to put his personal feelings aside, and so did she. This mission, this *child,* was depending on them, and that was what they needed to focus on.

…

Gaby had far too much time to think as they hiked through the countryside the next day. Illya was a taciturn stranger, marching ahead of her like she was a soldier in his troop. Just seeing his back, the rigid line of his shoulders, made the anger flare up inside her, and she had to bite back any number of cutting words that she knew would get a reaction out of him. She wanted that reaction. It was a dangerous game to play, but she’d rather have flashing, violent, angry Illya than this quiet, cold one.

But she shouldn’t want that Illya. She shouldn’t want *any* Illya. That was the point.

He’d told her he loved her, that he was in love with her, it wasn’t like she hadn’t known…

Except, she hadn’t… not really.
And then all hell had broken loose, but they’d survived it. Somehow, they had come through the other side, and she’d been ready - so ready - to break this year-long truce and at least talk about this thing between them. But he’d made the decision for her like he always did. He’d put the walls back up, he’d shut her out.

What a fool she was. She should be thankful. Thankful that he’d saved her from herself this time. And she was. She was thankful… thankful of the reminder that nothing and no one was permanent, and it wasn’t worth putting your heart into things that didn’t last. You lost a bit of yourself every time.

But she couldn’t bank the anger. It would not be cooled and it would not burn out, and she wasn’t sure she wanted it to.

Beast let out a fretful cry, and Illya came to a stop, turning as he lifted the baby from the new, makeshift carrier they had fashioned. She forced her mind back to the moment at hand. None of this was Beast’s fault so, as much as she would enjoy watching Illya struggle right now, she stepped forward to take the baby allowing Illya to remove the sack he carried. She lifted Beast up, holding him out in front of her so she could check him over.

She’d gotten him a romper at the store, and it was a bit too big. She hadn’t wanted to draw too much attention looking at the sizes, so she’d guessed quickly, sliding it, and two more like it, into the bag with the adult clothing she had paid for. This one was blue with fluffy little sheep across the front, and he looked rather cute… for a beast.

He fussed at her of course, like he always did, but it wasn’t a full-on wail. Maybe that was progress.

“Here.” Illya reached out to take him back once he finished. “I will change him.”

“I will do it.” Gaby was done with being useless. Even if he peed on her again, she was going to get the hang of this baby business once and for all. She all but pushed Illya out of the way as she knelt down to the blanket he had laid out. He made an annoyed, huffing sound and moved away, returning to the sack for something. She didn’t know what.

The rompers did have a slight disadvantage to the gowns, in that she had to unfasten the bottom as opposed to just pushing the material out of the way, but she was able to deal with it quickly enough. She undid the pins with only a modest struggle and then carefully put the new nappy under him before removing the old one. She made a quick swap, like she had before, and made a little sound of triumph. Beast did not cry this time but kicked his legs vigorously and watched her with a steady gaze, like he would memorize her face. She cocked an eyebrow at him, then bopped his nose as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to do.

“Still no smiles for me, hmm, Kleiner?” she asked softly. “That’s all right. I don’t feel much like smiling either.” He started to cry then, and she lifted him into her arms, putting him on her shoulder as she pushed to her feet. She patted his back, making a soft, little hum the way Illya did which always seemed to work, and bouncing slightly at the knees.

He stopped crying, and she felt a thrill of accomplishment pulse through her. She smiled and almost turned it to Illya, to share the moment with him but stopped herself, adjusting Beast so she could look at him instead.

And then he vomited on her.

She gasped as the hot, thick liquid discharge hit her neck and ran down the collar of her shirt, dripping between her breasts. Once the milk was out, Beast resumed crying, and Gaby thought
however briefly, about joining him.

Illya was there an instant later, taking Beast from her arms. She glared at him, almost refusing to give him up. She could do this, she didn’t need Illya’s help, vomit or no. The action seemed petty in the end, so she released the baby and reached down to pull her wet shirt away from her skin.

“I must not have burped him well enough after the last bottle,” Illya said, and Gaby threw a withering look at him before turning away.

“All Männer sind beklagenswert.”

…

They came to a barn just after sunset, when the light had faded, and Gaby had begun to have difficulty seeing. Illya heard her trip several times and felt guilty for not thinking sooner of her mild night blindness. When he reached back to help her over a fallen log, however, she batted his hand away and climbed over on her own.

He set his jaw and glowered as she walked away. This was getting ridiculous.

They made their way to the barn, taking time to study the house beyond with its lights in the windows. There was a threat of rain, and they didn’t have any gear for a night out in the elements. The barn would offer some warmth and shelter. He just hoped that the owners had already done their chores for the evening.

A horse nickered as they entered, met with the heavy scent of fresh hay and healthy stock. The space was lit with several lanterns hung high and secure. They cast a warm, welcoming glow.

Illya stepped up to the horse and let it check him out, breathing on its muzzle so it could take in his scent. The horse nosed at Beast, and the baby startled.

Any crying might alert their unwitting hosts, so Illya quickly pulled him out of the carrier. Using low tones to keep Beast calm, he turned him around to face the animal.

“This is a horse,” he explained slowly and then let the horse sniff at his belly. An exhale from the animal had Beast sucking in a breath and holding it, a reflex babies brought with them from the womb. He shook his little head, then breathed normally again and seemed otherwise enthralled. Showing his excitement with uncoordinated kicking and hand waving.

“What if it bites him?” Gaby approached and leaned on the gate, glaring at him with disapproval.

“I don’t think it will.” He patted the horse’s neck. “Seems very tame.”

“Really?” she snarked. ”Maybe you’re just too trusting.”

He scowled at her and opened his mouth to retort, but she pushed off the railing and walked away. Clamping his mouth shut and flexing his jaw, he watched her leave, took in the hard line of her shoulders, and then turned back to the horse. Now she was just being petty. He pulled Beast a little further away and smoothed a hand over the horse’s velvety muzzle to soften the slight.

Gaby chose a space for herself in one of the empty stalls and made it fairly obvious that he was not welcome in it. He picked out a place for Beast and him to sleep, trying not to overthink her cold shoulder. Memory of this accidental confession felt like a lead weight in the pit of his stomach. He would have expected some awkwardness, if he’d had any time at all to think of what the repercussions of admitting his feelings might be. He wouldn’t have expected this hard tension.
Was the idea really this egregious to her?

He turned his head and watched her scoop water from one of the water troughs with a small bucket and carry it back to her little nook. When she had stabilized it, she set about removing her shirt. The one Beast had spit up on. It was a cream-colored button-up, with brown and orange stripes that made a plaid pattern. The colors complimented her skin.

He had chosen this spot because he could see her but not with the intention of spying, so he turned away from the sight of her undressing. His resolve was far too weak, however, and his gaze drifted back to see her strip the shirt down her arms, leaving her in a white, lace-topped camisole. He took in her figure, her dark hair falling over her shoulder, released from the knot she’d had it in as they walked. The lamplight played golden over her skin, making her almost glow, and he felt all that righteous resolve to be reassigned waver and crack.

How could he leave her?

Certainly, he could pull himself together to keep things professional? Surely a professional relationship with Gaby was better than no relationship at all?

She looked up and caught him, not even surprised to find him watching her. Her dark eyes stared him down with a sharp-edged indifference, and his chest drew tight as he glanced away.

Or maybe staying close to her in any way was just a torture he was no longer capable of enduring.

…

Gaby woke to Illya standing over her. She startled slightly to see him so close, and her eyes darted round quickly before settling on Beast beside her in the straw.

“We need to go.” Illya's voice was a loud, rough whisper. “The rooster has crowed and the farmer will be out for his chores soon.”

Gaby’s eyes caught movement behind Illya’s shoulder and her mouth pulled into a grim line. “Too late.”

“Restate dove siete,” the man said, cocking a shotgun and raising it to his shoulder, pointed at them. Illya went very still. He was still facing her and Gaby watched his blue eyes flit over her face quickly, then look at the baby. She drew a small, shallow breath and braced herself for action.

As Illya raised up slowly from his bent position, his hands out as if in surrender, Gaby pulled Beast into her arms, drawing the man’s attention while taking him out of the line of fire.

When Illya moved it was like a snake strike, so fast she barely registered his hand drop to the gun at his waist. One arm came up, knocking the farmer's shotgun aside, Illya's body turning at the hips as he brought his pistol up to bear, pointed dead center at the man’s forehead.

The farmer stumbled back, but Illya’s hand on the barrel of the shotgun stopped his retreat. There was a moment of tugging before he released it and stepped away, leaving the shotgun in Illya's possession. His focus bounced between the two spies, leery and on edge. Gaby stood to her feet, lifting a still-sleeping Beast to her shoulder.

“We aren’t here to take anything,” she told him, keeping her tone soothing. “We just needed a place to sleep.”

He squinted at her. “Ingles?"
Illya spoke to him in Italian, his deep voice and accent lending a harsh edge to the language that was not helped by the gun he had aimed at the man. The farmer looked churlish, his eyes darting to his weapon which Illya was still holding.

Illya handed Gaby the shotgun, and she managed to unload it with Beast balanced on her forearm. She tossed the two shells away before handing the rifle back to her partner.

Once he held the unloaded weapon, Illya slowly lowered his pistol. Speaking in Italian again, this time with a softer tone, and Gaby once more thought about how she needed to kick up her language lessons.

Illya stepped away, tucking his pistol into his waistband and turning to lift the sack with their supplies. The man reached for something at his back, but before he could finish the motion, Gaby was pointing another gun at him. Illya’s second Makarov fit nicely in her hand, and she tilted her head to the side as she looked at the stunned farmer.

“A mother will defend her child, no?” she said, this time in German, and bounced Beast a little in reference.

Illya growled and spun the man around, yanking the pistol from his waistband and throwing it away. “Siete armato bene per un agricoltore.”

“Devo guardare fuori per i lupi,” the farmer answered.

This time, Illya tied him up and shoved him, none too gently, into an empty stall.

“You don’t have to rough him up,” Gaby said quietly.

Illya scowled. “He would draw a second gun even though we had an infant! He would put a gun on a child!” Anger made his hands shake slightly and Gaby didn't stop herself from laying a hand on his arm in an attempt to soothe him.

“He was just trying to protect his property,” she consoled, dropping her hand and moving toward the back of the barn. “Come on, we need to get moving before someone comes looking for him.”

“I managed to get a look at the recovery efforts,” Solo said into the phone receiver, as he went over the selection of photos he'd snapped from behind heavy cover. “Very well guarded for a fishing boat haul out.”

“Are you certain they were on board?” Waverly’s voice asked over the warbling long distance line, and Solo could almost hear the frown.

“The size 15 boot they pulled from the wreckage was a good indicator. ” Solo took a moment to look out the window. “They also pulled up a gun. Gaby’s PK —”

“The one you gave her for Christmas last year,” Waverly finished. “I guess you would know that by sight. No bodies though.”

Solo sighed. “Just the fisherman.”

“Damn.” Waverly’s voice deepened when he was disturbed by something and, in this case, Solo thought the man was aiming some blame at himself. “And, you’re certain it is THRUSH?”
“Well, the one thing we know about THRUSH is how difficult it is to know it’s them,” Solo replied, tapping a photo of one of the thugs guarding the wreck. “Let’s just call it a strong, gut feeling.”

“I’ll take it.” There was a rustle of paper over the line. “I will let you decide the next best course of action. Knowing the two of them, you are bound to hear something eventually.”

Solo smiled at that. Neither of his partners could be labeled calm or cool, but they were good agents. “I’m sure I will. I’m going to see if I can find where they came ashore.” The thought sent a small frisson of fear through him. There were so many ways things could have gone wrong.

“That sounds like a plan. Do you need any resources from home?”

“I don’t think so,” Solo began, then stopped, “Only… check my mail,” he offered on a whim.

“You think they would try to make contact that way?”

Solo hesitated, not sure he was willing to tip that hand just yet. “Any attempt to communicate with the US from Slovenia would probably be noticed, but maybe once they got to Italy…”

“Except we already know THRUSH has a stronghold there, and if you are right about that wreckage, perhaps stronger than we thought. But it’s worth a follow through.”

“All right. I’ll check back in a few days.”

“Thank you, and,” Waverly paused a moment. Solo could hear a pen tapping. “Take care of yourself, Solo. I don’t need three agents lost in Northern Italy.”

Solo smirked. “Of course, sir.”

“Oh, and, by the way, Bonnie had her baby. A girl, I’m told. I rather avoided getting any other details.”

“Well, I will have to figure out how to send her flowers from here,” Solo said. “Unless you’d be my proxy, sir? Send her the most ostentatious bouquet you can find.”

“I will… see what I can do.”

Solo chuckled softly as the line went dead. He tried to imagine Waverly picking out a bouquet so against his British sensibilities.

His humor faded off as he looked at the items he’d managed to photograph from the wreckage. Illya’s boot, a woman’s orange blouse, a baby’s bottle. It was a rather disturbing montage.

He went to his suitcase and began setting aside things for a trip light on his feet. If he were quick about it, he could probably be on his way before Faucheux returned. Solo had no idea where the man had gone, if he’d lost interest or if he had his own leads he was chasing. Neither option sat well. Solo didn’t like the idea of the Frenchman keeping things from him, or finding his partners first, since he had never been entirely assured of René’s intentions. Still, the idea that he would dismiss the situation so lightly, after all his waxing on about caring for Gaby, definitely rubbed the wrong way.

He was just buckling the straps of his messenger-style bag when there was a knock at the door. Solo stood up slowly and waited for the sound a second time so he could judge the weight of the knuckles on the wood. The follow-up rap left him sure it was a man. Not Filipa then, he thought with a mix of relief and disappointment. He had definitely been interested in a second go with the lovely, young waitress, but since he didn’t have the time, he’d rather not have to turn her away.
“Chi è?” he called as he approached the door with a spy’s caution. When he chanced a look through the peephole, he sighed. *Think of the devil and he shall appear.*

René smiled widely when the door was opened. “Solo, my friend.”

“You use that word too lightly,” he replied blandly as he moved back into the room, leaving the door open for the other man to enter. “You caught me on my way out.”

“This is the greeting I get when I have only come to deliver something to you?”

Solo stopped and did a quarter turn back, laying an assessing eye on the other man. “What are you talking about?”

“Only this,” René offered, holding up a postcard between two, lanky fingers. He waved it slightly, and Solo’s eyes locked onto it, catching sight of a dark sky and lightning. René tipped the rear of the card to his face, chin tucked into his chest to read silently. “Yes,” he mused, tone faux-thoughtful. “I do believe this is supposed to be you.”

Centering himself so that none of his anxiety showed on the outside, Solo took a step toward René and held out his hand. René paused, holding the card close a second before giving it over.

“Thank you,” Solo said, then turned away, looking at the photo. Night over the Gulf of Trieste, a rocky outcropping and bright, purple lightning splitting the sky. Night, rocks, lightning, that was about everything that could go wrong. He tapped it on his palm. There weren’t many places along the gulf with rocky outcroppings. That was probably where he should start.

Once that was decided, he paused. How had she known where he was? Why had René brought it? He remembered René reading the back and flipped the card over.

Gaby’s feminine writing, looking rushed but steady, decorated the back. There was an address to Paris, expected since it had come with René, but what most caught his eye, in the message section—usually left blank—there was a single line.

“Please fetch me my Lion.”

A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. He *hated* that nickname, but he supposed if you were sending a Frenchman a code…

He picked up his case and slung it over his shoulder. He was wearing a pair of serviceable slacks and a white button-down undone at the neck. With the bag, he looked a little like an adventurer. He turned back to René with a smirk on his lips.

“So, errand boy,” he inquired, getting a frown in return. “You coming, or what?”

Chapter End Notes

Did anyone actually remember the postcard from chapter one? It was a century I ago! <3
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Hostility and hot water.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday!
To everyone who has loved and supported me through his continuing saga (lol) thank you.
Special thanks to diadema, my amazing beta. <3<3<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The house looked like something out of a fairytale.

Or a nightmare. It depended on the perspective.

The walls were a gray stone held together with white caulking. The roof, made of wood shingles, was threatening collapse on one side, but otherwise, the place looked whole. It would at least provide shelter for the night.

_Barring a rat infestation_, Gaby thought to herself as Illya rammed a shoulder into the door to gain access. The walls must have settled some since it had been last opened because it took effort for him to push the wooden door and it scraped loudly over the stone. Illya ducked inside, too tall to clear the door fully standing, and she let her eyes trail over him as she waited for him to give the “all clear”. She turned away when he reappeared, acting as though the unhappy baby in her arms held all her attention.

Things had been tense between the two of them for the last three days. A tight, snippy repartee that had faded into an icy quiet where they only spoke when needed. It was a relief and a torment all in one. He was _right there_, but he was a million miles away, and she was constantly at war with herself over which of those she actually wanted.

No, that wasn’t completely true.

She was angry and hurt and knew that being with him was only going to hurt more in the end, but she didn’t want him gone. Not now, not ever.

“Empty,” he said as he reappeared. “Definitely no one living here, though I think they intended to come back.”
“Why do you say that?” she asked, looking up at him again, and he tipped his head to the interior of the house. Gaby moved forward and stepped inside, stopping just within to let her eyes adjust to the gloom.

The interior was filled with furniture. Not as if for storage but ready to live in. There were paintings on the walls and figurines on shelves, an empty vase on the table awaiting flowers. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs.

“I wonder what happened?”

“I don’t know.” Illya moved past her into the kitchen. He checked the faucet. No water came out. “But I do not think we need to worry about an unexpected return.”

“I hope you are going to knock on wood or something after saying that,” Gaby said, turning in a slow circle as she took the place in.

Illya frowned. “It is not about luck.”

Gaby rolled her eyes. “We are going to need water.”

“We are going to need food too.”

Her stomach rumbled at his words. She had not eaten since yesterday and she had a feeling it had been longer than that for Illya. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him eat. “You want to chance the cupboards?” she asked.

He turned and she thought she saw a flicker of a smile. “No.” He pulled out the map and laid it on the table, stirring up a cloud of dust.

Gaby waved it from her face, and Beast sneezed. She tried to wipe a smudge from his face but only made it worse so she gave up. They were all filthy.

“There should be a town about 16 kilometers south,” Illya was saying, tracing long fingers across the paper. “I will go and get what we need.”

“That’s 32 kilometers there and back,” she snapped. “I thought you didn’t want to split up?”

“This is not splitting up because you are going to stay here, and I will come back.”

“I’m sorry?” She narrowed her eyes at him.

He narrowed his right back. “I will move faster on my own.”

“Ah, so now I am just slowing you down.”

Illya didn’t say anything to that, just turned away with his jaw set. “Lock the door,” he growled as he left.

“I’m not stupid!” Gaby called after him. Her eyes flared, and she spun away before she went after him with the sole purpose of slapping his face. She bounced Beast, who sneezed again and fussed about it. “I will stay here, but only because I am the best one to get the water running.”

She managed to make the baby wrap on her own body without Illya to help her, and got Beast into it, mostly secure. He still didn’t like her, and he was whining non-stop, though she supposed some of that was hunger. She prepared him a bottle with the last of their clean water and once she had fed him, she went to work.
There were some tools in a lean-to shed off the back wall and she started checking the valves and pipes, restarting the pump to the well, which took her mechanic’s hand. Hours later, she and Beast were both grimier, but water was pouring from all the faucets. She lit the pilot light on the water heater and sat back on her haunches, proud of her accomplishment.

Gaby was tired, aching, and hungry. They’d walked miles, hadn't eaten, hardly slept, and the constant tension between she and Illya had taken a toll. Not to mention the baby, who’d been increasingly irritable. She could hardly blame him, she and Illya were used to living rough occasionally, but it must be very hard on a small baby.

Looking down at where she’d laid him beside her on the floor, she put a hand on his little round belly. He was so small, so completely helpless. She felt a tide of worry for him fill her. Were they doing him more harm than good? Would it have been better to let THRUSH take him and then come for him later? The enemy had obviously been more prepared for him then either of them had been.

She thought of Illya with the baby, and her heart did a squeezed tightly. It wasn’t fair the effect it had on her. One night in particular, Illya had spent half an hour just letting Beast touch different materials from their supplies, running them under his tiny fingers with such quiet gentleness she’d had to turn away.

“Well, Beastie,” she said, breathing through the rush of emotion that memory brought on. "I can make you another bottle now. I bet you are hungry.”

Beast’s response was a cough and concern washed over her. He’d been coughing off and on throughout the day, but she’d been too busy to really focus on it and assumed it was the dust. Now, she took note of the raspy note to it, one that reminded her of when they’d just crossed the border into Slovenia. He coughed again and then cried, and she realized his nose was stuffed up as well.

“Oh no,” she lamented, lifting him up into her arms. She peered up at the hot water tank she had just finished fixing. It was big. It was going to take a while to fill and heat up. She moved back out into the main room and looked around. There was a large, copper pot on the stove — another wood cooker— covered in dust, cobwebs clinging to the handles. She snatched it up, Beast balanced in one arm, and carried it to the sink. She washed with one hand and was feeling pretty good about her increased baby-handling abilities until Beast let out a string of coughs that had him crying and arching back in a way that almost threw him out of her grip. She dropped the pot with a bang. Water went everywhere as she quickly caught him with her other hand and pulled him in close. Baby secured, she huffed out a breath and leaned against the counter until her heart rate went back to normal.

“New plan,” she said out loud.

A little while later, Beast was in a dresser drawer from the bedroom, nestled in a pile of stale but clean lady’s lingerie.

“There are other men who would love to be in your position right now,” she told him as she set the pot on to boil. “Even if they were sick.”

It took some time to get the fire hot, the water boiling and, with each moment, she felt a little more anxious as his fussing increased and his cough grew worse. She wished that Illya would return soon. She would surrender any hope at ever being as good at soothing the baby as he was if it just meant that the little one wouldn’t feel so miserable.

Finally, the water boiled and, knowing instinctively that he wouldn’t eat in this state, she skipped the bottle and pulled a blanket from the closet, draping it over them and the pot in a little self-made tent
on the floor. She pulled Beast into her lap and held him close to her chest, smoothing the fuzz back from his head as the steam filled the air around them.

Sometime later, when he seemed eased and the pot had cooled too much to provide steam, and she was covered in baby snot and a leaked wet diaper, they emerged again so she could make him a bottle.

She was damp, tired, and grimy, but as she looked down at the baby in her arms, happily devouring his bottle, she felt a bit of peace settle in her chest.

“I’m going to get you to safety, Kleiner,” she murmured. “I promise.” She ran a finger over the curve of his soft, round cheek and he looked back at her with eyes as dark as her own. He waved a hand at her, and his fingers caught on the chain at her neck, the ring filling his palm. She untangled them and, without the slightest conscious thought to do so, kissed the pudgy digits and gave his hand a squeeze. “You and this necklace. I can’t tell if you do it on accident or if you just really like it.”

The corner of his mouth turned up, breaking suction on the bottle nipple. She could see his little tongue still holding on, but she was almost sure he was responding to her.

The shattering of glass broke the moment, and she jumped up, crying out in surprise as she spun, pistol ready. She aimed at the window, scanning for the threat, then dropped her eyes to the floor. A crow flopped around in the broken glass, looking dazed, and she sighed, letting her gun hand fall to her side.

“Du hast mir Angst gemacht!” she declared and then screamed when it launched itself back into the air toward her.

Illya approached the cottage just as the sun was beginning to set. The shadows had grown long, but there was no light coming from inside. He stopped as he realized the front door was partly ajar and swung the bag from his back, setting it aside as he pulled his gun. He studied the front of the house, spotted the broken window, and felt his stomach plummet into his boots. He moved forward with swift, agile steps, his feet making almost no sound on the packed earth and slid his body through the crack in the door. Looking around, he brought his pistol up, sweeping the room. His eyes took in the shards of glass from the window, a knocked-over chair, a line of shattered figurines from the mantle now decorating the hearth, and his blood ran cold.

He stopped and listened, taking note of the sound of running water. A shower? Then he heard the baby’s cry, a wail echoing off tiles and all but ran to the bathroom. Without a second thought, he kicked open the door and stepped inside, gun drawn, fully expecting a dead or injured Gaby and Beast a prisoner.

What he got instead was a wet Gaby with a gun pointed back at him.

A completely naked, wet Gaby. His own Makarov aimed at his face and a baby on her arm.

The bathroom was full of steam, but it wasn’t enough to obscure the tawny lines of her body, pink and glistening from the hot shower. Small, pert breasts, toned stomach, dark curls between her legs. His body responded immediately, without his permission, as shock and arousal blindsided him.
“Scheiße, Illya!” Gaby gasped, dropping her arm. She set the pistol back on the shelf where she’d had it at the ready and then seemed to notice he still hadn’t dropped his. He did so then, his eyes skirting once more over her body before forcing himself to focus on her face.

She had seen it though, and her dark, scalding eyes burned into him as she stood there, not moving or attempting to cover herself. She glared at him hard, and then looked down his body, pausing on where he knew his erection was visible through the material of his trousers lifting her eyes back to his. Shame washed over him.

She stepped out of the spray and walked toward him, her hair plastered to her head and clinging to her shoulders. He held his breath as she drew closer, his mind spinning with both impossible and dangerous expectations. Gaby looked up at him, anger and something else, something that looked a lot like hurt, radiating from her eyes, and shoved a similarly wet and naked Beast into his chest.

“He’s croupy again,” she told him sharply and then pushed past him, her body brushing over his, leaving a damp impression of her behind on his clothing as well as the skin beneath.

He inhaled as his own anger swelled, filling up the space where adrenaline, fear, and then desire and shame had been. He grabbed a waiting towel from the sink rim and wrapped Beast up in it before storming out of the bathroom.

“There is shattered glass!” he justified. “The door is open! I thought you had been attacked.”

Gaby was securing a blanket around herself and her face snapped up at his sudden appearance. “We were attacked,” she retorted. “By a crow!” She flung a hand out toward the broken glass. “It flew into the window, and I had to fight to get it back outside.”

Illya took note, for the first time, of three, thin scratches along her collarbone.

“It didn’t help that we were practically trapped in here because of that stupid door,” she continued. “But I handled it, Mr. Big Strong Soviet, without you.”

He flexed his jaw. He hated when she called him that. Knew it represented the worst of things to her. He could no longer take this tension between them, it needed to be dealt with now.

“Why are you so angry with me?”

“You burst in on me in the bathroom!”

He exhaled through his nose. “I explained that,” he hissed. “That is not why you are angry. You were already angry. You have been angry since…” He took a breath and flexed his jaw again as humiliation pulsed through him. “Are you that offended by what I said on the boat?” he managed, his voice tight.

Gaby paused, staring at him and then clicked her tongue as she tilted her head to the table top. “Offended,” she repeated, crossing her arms over her chest. “You think I’m offended.”

She made a sound of annoyance or frustration. He couldn’t be sure. Then she caught his eye and held it, the gaze steady and unsettling. “You can’t look past your own… Selbsthass to see what is going on with anyone else. It’s a selfishness you don’t even realize…” she shook her head, breaking off her sentence and turning away. “Not that I have any room to talk.”

Illya frowned as her words jangled around his mind, crossing circuits, moving pieces into different positions. “Gaby,” he breathed, stepping forward on instinct—the fact that she was hurting taking precedence over his own confusion.
She held up a hand, palm out to stop him. “Just go, Illya. Check the perimeter, set your traps.” She took a deep breath, still not looking at him. “I need to get dressed and I... I don’t want you here.”

*I don’t want you here.*

The words resounded inside him like a cannon. A mortar shell that sent shrapnel out to every single part of his being. He stepped back as though she’d struck him, and it was a moment before he remembered he was still holding Beast in his arms. He sucked in a breath and laid the baby carefully on the floor. He was still only in a towel, and Illya knew he should diaper him, dress him, but he could feel his hands shaking. He ran trembling fingers over Beast’s belly and pulled away, standing to his feet.

Illya moved toward the door, all but running for it, pain, anger, and resentment burning holes inside him. He tried to pull the door shut, but it stuck, yanking him back. He growled and pulled again with force. It slammed shut loudly, little flecks of caulking and dust sprinkle to the ground.

He didn’t see Gaby sit back against the dining table, swiping quick, agile fingers over her wet cheeks.

... 

Striding out into the neglected shrubbery, right past the pack of supplies he’d brought up from town, Illya sought to let go of the painful tightness inside him. All he could hear at first were those same words, *I don’t want you here,* repeating in his head over and over, but as he walked, some of the other things she’d said began to come to the forefront.

“You think I’m offended.”

Which seemed to indicate she was *not* offended? And the rest of it? She wasn’t wrong about the self-loathing, but he had never thought of it as selfishness before. He came to a stop and turned, looking back as the soft light of a lantern stretched out across the overgrown yard. She had put it in the window. Had she put it there for him?

Filled with a new determination to clear the air between them, whatever that meant, he started toward the cottage but paused when his eye caught a movement to his left. He turned just in time to take the attack full-on, deflecting an arm with a knife aimed at his throat.

His assailant was shorter than him but bulkier, taking away any leverage his height gave him. What he did have was speed, and he used the deflection to spin the assailant’s arm, squeezing his wrist until he lost his grip on the knife and then pulling him in for a sharp blow to the face. The man stumbled back, and Illya chanced another look toward the cottage.

There were three more assailants in dark dress, converging on the front door. Swearing, he darted toward it, only to be blocked by a second man. His hand went to his gun.

...
Gaby lifted Beast from the nest of towels that Illya had left him in, wrapping him up in a fresh, dry one to keep him warm while she looked for a clean nappy.

“Just don’t pee on me, sir,” she said, delving into the canvas bag. “I’ve just gotten dressed and I have a very limited wardrobe. Illya—” She took a breath when she said his name, the pinch in her chest still too tight. *I shouldn’t have said it that way,* she thought for the hundredth time since he’d slammed the door. “Illya will be back soon, and you won’t have to put up with me anymore.”

Beast made a squealing sound, arching his back, and she patted him through the towel.

“Now, let’s find the nappies—”

The sound of shattering glass again startled her, but this time it was no crow. Three men in dark clothes came in through the window, sending the lantern to the ground with a crash and knocking over the table.

Gaby took a step back in utter shock, then tightened her hold on Beast as they came at her. She punched the first one hard in the nose, stunning him and sending him stumbling back, but there were still two more and one of them grabbed the baby. She couldn’t hold on without hurting him, and she left him slide from her fingers. As one figure was moving away with Beast, the first guy was back again, trying to wrap her up in a hold. She felt a sting of pain at her neck and turned, striking him in the chin with the heel of her hand in a sharp uppercut.

Two on one now. Gaby didn’t have more than a glance to clock the one leaving with Beast. Without the baby in her arms she was better able to fight and she’d had not just one, but two incredible teachers. She fought dirty as well, not caring for any false sense of honor in a fight, especially outnumbered. The next one that came at her got her knee in his balls. He hunched over, and she slammed a fist into the side of his face, sending him to the ground. The force of it reverberated up her arm, and she shook it out as she danced in a standoff with the other man. He darted toward her, and she moved in, grabbing the front of his dark shirt, sweeping his legs with hers sending him to the ground.

Her managed to bring her with him, and she rolled away, diving toward the coffee table where Illya’s backup Makarov was waiting for her.

Illya wrapped an arm around his assailant’s neck, working to gain access to his throat as he continued to fight, one forearm braced against Illya’s hold. Illya gritted his teeth and yanked, hoping to cause the man to lose his grip or his footing but his balance was impeccable.

The sound of gunfire from the house snatched his attention, his blood running cold. His victim used the moment of distraction to break away, turning quickly to attack and forcing Illya to block. He could hear Beast crying in the background as he exchanged furious blows with his assailant, finally lunging in to grab him by the front and throw him, rolling with him and yanking him into a full, tight choke. Tilting his arm for just the right angle, Illya growled and snapped the man’s neck, before tossing his body aside.

The roar of engines rang out through the hillside, a motorcycle and some other, larger vehicle approaching from the main road. Illya scanned the ground for his pistol, knocked away early in the
fight. Snatching it up, he pushed to his feet just in time to watch two men hop into a dark van, one of them with Beast over his shoulder.

“NO!” Illya shouted, bursting forward to try and reach the vehicle before it pulled away.

Worry for Gaby speared through him, but Beast was the priority. He swiped the rear quarter panel with his fingertips as they took off and, without a second thought, he ran after them, digging deep to pull up the speed he would need to catch them before they reached the main road.

Gaby tossed a blanket over the glass shards and climbed out the window, losing her balance and taking a knee, her bare feet pricked by twigs and gravel. She looked around and caught sight of the van with Illya in pursuit on foot and then jumped out of the way as a motorcycle roared past her. Glaring after it, she raised her pistol and fired twice before hitting the driver between the shoulder blades. He reared back and the bike careened out of control before flipping over in the tall grass.

Scrambling to her feet, Gaby ran. She held the pistol on the fallen man in case he wasn’t dead. When he moved, she put two more bullets into him. Yanking on the handlebars of the enduro bike, she pulled the heavy machine upright and leaped onto the seat, starting the engine with a loud, buzzing growl.

She tore off out of the grass and took chase, pushing the machine’s speed on the loose gravel road.

Illya heard the motorcycle coming up behind him and prepared for an attack. He had only two shots left in his pistol, so he would have to make them count.

“Illya!” Gaby’s voice rang over the sound of the engine, and he drifted to the side as he looked back at her. She sped past him, her hair fluttering wildly in her wake, and skidded to a stop.

“Come on!” she shouted, and he quickly swung a leg over behind her, wrapping an arm around her middle to hold on.

She took off, the bike fishtailing in the loose gravel, sending bits of rock and debris flying in every direction. For a split second, Illya worried about her ability to control it with his added weight on the back, but she pulled it out, as skilled as ever, and they shot off down the road after the van.

They zoomed through the countryside, gaining more speed as they reached a paved road. The van had impressive horsepower and a head start, but the bike beat it in maneuverability, and they gained on every curve.

The road wound up into the foothills, steep and twisting onto more dirt roads. The van engine growled as the transmission kicked into low, and Gaby leaned forward as if trying to will more acceleration from the motorcycle. Illya leaned with her, head and shoulders above her in the back, trying to provide less drag. Hope flared inside him as they neared the back corner of the van, a ladder up the side the perfect access point.

“Hold it steady!” he shouted to her, and she gave a curt nod. He was just about to reach out when a wobble from the front tire took them sideways. Illya didn’t have time to question Gaby’s control as the tire broke loose, shooting out from beneath them. The fork hit the ground, digging into the hard packed dirt and sending them both flying over the handlebars.
Pain shot through him as he slid through the loose gravel and grit, slamming into the sidewall that protected the corner and kept him from falling to his death. Gaby rolled, her body coming to a stop a few feet further down. It took him a moment to catch his breath, to even regain access to his body as it screamed out in protest, but he focused all his attention on her huddled form, waiting for her to move. The van sped off around the corner, the roar of the engine ringing in his ears.

Gaby groaned and pushed up to sit on her hip, wincing. Then she was looking around for him. Their eyes locked and, for that heartbeat, all he knew was relief.

Then he realized they had lost the baby. THRUSH had Beast, and there was no way to follow them, track them, find him. He stumbled to his feet, taking several steps in the direction the van had gone, as Gaby crawled to the motorcycle.

“Ich kann das nicht reparieren,” she said. “Not here.”

Illya hardly registered her speaking. All he could think of was the mission, the baby. Beast was being taken from them and he could not follow. His fingers tapped at his leg as the scenario spun in his mind. He had to turn back if he had any hope of finding him again. Turn back, acquire a vehicle, a map. But turning back meant leaving him, going in the opposite direction, and he couldn’t do that. Beast was helpless, tiny, fragile, motherless. There was no one else in the world on his side at this moment but them. He couldn’t leave him, but he needed to act, but he couldn’t leave him, he couldn’t follow... His fingers went still. His body went still. Everything went still.

... 

Gaby forced herself to stay standing against the aching protestation of her muscles. She gritted her teeth and rolled her shoulders, doing a quick mental checklist. Her early life as a ballerina had prepared her for a few things in spy life: hard work, agility, and pain.

She turned her head to where the van had disappeared, her stomach dropping, her heart twisting inside her chest. They’d lost him. They’d lost the baby. “Beast,” she said aloud, her voice rough to her own ears. They won’t hurt him, she reminded herself. They want him for leverage.

“We need to get back to town, get a car,” she said to Illya’s back. “We need to get him back.”

Illya didn’t respond. He didn’t even move. Gaby frowned and moved toward him. “What? What are you thinking?” she asked, but when she rounded his body, she found him staring, almost absently, in the direction their enemy had gone.

“Illya?”

Nothing. He blinked slowly but remained unmoving, and Gaby took a step back, her eyes sweeping over him. His fingers weren’t tapping and he wasn’t tense. She didn’t know what was happening, but her instincts told her it was bad.

Fear lurched inside her, but she pushed it away. Pushed it away with the pain, the exhaustion, the hunger—all the things that wanted to swallow her whole at that moment. She took a deep breath to steady herself and fight back useless, unwanted tears.

“Illya,” she croaked. “Illya, I need you. Beast needs you. I know… I know this is hard, this is... maybe it’s futile, but we have to try.” She shook her head and wiped angrily at her running nose,
cursing the emotional release she just didn’t have time for right now. “Illya, please,” she begged, reaching for his hand. Her fingers were so slight compared to his - thin, slender and weak, - but she wrapped them around his larger ones and squeezed tightly.

At her touch, he jerked and gasped for air as if someone had doused him in cold water. He shoved her away, knocking her to the ground as he moved into a defensive stance. Gaby cried out as the impact jarred her already battered body, groaning and laying back in the dirt to let the worst of it pass.

“Gaby?” Illya’s voice was small, small for him. A slightly higher pitch, without the usual rumble. Hearing it was a relief, but she couldn't respond, pain still too much in the forefront. “Gaby!” He fell to his knees beside her, sliding an arm beneath her shoulders and lifting her up. “What happened? Are you all right?”

Gaby frowned at him, but he was no longer looking at her. He was looking at their surroundings, and she watched his face change from confusion, to realization, to anger. His jaw flexed tight, though the hands that cradled her remained gentle.

“How long?”

“What?” she asked, reaching up to touch his shoulder where his shirt had ripped at the seam. He turned back to her then, and she could see self-recrimination rise up inside him.

“How long was I like that?” he demanded quietly. “How long ago did they take Beast?”

She shook her head. “It’s only been a few minutes, Illya,” she said. “But you were—” the muscle in his jaw rolled.

“I know,” he gritted out. “I’m sorry.”

Without a second thought, without worrying about the tension that had risen between them, the anger, the disappointment, the fear, Gaby cupped his cheek, pulling him to her and pressing her forehead to his. “It’s all right. We’ll get him back,” she said, her tone quiet but full of determination. “Let’s go get him back.”

Chapter End Notes

omg - are we half way through!? What???
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

A carjacking, a safe house, emotional turmoil. You know, just an average day for these two...

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday!

I want to say thank you to everyone who has been reading this from the beginning, all the newbies, and everyone who comments to remind me I'm not shouting into the void. You guys are awesome.

Also, always and forever, diadema - beta extraordinaire and a very good friend.

The couple was driving their modest sedan home, most likely returning from a shopping excursion in town. Ordinarily, Gaby might have felt some qualms about taking it from them, leaving them semi-stranded in the countryside. This time, she did not. She pulled the Makarov, with its three remaining shots, from her waistband and aimed it at the man in the driver’s seat.

“Get out of the car!” she shouted, and his head popped up, startled, his hands lifting off the steering wheel, his eyes wide. Gaby was sure she looked a sight: her hair a mass of dark tangles around her head, torn clothing, her body covered in dirt and blood, her stupid bare feet.

Beside him, the woman began railing in Italian and Gaby glared. Illya appeared from behind her then, stepping into the beam of the headlights. They obviously hadn’t noticed him before in the darkness because the woman screamed when he started around to her side of the car. He opened the passenger door and spoke to her, very calmly, in Italian. The woman quailed at his nearness and then slid out of her seat, staying as far from him as possible.

Gaby leaned further into the driver's space. She narrowed her eyes, her gun unwavering, the barrel aimed at his temple. He was watching Illya, most likely feeling a need to protect his woman, be she his wife or sister - it didn’t matter. “He’s not going to hurt her,” she tried, in German this time. “We just need the car.”

She tipped her head toward the side of the road, indicating his exit, and finally, he reached for his door. She backed away as he pushed it open, caught him eyeing the gun in her hands.

“He’s got one too.” Gaby tilted her head toward Illya. He was already in the passenger seat, his
pistol pointed at the man as well. The driver’s eyes darted toward him, widening in fear, and he began to move more quickly, scrambling away from the car and around the front. Gaby’s gun tracked him to where the woman was waiting by the ditch.

“I’m sorry about this,” Gaby offered uselessly as she slid into the driver’s seat.

Illya maintained his bead on them through the window as she put hers down and shifted the car into gear. The engine let out a decent growl, and she tore off down the road, trying not to spit dirt up at the now stranded couple.

“Where are we going?” she demanded. “We can’t go back to the cottage.”

He sighed, and there was an emptiness in the sound she didn’t like. “They have what they want,” he said, staring out the car window. “It is unlikely they will come back for us.” He shook his head. “But, no, we will not go back there.”

“I don’t want—” she swallowed, clenching her hands on the steering wheel. “I don’t want to go too far. We need to stay close to him.”

Finally, Illya looked at her, his blue eyes a storm. “We have no idea how far they are taking him,” he asserted, his voice growing rough. “We cannot stay close.” He leaned back against the seat and dragged a hand over his face. “We can only find a place to regroup and…”

And…

The word rang through Gaby’s mind. She knew they were thinking the same thing. And what? They didn’t know THRUSH’s plan, their people, their hideouts. They had nothing to go on, and no resources available in order to find Beast. Every minute that passed, he became more and more out of reach. The memory of his tiny body on her shoulder, his little coos and squealing sighs, flooded her thoughts. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her voice was strained when she asked, “Where?”

Illya regarded her for several seconds and then turned back to the dark countryside. “I know a place.”

…

“Slow down.” Illya held up a hand and Gaby heeded the instruction, easing her foot off the gas pedal, then bringing the car to a full stop when he made a fist. Without a word, he ducked out and she watched as he made his way forward through the undergrowth. There were no lights, no signs of life, just an aging stone-walled house with arched windows, shuttered with dark wood. His form disappeared into the night, and Gaby forced down the knot of worry it inspired.

He reappeared a few moments later, signaling the all clear, and she pulled the car through the overgrowth that covered most of the driveway, headlights off.

“You are better at picking locks than me,” he said when she climbed out of the driver’s seat. “This one will not be easy.”

Gaby peered down at her hands. They were trembling, filthy and abraded from the crash. Her body chose that moment to remind her that she hadn’t eaten in nearly forty-eight hours. “What are we
breaking into?”

He looked up at the house in response, and she followed his gaze. It didn’t seem all that formidable.

She turned back to see the corner of Illya’s mouth quirked up, and it stunned her, so welcome at that moment, her Illya… her Illya. Still here.

“What?” she asked, because she had a feeling he wanted her to.

“CIA safe house.”

Gaby smiled then too. “You know where a CIA safe house is? Did Solo tell you?”

His expression said he didn’t need Solo for this sort of thing. “I am a spy.”

A small laugh slipped out, and she took a deep breath, wiping her palms on her trousers. “How much trouble will I get in for this if we are caught?”

“Less than I will,” he said flatly. When she turned back to him, he shrugged. “Maybe Cowboy will cover for us.”

This time her laugh was not from humor. “Right. He’s got so much pull.”

They raided the car for any tools they might be able to use for lockpicking and found the backseat was full of food: fresh veggies, bread, cured meats, and coffee. Gaby’s stomach growled loudly enough to draw Illya’s attention.

“You need to eat.” His face was grim as he spoke.

“So do you,” she returned sharply. “First, we have to get past the door. I’ve found some hairpins.”

He hadn’t been wrong about the lock. It was complex, but it was also one of the locks Solo had trained her on, an older American model, and she wondered if it had occurred to them what a giveaway that would be to anyone in the know. Or were they only worried about the random locals?

With her shaking hands and aching fingers, it took longer than it should, but finally, the lock clicked out of its hold, and she turned the knob, pulling open the door with a sigh of relief. While she had worked, Illya had checked for alarms and other booby traps, and now he signaled for her to wait while he did a quick sweep of the inside.

“Good,” he called, emerging from the dark interior. His face caught the moonlight, highlighting the injuries there. Though the thickening growth of beard on his jaw hid some of the damage, he was scraped, bruised and his lip had been split at some point, the blood now dried. He looked both fierce and beautiful, and Gaby let herself be glad he was here with her.

“Let’s haul everything inside,” she said out loud. “Then we go ditch the car somewhere and come back.”

“I will—” he took a breath. “My legs are longer, and I can run faster.” It was a petition, his tone conciliatory, and she remembered their fight at the cottage. It seemed so long ago now. “Perhaps I should ditch the car while you get something to eat.”

She wanted to protest, not because he was leaving her behind again—he was right, he was faster, he could take the car farther without her—but because she didn’t want him out of her sight. Still, she bent her head and nodded.
Needing something to hide the swelling emotion behind, she crossed her arms and gave him a half glare. “You mean, stay here and get some food on the table like a good woman?”

Illya pulled back and frowned. “That is not what I—”

Gaby bumped her shoulder into him, offering a subtle smile as she slid past him to enter the room. “I’m going to feed you anyway. If the CIA has a workable kitchen.”

His exhale let her know he had finally seen the joke beneath her sarcasm, and he moved toward the door. “I’ll be back soon.”

…

The clock on the wall was silent, batteries long since run out, but Gaby kept checking it as though it could tell her how long since Beast had been taken from them.

Illya watched her pacing the room, his eyes tracing over her, cataloging her physical state. Her clothing was ripped at the elbows and one hip of her trousers was shredded, revealing a patch of scraped thigh beneath. Neither of them had taken time to tend their wounds. He’d suggested she shower and change, she had only brushed his words aside and continued as she was. He turned back to the maps he’d dug out of the CIA’s cabinets, but snapped his eyes shut as the vision of her on the ground in pain flashed through his thoughts.

_He had pushed her._

He had not realized it at the time, because his mind had still been foggy, but now he remembered the feel of her hand taking hold of his, felt his body jerking to defend itself. Frustration at his loss of control spiked viciously, and he slammed a fist down on the table, making it rattle with the assortment of pens and dishes that still littered the top.

“What is it?” Gaby stepped toward him.

He shook his head, squeezing his quaking hand tightly. "Is nothing."

“No,” she said, coming closer, stressing the word. “No, we’re done with not talking. Now we are talking. Tell me.”

His eyes snapped up to her in surprise then turned sharply away. He couldn’t think about this now, he needed to focus on finding Beast. “It is not important right now.”

“Why? Because you are not important?” she demanded, and he felt it like a slap to the face. She took a deep breath, fingers fiddling with the fake wedding ring she still wore, her eyes darting away before returning and locking onto his. “Tell me about what happened up there.”

He straightened up and pulled back, a sharp defensiveness and shame bolting through him. He couldn’t bring himself to answer. She should be told, he knew, and she deserved an explanation, but he couldn’t stand the thought of her knowing this about him: this failing, this flaw.

Gaby turned, marching away and then back again, her eyes pleading. “They took him from me, Illya.” Her voice was tremulous, filled with a guilt he found painfully familiar. “They took him _right out of my arms_!” She held them out for him, as if to show him her deficiency. “And I couldn’t _stop_
them!”

Her desperation and anguish made him ache. “Gaby, no. You—” he started, but she held up her hand cutting him off.

“We are people, and we are weak and imperfect, Illya, but we don’t have time for this… Selbstbeschuldigung. Beast needs us. He needs us.”

“I-I froze.” He stumbled over the words. “I could not… I could not think.” He swallowed. His handlers knew of this, shrinks in the KGB knew this about him, used it against him, like all the other things they had pulled out of his head over the years, but he had never admitted it out loud before. “I lost myself.”

“Has it happened before?”


“But it’s been a long time.” She said it as a statement, not a question. Solid, certain.

“Yes,” he bit out. “Yes, not since…” he shook his head. He didn’t want to tell her about those things. “Training. During training.”

“When you were a teenager?”

“Yes.” A harsh whisper of sound that scraped at his throat.

Alright then.” She gave a nod. “I doubt it will happen again, but we will talk about it later so that I’m more prepared and know how to help you.”

“I knocked you down.” His voice was stark, contempt for himself ringing in each syllable. The weight of his shame deepened, pressing in on him from all sides. “I hurt you. It is—”

“You defended yourself,” she countered, slicing a hand through the air as if she could wipe his guilt away. “I should have expected that.”

“Gaby.” Her name fell, like a plea from his lips, but what he was asking for he didn’t know. He could not forgive himself for this. How could she? How could she continue to trust him as her partner or… or anything else?

“I’m glad!” she shouted and it jarred him. She twisted back to look at him, the motion sharp with repressed energy. The ferocious gleam in her eyes faded when they met his, changing to something soft he could hardly stand to accept. “I am very glad to know that… if it ever happens again, you will defend yourself even then.” Her eyes were so steady, so assured he lost himself in it, seeing things he wanted so desperately to be there but had no right to hope for. She took a step toward him and lifted her hand, as if to touch him, before dropping it back to her side. “I am very glad.”

Her absolution was too much to accept and he exhaled sharply, forcing his focus back to the maps. The need to make it up to her, to prove her faith in him right, was an iron rod of determination spearing through him. If he were going to do that, it meant finding Beast. He went back to the map. "I am sure they are going to take him out of the country, but we have no idea which direction they will go.”

“We could contact Waverly now,” Gaby said, pacing again, massaging the back of her neck in agitation.
“CIA will be monitoring these channels.” He scrubbed a hand over his face, weariness trying to seep its way into his thoughts. “We can do it, but they will most likely be a complication.”

Gaby sighed. “Not to mention, we already know there’s at least one THRUSH agent embedded there.” She threaded her fingers together and hung them from her neck for a moment then released them, dragging them down in frustration. She stopped suddenly, her hands flying back to her throat.

Illya frowned, stepping forward with concern at the wide-eyed look on her face. “What is it?”

“My necklace!” she cried, frantically tracing her fingers over her throat and shoulders. “My ring, Illya! Beast was holding it again when they came in. I, I felt the chain snap, I just didn’t realize!”

His eyes flared, but he shook his head almost reflexively. “He will have dropped it. It won’t be with him.”

“You know how hard it is to get out of his hand. I…”

“They will have found it,” he insisted, even as he turned and hurried down the hallway, headed for the tracking equipment he knew the CIA was hiding in their closets. Gaby followed after him.

“I know. I know it’s impossible, but…” He could hear the edge of hope in her voice, and it felt contagious.

“Any chance at all,” Illya agreed, holding up the device for her to see. “We have to try.” He snatched up the tools he would need and took a seat at a nearby workstation.

“You can track my ring with that?” She came up behind him, peering over his shoulder. "Without it here to connect, or… whatever it is those things do?"

“Usually, yes, you would need the beacon to get the frequency,” he said, then looked up at her from the corner of his eyes. “But I have this one memorized.”

Gaby blinked and then smiled widely. She leaned in, the tip of her nose touching his temple, her breath ghosting over his cheek. “What a romantic you are,” she whispered, and kissed him there before moving away. He watched as she entered the closet, his skin burning where her lips had touched, his pulse racing. She flipped on the overhead light, revealing the large armory hidden inside, and settled her hands on her hips.

“Guns,” she said. “We’re going to need guns.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

A beacon, a baby and a space between.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday everyone! Love to you all. Thank you for sticking with me so far, we've still got away's to go and hopefully it'll be a good ride. Special thanks to diadema, my beta, soul-sister and morale support. :D

The beacon in the ring led them to a train yard.

When Illya had first tuned the receiver to the ring's frequency, the beacon had been moving. It had come to a rest here, and they had no idea if that was because Beast was no longer traveling or if the tracker had been separated from him.

There was also the strong possibility that this was a trap.

Illya lifted the binoculars, scanning the compound, eyes settling on each feature of interest, taking a mental note before moving on. Across from them, there was the old roundhouse. It was a nicely-designed building with a dome of multi-paned windows at the top. It had once housed offices and train engines in need of repair but it now sat neglected. Like most of the trains in the yard, it had been left to decompose.

“What do you see?” Gaby asked from beside him. She was checking over their weapons one last time, and he felt her slide one of the CIA issue Browning pistols into the holster at the small of his back. The warmth of her fingers seeped through the fabric of his shirt—a lingering touch he didn’t have time to dwell on.

“It is a yard for decommissioned trains, there is no—wait.” He spotted movement and followed the line of it with his eye. There, just on the other side of the roundhouse, a train waited. This one did not appear to be in line for retirement. The paint was shiny, and the exhaust rising from the diesel engine told him it was running and ready to depart at anytime. Illya set his mouth in a grim line at the thought of how quickly Beast would be out of reach if they took him by private train. He relayed the information to Gaby and heard her soft swear.

Numerous armed figures were milling about near the steam engine and the roundhouse and several more were walking the perimeter, but they didn't seem to be preparing for an attack. He adjusted his
lenses, hoping to get a closer look.

“What else?”

“Guards,” he answered. “Many guards. All armed with military weapons.”

“Doesn’t sound like your standard train yard security. Too much coincidence not to be them.”

He hummed his agreement, handing over the binoculars and pointing out the most relevant spots.

“There aren’t as many as I was expecting,” she said, setting the binoculars down and peering out over the space with her naked eyes.

She was wearing a black stocking cap to cover her braided hair and black paint to strategically dull the highlights of her face. He was dressed much the same, but there was always a unique mix of worry and pride that filled his chest at the sight of Gaby this way.

He absorbed the image of her with a small smile. “Maybe twenty to one,” he said with a shrug.

“Exactly.” She tucked one of the Brownings into a shoulder holster and slung a grappling gun over her back. Both appeared huge in comparison to her small frame. “We can take them.”

“No problem,” he said, and their eyes locked. “Legche legkogo.”

She held his gaze as she handed the binoculars back to him. His heart clenched: affection for her, thankfulness for having her at his side, welling up even as the dread of impossible odds tried to pull him under.

Illya lifted the binoculars again, forcing himself to focus on the importance of the mission, on Beast who needed them. He watched as a town car pulled up, shiny and black in the perimeter lights. A man in a very nice suit climbed out of the back, straightening his jacket as he took in his surroundings with distaste. He spoke, gesturing to the guards and then opened the other door, reaching a hand in and helping out a woman. She seemed nervous and out of place, a large satchel clutched to her chest. One of the guards took her by the arm to hurry her forward. She startled, yanking back from him, and fell, spilling the contents of her bag.

Bottles and diapers, along with other things Illya couldn’t identify, were hastily shoved back into the bag, and the woman was dragged back to her feet. It was all the confirmation he needed.

“All right,” he said. “I have a plan.”

…

Gaby rushed between the cars, the smell of aging rusted metal and ancient coal dust rising up around her. She settled into the shadows, her small body decked out in CIA tactical gear all but disappearing in the darkness. Weapon up and ready, she leaned her head around the corner, looking first left, then right before focusing on her next point, making sure the way was clear. She checked the tracker strapped to her wrist to verify that little red dot had not moved, then darted forward again, keeping low, her boots on the gravel the only thing that might give her away.

Her goal was the train car, where the ring seemed to be, and, they could only hope, the baby with it.
Illya’s was distraction. She wasn’t a fan of that part of the plan, but then, she never was. She hated when he made himself a target, put himself in danger. She couldn’t help it. But she couldn’t deny that their comparative sizes meant he was better for drawing attention, and she, for avoiding it. At least in this situation.

Her final sprint had her sliding beneath the train car in question and waiting. She watched the legs of the guards walk by, thick-soled boots and sturdy trousers. They didn’t seem like random thugs, and Gaby wondered where THRUSH recruited their muscle. Were these men in on the idea of global destabilization for power and profit, or were they just men with skills, taking whatever work they could find?

She didn’t have long to ponder. Illya’s distraction campaign began in the form of an exploding fuel tank followed by the exchange of gunfire. She suppressed the flare of concern for him and scrambled from her hiding place, pulling her body up the steps, her gun poised as she eased into the first of the three cars behind the humming engine. This one was a dining car, a tight galley that opened into a dining room. It was set up like a fine restaurant with faux candles and white linen tablecloths. Illya would surely huff at the extravagance.

She scanned the room and moved through it, taking extra caution at the door as she passed between cars. Next was a set of berths, and she checked each one thoroughly, even though the delay made her itch. She couldn’t afford to leave an unknown behind her.

The last car was locked, and she hissed, hanging out in the open as she retrieved a set of lock picks from her back pocket. She crouched down, laying her pistol across her knees as she set to work, her heart pounding in her throat the entire time. She could hear Solo’s voice in her head, reminding her what to feel for if she couldn’t hear, and she focused on the fine vibration in the metal tools as gunfire and shouts continued around her. Another explosion rang out, and Gaby couldn’t help but smile to herself as the lock clicked open beneath her touch. You’d think there was an army out there, not just one eigensinnig Russian with a plan.

She stood to her feet and readied her firearm, reaching for the latch. Setting a shoulder against the door, she shoved the latch down and slipped into the room beyond with her pistol up, scanning.

It was decorated as a gentleman’s study: shelves with books, a fine mahogany desk, expensive leather chair. Everything in dark woods and evergreen. A set of circular stairs led up to the overhead part of the double-decker, probably to a bedroom equally luxurious. It was certainly not the worst way to take the train.

Settled on a desk in the middle of the room sat the one thing that did not fit. A bassinet. It was simple wicker, white with blankets overflowing the sides. A baby’s cry filled the air, and Gaby’s heart stuttered for a moment. She holstered the gun as she rushed forward.

Beast lay inside, still naked but for a hastily-pinned diaper. The towel he’d been in when they snatched him mixed with the blankets. He stopped crying when her face appeared over him, his dark eyes huge in his small face. He stared back at her as though he could see her soul, then smiled, bright-eyed, his little, toothless mouth open with glee at the sight of her.

Something in her chest squeezed tight, and her eyes stung as she smiled back at him. “Hallo, Kleines Biest,” she said. His legs kicked the air, and he waved his hands at her. The sparkle of chain caught the light from between his fingers, and she took one of his hands in hers and kissed his knuckles before pulling the ring from his fist. “Yes,” she said softly. “Look at this. Good job. What a clever spy you are.” She kissed his minuscule palm and then rubbed a red spot where the metal had been pressing into his tender skin.
Tossing the chain aside, she slid the ring on to the finger of her right hand, a fake wedding ring still taking up her left, and then examined the room one more time, double checking her exit points. When she was ready, she wrapped Beast snugly in his blanket the way Illya had shown her, then lifted him from the bassinet and tucked him against her chest. “Now, let’s go signal Illya.”

The sound of the door sliding open drew her attention, and she spun around, pulling the gun from the holster at her back. The man at the door already had his on her. “I wouldn’t try that if I were you,” he said in accented English.

Gaby opened her hand, letting the pistol dangle from her thumb. “You’re going to shoot a woman with a baby?”

“If I have to, yes, I will,” he returned. “Now, toss it over.”

Gaby tilted her head, offering a flat smile. “If you insist.” She hurled the gun at his head and grabbed the grappling gun from her hip, raising it over head and shooting it into the ceiling. It broke through the thin access panel above her and lodged into the roof of the train car. The cable yanked at her shoulder, and she tightened her grip on Beast, curling her body around him as they flew upward through the shattered panel and into the upper level. She leaped forward onto solid flooring, crouching to catch herself.

“Your next spy lesson, little one,” she said, breathless, “is to always have more than one plan of escape.” She quickly scanned what was indeed a bedroom and grabbed the cable from the grappling hook. “Of course, I wasn’t entirely certain that one was going to work.” She looped it over her arm and marched toward the wide, panoramic windows, pulling her second pistol and firing into the glass. Snatching up the closest bit of material she could find, she wrapped a discarded shirt around her hand just as her assailant came sprinting up the stairs. She seized the cable and jumped, rappelling down the side of the car, one-handed, losing her grip part way. A grunt of pain was forced from her lips as she hit the ground, Beast cushioned on her chest. The man poked his head out the window with his gun, and she locked her arms around Beast like a cage and rolled under the car, using her heels to push them out the other side.

He was crying now from all the jostling, and she kissed the side of his head as she scrambled to her feet. She ran for the shadows of the next car but was cut off by another guard. He hollered and started toward her so she pitched left, in the direction of the roundhouse, lifting her pistol and firing, before turning to run.

Illya continued to prime the fuel on the old locomotive engine, checking his watch to verify the countdown in his head. He had three more booby traps and two more explosions set, then he would be out of distractions. He leaned down to glance out the window as he cranked the knob in the other direction and listened to the starter motor come to life. Holding his breath, he waited. The engine turned over once, then... nothing.

“Davay, staryy soldat,” he cajoled. “One more run.” He turned the starting switch again, and this time, the engine rolled over with a loud whine that stuttered into a roar. “Molodets!” He gave the cool metal wall two swift pats and then ran toward the control room. Halfway down the passage, gunfire drew his attention and he ducked to peer out the window.
Across the yard, he spotted Gaby running toward the roundhouse and cursed as a jolt of fear ran through him. Diverting from the control room to the ladder that let him climb down, he seized onto the railing and swung off, landing on the ground with a crunch of gravel, and breaking into a run.

Firing off several gunshots, he offered an immediate distraction to the men chasing Gaby, several them breaking off from their pursuit to come after him instead. He watched her disappear around the wall through one of the engine bays but had no way of telling if she’d gotten the baby yet or not. He flexed his jaw and fired two bullets into the man closest to him and then two more in the next before diverting between train cars.

Taking cover meant he could no longer see the roundhouse, and he was forced to weave between them to cross the yard. Aware of all that could happen in the moments Gaby was out of his sight, he dug in with his toes, the thick tread of his boots throwing up gravel behind him. He rounded one of the rusting cars and was tackled from the side. He and his assailant spun, rolling to the ground, and he lost grip on his pistol at the impact. Their bodies separated from the force, Illya tumbling out of control before he could roll to his knees. He turned to face his attacker with a growl.

The man was already standing, a gun unsteady in his hand, but Illya was on his feet in a flash, kicking the weapon away, his height giving him the reach he needed. He pulled the pistol Gaby had secured at the small of his back and fired, watching as the man fell to his knees, hands over his gut. Illya put one more in his head, ending things quickly and then retrieved his second pistol before bolting down the row of cars, looking for a crossing point.

Gaby ducked behind the stairs as she watched the men enter the roundhouse after her. It was dark, but the open space between the steps left lines of light across her face and hair. In her arms, Beast was still crying, the loud noise and abrupt movements frightening him. She bounced gently, shushing softly in his ear.

“You can’t hide,” one of the men called. “Not with the brat crying like that.”

“Maybe you should try putting him on a tit!” another shouted, more to her right. “You are a woman, aren’t you?”

Gaby gnashed her teeth as anger twisted in her belly. She inhaled slowly through her nose. Glancing around, she moved along the edge of the brick wall and resisted the urge to break cover and take a shot at them. She couldn’t get into a gunfight with Beast in her arms, and she didn’t quite trust them to feel the same. She was running along the back wall when a machine gun opened fire, bullets exploding in the brick several feet in front of her. She crouched and fell to her knees as the windows overhead shattered, raining glass down on both of them. She cried out, hunching her body over Beast to shield him.

Knowing they had tagged her location, she crawled hastily through the shards of glass to a grimy bit of cobweb covered machinery. Brushing a kiss over Beast’s soft hair, she laid him on the ground, tucking him out of view and stood to her feet, pulling the pistol and checking the clip.

She took a moment, listening to try and pinpoint their location, then stepped out, wrapping both hands around the Browning HP to help control the kick. She hit the first guy, missed the second and had to fire another round, all in rapid succession. She managed to shoot a third before they started
firing back and she was forced to dive behind a second machine for cover. Her gaze shot across the space that now separated her from the tiny baby she needed to protect. Should she keep him with her? Leave him hidden and hopefully draw them away?

She didn't have time to decide as they rushed her, three of them firing at once, and she had to shrink into herself to keep from getting hit. One of them picked her up and threw her against the wall. The force of it made her teeth snap together painfully, but she brought up her gun even as she fell and put three bullets in his chest.

The next man booted the gun from her hand and reached down to wrap his meaty paw around her throat, lifting her up and smacking her into the wall again. She kicked her legs and clawed at his wrists as he suspended her off the ground, panic sliding its vibrating fingers into the edges of her mind. He was huge, a barrier of man filling up the space, blocking most of her view.

“Grab the child,” he ordered, accent thick, and Gaby darted her eyes over to watch one of them scoop up Beast. She tried to take a breath, but the hold on her neck was absolute. She turned her eyes to her attacker, letting him see the alarm there and waited for that grin of confidence, then she let go of his wrist, even as her vision went dark, and jabbed her knuckles into the soft pressure points just behind his elbow.

His shoulder jerked backward, and he shouted in pain as his hand released her. Her feet hit the ground, but she didn't have time for breath. Bringing her arm up, she smashed the heel of her hand into the side of his jaw, snapping his head to the side, and then kicked him hard, falling to the ground herself as dizziness overtook her.

She gasped for air as she rolled to her side, looking for the man who had taken Beast. She caught blurred sight of him and started to push herself up. There was still a threat from the man behind her. She doubted she had managed to knock him out. Movement from the corner of her eye drew her attention, and the feeling that jolted through her could only be described as a mix of relief and joy.

“Illya!” she shouted, but her voice was still choked from the man’s hand on her throat. Illya was barreling toward her, his face a mask of determination and rage. “Illya!” She forced out and pointed the direction the other man had gone. “He’s got Beast!”

She saw him follow her gesture and take note, saw the look in his eyes as he slowed, gaze darting back to her. She watched him change directions, heard the growl he uttered as he took off after their mission, their charge, the tiny infant who needed them.

Gaby stood to her feet, stumbling once before finding her balance. She snatched up her gun and spun to face the man who’d choked her, but he was out cold. Taking a deep breath of release, she set herself against the pain in her body and bolted off after Illya.

Illya charged toward the man carrying Beast, his speed overtaking them easily, but bringing down an opponent with a hostage, especially a small and helpless one, presented its own challenge. His target led a chase through the maze of cars until Illya managed to take hold of the collar at his neck and yanked him backward, spinning him around and slamming him against one of the train cars. He pressed the muzzle of his pistol to the man’s head and leaned in tight to his face.
“If you think I will hesitate to put a bullet through your skull,” Illya snarled. “You are wrong. Now, give me the baby.”

The man quailed, releasing his grip, and Illya pulled Beast to his shoulder and stepped back, gun aimed steady at the man’s head. Illya spun the gun around, catching it by the barrel, and clocked him upside the head, knocking him unconscious.

A sharp, burning pain sliced down his back before he could turn, and it sent him to his knees. He managed to pivot at the waist and bring up his arm to block the next blow. The man’s inner elbow collided hard with Illya’s forearm, the knife’s blade an inch from Beast’s body. Illya roared, furious, as he used the position to rotate the man’s arm away, gripping him tight and yanking him in to bash their heads together, smashing the corner of his skull into the other man’s eyebrow. His opponent drew backward, dazed, and Illya twisted the knife from his hand and dove forward with it, shoving the blade through the man’s belly. The body slumped, hanging over him, and Illya pushed it off with a grunt and staggered to his feet.

He could feel the wound in his back open and shift at the movement, felt blood trickle down over his skin. Not good, but there was nothing he could do about it now. A gunshot behind him made him flinch in expectation of pain, but it didn’t come, and he whirled around in time to see another guard fall, revealing Gaby sprinting toward him, gun drawn.

“I hope you’ve got a brilliant escape plan!” she called as she ran past him.

“It is a plan,” Illya hollered in response, following after her.

They wove their way through the lines of cars, Beast squalling in Illya’s arms.

“Is he okay?” Gaby asked over her shoulder, her voice edged with worry and determination.

“No, he’s just scared.” He hoped. He hadn’t had a moment to check him. “Go left!” he yelled as they came to the next opening, and Gaby heeded, sweeping for guards as she did so.

Illya skidded to a stop when they stepped through to where the engine should have been, and for a moment, he thought he’d navigated wrong. But then he heard the sound of the old train chugging away and whipped his head around. It was rolling down the track without them. He’d forgotten to engage the brakes.

“What do we do now?” Gaby challenged, and Illya pointed toward the locomotive already running.

“Catch that train!”

It was moving at a snail’s pace—for a train—but they still had to run full out to catch up with it. Illya passed Gaby, reaching up to the ladder and swinging both him and Beast aboard with one arm. He rushed into the control room and hurriedly tucked the infant against the bulkhead, out of the line of fire. He looked out at the track in front of them, saw the guards rushing to intervene and pushed the throttle forward. They were going to have to go faster if they were going to make it.

As the train slowly started to increase speed, he ran back out, watching for Gaby. She was running full out, her jaw set, but her legs were just not as long as his.

“Come on, Chop Shop!”

“I hate that name!” she shouted back, kicking up her speed.

“I know, so come here and slap me for it!”
She eyed him darkly and reached out her hand, almost there, fingertips dancing against his before falling away. Her gaze shifted to something behind him, and he turned to see that their enemy had already made the junction point and was working to switch the tracks. It would bring the engine toward the roundhouse instead of down the abandoned track as Illya had intended.

He jerked his head back around to Gaby, saw the decision in her eyes the moment she made it, and panic flashed through him.

“No!” his voice was barely a yell, fear crawling up his throat.

She looked up at him with a thin smile. "Get Beast out of here."

His heart jumped as she broke off, changing direction toward the junction. “No!” he screamed, but it was too late.

Swearing vividly, he stormed back into the control room, ready to stop the engine and go after her. From the floor, Beast made a squawking cry, and Illya blinked down at him. Half-swaddled and tucked into the corner the baby was staring back at him with dark eyes, so like Gaby’s. It would take too long to slow the engine and restart it again. Maybe they would be able to find another way to escape, together, but it would certainly involve more gunfire, more risk.

He rushed to peer out the door and saw the guards chasing after them, a truck pulling onto the tracks, more men climbing onto the back with machine guns in hand. They weren’t going to give up.

The baby was their priority. He was what they wanted and, for Beast’s sake, for the world’s sake, Illya couldn’t let that happen.

He scanned the yard until he spotted Gaby, sprinting across the ground, her stocking cap long gone, her face drawn in determined lines.

Closing his eyes, he gritted his teeth on a million curses, his heart lodged in his throat and turned, shoving the throttle to the wall. The train’s engine groaned and whined as they picked up even more speed. Illya leaned into the wall, his hand in a fist against the steel, squeezing until his knuckles ached.

A smattering of gunfire clanged across the back of the control room, and Illya ducked instinctively, turning with a snarl. He had one last grenade hanging from his belt, and he snatched it up, running to the door as he pulled the pin. He launched it toward his pursuers and saw it bounce beneath the armed truck before rushing to bend down to cover Beast.

The truck exploded with a concussion of sound, and the train sped onward.

Illya lifted Beast into his arms and moved to look out the window one more time. “It’s all right,” he said, pressing his nose against the baby’s tiny head. “She is smart and strong. She will be all right.” He could only hope it would be enough, as his gaze darted between the man at the switch lever and Gaby flying across the yard. If she didn’t reach it in time he and Beast would not escape. Part of him almost wanted it that way, his mind and heart rebelling against the idea of leaving her behind.

…

Gaby ran, the gun in her hand a heavy, welcome weight. She didn’t look to see what Illya’s response
to her actions would be, knowing him, he’d stop the damn train and put them all in more danger. She knew he didn’t like it, but it was better to risk her alone than to continue risking Beast.

It wasn’t like she was a fan of the idea.

Most of the guards set off after the escaping engine, but two of them veered toward her. She raised her gun and took them out, her aim sharper than she expected at a dead run, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She heard the spatter of gunfire in the distance and spared a quick glance in that direction. A Fiat 1100 had mounted the tracks in pursuit and she caught the moment it exploded, fire bursting up from beneath the engine and lifting the chassis into the air briefly. The heat of it swept over her but she had little time for a reaction.

There was still one man on the switch control, tugging on the lever with all his might. The ancient, neglected machinery resisted his efforts, filling the air with the screech of metal on metal friction. She heard it release, watched it begin to shift into position. The tracks groaned and clanked, changing the line, diverting the course Illya’s train would take back into the train yard.

Gaby cursed. Only one track and a rusted out flatcar separated her from her goal, and she darted up the loading ramp and flung herself off the other side.

The man looked up just in time to see her hurtling toward him, and his eyes widened in surprise just as her fist collided with the side of his face, the weight of her entire body behind it. A sharp pain bit into her hand as his head snapped to the side, and he went down, Gaby with him, sliding on her shoulder then rolling into it to help absorb her momentum, before she tumbled to a stop several feet away.

Her shoulder was on fire, and her hand screamed in pain. She cradled her arm, clenching her jaw against the agony. She absently wondered if she had broken a finger before she looked down to see her ring, the false pearl shattered, the little bit of tech inside coated in blood and hanging like a loose spring from its moorings.

She only had a second to mourn the loss as she heard the train engine whine with effort. Good, she thought, even as an edge of panic licked at her. Illya was making a break for it with the baby, just like she had hoped he would, but none of that would matter if she didn’t switch the track back before he reached it.

Lifting her eyes to the rusted lever, Gaby scrambled to her feet. She winced in pain, her hip, her hand, her shoulder all burning, and rushed forward. Grabbing on with both hands, she squeezed the handle and tugged, gritting her teeth as the hinge resisted. It moved several inches and then held fast and Gaby cussed at it, her throat raw. Frustration and fear throbbed inside her and she screamed, kicking the lever rod as hard as she could, once, twice, three times. In a burst, it began to give way, and Gaby threw her body at it, shouting into the exertion. With one final groan of the deteriorated metal, the lever slammed into place and Gaby lost her balance, collapsing onto the platform in a jumble of limbs. There was a ding, and the little sign overhead flipped, indicating the track had been returned to its exit route.

Sucking in air, she rolled over, scrabbling up to watch as the train passed the switch, hurtling off out of the train yard. She held her breath, her eyes noting the engulfed truck now blocking the tracks, hearing the rattle of the train gathering even more speed. It rounded the corner, disappearing from view and she closed her eyes and exhaled as relief washed through her.

The moment of respite was short-lived, as loud shouting in the distance brought her back to her own situation. Looking around at the enemy headed toward her, Gaby clambered to her feet and darted back across the train yard, a mob of armed thugs on her heels.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Worry, wounds and the waiting game.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday all! I’m posting this via mobile today, so hopefully all goes well. 😊

Big thank yous to diadema my incomparable beta. Much love everyone, have an awesome weekend!

The house was dark and empty, just as he’d known it would be. He had visited only a few times in the last several years, checking that it was in order, kept in excellent condition. Having put good money into setting it to rights and keeping it that way, the small irony of having to pick his own lock was not lost on him as he worked at it with tired hands.

Beast lay on the ground beside him, the towel and blanket he was wrapped in covered with filth and debris. He slept quietly, the night’s events, plus a long ride in a stolen car, pushing him into unconsciousness. It grieved Illya to think of how much the small child had been forced to deal with over their time together, and he took a moment to set a gentle hand over him, as if he could somehow absorb the stress into himself.

The lock finally gave way, and he pushed the door open, pulling the baby into his arms before lifting the large pack of supplies he and Gaby had pilfered from the CIA. He stepped inside, looking around the small, cozy space, and exhaled with a mix of relief and wariness.

Deciding not to go back to the safe house had been a tough but mutual decision. They had a lousy record of being found, and returning to the same place twice just seemed like asking for trouble. When he’d given Gaby the coordinates to memorize, she had been curious of course. She’d asked him how he knew what was waiting. He was sure his answer had left her assuming it was another KGB installment. At least this time she had not seemed angered by the idea.

He had no idea what he was going to tell her in the end.

Will I even have the chance?

The thought drew all the worry he had been compartmentalizing to the forefront in a rush. Dragging in a shaky breath, he pushed that fear back below the surface until he could take some kind of action, and hurried across the small living area, through a set of french doors to the open bedroom.
Laying Beast on the bed, he unwrapped his little body and inspected him for damage. Aside from the minor, fading scratch on his head from their second day, and a wealth of grime, he was thankfully unscathed.

His nappy was long past ready to be changed, and Illya removed it with casual efficiency. Beast stirred, half-waking, and Illya shushed him with a hum of baritone. “You are all right, malen'kiy. You are safe now.”

Scooping him up, Illya carried him, still naked, into the kitchen and turned on the faucet there. The rushing of water filled the otherwise silent space, and he slid his fingers beneath the flow, waiting for it to heat up. Blood and dirt cascaded from his skin, and splashed over the copper sink bottom, spiraling down the drain. He stared at the mix, jostling Beast gently as he forced his mind to stay on task in the here and now.

When the temperature began to rise against his fingertips, he sent a quick thought of gratitude to the caretaker and adjusted the temperature. He set Beast in the sink, cradling him under the warm water, and washed him carefully, running large hands over his tiny body. The baby blinked up at him with wide eyes, one hand stretching out toward him. Illya gave him a soft smile, humming reassurances he hoped would keep them both calm.

With a freshly diapered Beast on his shoulder, Illya crouched down to open one of the bags he and Gaby had used to build their stash. He ignored the bite of pain from the wound in his back, and pulled out the can of formula and the bottle they had managed to steal while en route. He had felt far too optimistic at the time, almost asking for fate to work against them, but now he was grateful they had planned ahead. He prepared the bottle, pacing the room as he fed the infant, holding him close as he sought to keep his hands from shaking, his heart racing away in his chest.

Helplessness and frustration were strong triggers for him, and he needed to keep it under control, hold himself together. For Beast, for the mission, for Gaby.

He stopped and lifted his face toward the ceiling as he blew a slow stream of air through tense lips. She was a more than capable spy. Smart, strong and competent. But no matter how many times he reminded himself of these things, he also remembered that smart, strong, competent people—spies especially—died all the time. Fear rose like bile in his throat, burning and closing it off. He swallowed and looked at the child in his arms, pale lashes on soft cheeks. He had fallen asleep again. This time, well-fed and in peace, and Illya took what comfort he could from that.

Using the pillows beneath the quilt to bolster him in place, Illya settled Beast in the middle of the large bed and covered him with a clean blanket. A tick in his jaw was his only response to the new jolt of pain from his back, and he felt another small trickle of fresh blood run past the waistband of his trousers.

Concern for Gaby overrode any thoughts for his own injuries, and Illya dug through their supplies again to find the second receiver he had programed as a backup. He held it in his palm and tried to stop the trembling, squeezing it tightly as he held his breath, switched it on, and waited.

Nothing.

He huffed angrily, then double checked his input. Triple checked it. Still, the device remained silent. Either she was too far out of range, which shouldn’t be the case, or the ring had been destroyed.

The imagery that filled his mind with either of those possibilities had his hands shaking harder, panic crawling up the back of his throat. Growling loudly, he threw the receiver across the room, correcting the impulse just in time to aim for the small sofa and not the wall. If she had been
captured, he may still need it in order to find her.

For now, all he could do was wait.

He undressed and attempted to clean his wound in the bathroom’s old-fashioned copper tub. It was not long enough for his legs, and he had to scrunch himself into it, knees to his chin as he poured water down his back, over and over. Once he felt the cut had been flushed sufficiently, he dried himself off and used the small, age-darkened mirror and did what he could to tape the edges together.

He dressed in a pair of navy athletic trousers, remaining topless so as not to further aggravate his back. Focused but on edge, he went through the supplies in the rucksack, then the dressers, the cupboards, the pantry, itemizing everything he found until there was nothing left to do, no task remaining to occupy his anxious mind.

There was still no sign of Gaby.

With no other outlet for the energy building inside him, Illya paced the floor of the small house like a caged animal, uselessness creeping into his bones. His back stung, his muscles ached, but Gaby was all he could think about. Every moment that went by where she didn’t appear, he fell further into that place inside his mind where he had tried to compartmentalize everything he felt for her.

Gaby.

He’d known someday he’d have to live without her but not yet. not yet not yet.

Someday, the KGB would call him back and keep him. His exposure to the west was already far beyond what they usually allowed for non-embedded agents. They would call him back, and he would have to let her go. He knew that, had spent so much time building up the strength to do so, working hard to protect her from that moment as well as himself. Holding back from her, keeping her at a certain distance, for what? To lose her like this?

He took three determined strides toward the front door then stopped. Not only did he have no idea where she was, he couldn’t leave the baby alone. Beast was the priority and if... if the worst had happened, she would never forgive him if he made her sacrifice pointless with his own carelessness.

Vibrating with the impotence of his situation, Illya jammed his fingers into his hair, grabbing onto the longer strands at the front, and pulled, pulled until he felt a throb of pain from his scalp in protest. There was nothing he could do, and he felt it, the frustration, like an itch crawling over his skin.

He had kept the lights very low, the shutters closed and curtains drawn, to avoid any detection from the outside. Only the dim blue of an emergency lantern allowed him to see from where he had set it near the wall. Back and forth he paced, his bare feet making little sound on the worn wood, his body drawn taut like a bow. His hands balled into fists, squeezing tight - then opened, stretching out, fingers spread wide, over and over, like a ritual, a rhythm that seemed burned into his soul.

A sound at the door had him spinning around, his heart in his throat. He snatched up the pistol he had ready on the table, and aimed it at the entryway, pulse thumping in his ears. The dark walnut door swung open, and Gaby slipped inside, gun drawn as she swept the room. Her braid had come loose in several places, dancing, wild and debris laden, about her flushed face. Her clothing was torn, her shoulder exposed, and he could see the terrible abrasions there, but she was otherwise whole.
They lowered their weapons in unison, staring at each other, wide-eyed, as they absorbed the glut of relief that flooded them. Then Illya was moving, eradicating the space between them before falling to his knees and wrapping his arms around her.

He buried his face in her belly and dragged in an unsteady breath. Turning, he pulled her closer, palm spreading wide on her back, and listened to the sound of her heart beating. Gaby set a shaky hand on his head, fingers running over his hair and then down his neck to his shoulders before wrapping her arms around him the best she could, her own breath rushing out in the shape of his name.

They stayed like that, countless minutes ticking by as they clung to each other, neither speaking.

“Beast?” she asked finally, worry catching on the edges of her voice.

“Asleep,” he answered against her ribs. “He is fine, not injured.”

She let out another breath. “Gott sei Dank.” Her hand slid further down his back, and he flinched when she brushed his wound. She stiffened, lifting her hand. “Illya, you’re bleeding!” He released her slowly, and stood to his feet.

“It is nothing,” he assured her. “It is clean, we should worry about your injuries.” He looked down at her, drinking in the sight of her face, everything about her. Bruises on her neck, scratches on her cheek, twigs in her hair—she was the most beautiful thing in his universe. He watched as her keen eyes narrowed to slits, finding he only loved her all the more for that stubbornness.

“Let me see,” she demanded, and he sighed. Unwilling to tell her no, he turned and heard her gasp, then her fingers were touching him, soft, gentle brushes of her fingertips igniting little fires on his bare skin. “A knife?” He hummed the affirmative. “It needs stitches.”

“I know.”

“I’ll do it,” she said, moving past him toward the medical bag he’d left on the table. “Where’s the sink?”

She was already tossing aside the black sweater, leaving her in the torn and bloodied t-shirt underneath. He reached out and took her hand, stopping her, pulling her back toward him.

Her eyes snapped up to his, gaze flitting over his face. “What?”

Words, countless truths and needful confessions, filled his mind. They clogged his throat, his chest constricting around his pounding heart, and he let her go, shaking his head. “Nothing.”

“Illya…” She laid a hand on his chest, her skin warm on his, fingers drifting downward before she dropped it awkwardly and turned away. “I should wash my hands.”

He could only bring himself to nod, and his eyes followed her as she left the room.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

A white flag...

Chapter Notes

Happy Day after Valentines Day. Here is my Valentine to you. <3

Thanks and endless devotion to diadema as always. She has done such a wonderful job helping me along the way. All the mistakes are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once Gaby had finished washing her hands, Illya swung one of the dining chairs around and straddled it, folding his arms over the back as Gaby rummaged through the CIA-issued medical kit they had stolen. She tossed several unneeded things to one side before she pulled out the suture implements, and Illya’s eyes landed on a pile of condoms that had scattered across the tabletop, blinking in surprise before looking away. He darted a glance up at Gaby to see if she’d noticed them, the heat rising up his body to his neck and ears. He cleared his throat, and focused on his hands.

“I’m not as good at this as you are,” Gaby said, pulling up another chair to sit close behind him.

“You will do fine,” he assured, his voice low. He watched as she soaked a piece of gauze in iodine.

“This is probably going to sting.”

He felt the corner of his mouth lift. “Probably.”

She swiped the disinfectant down the length of the wound. It ran from mid-back to the top of his left hip, just below the place where scar tissue from his most recent exit wound already puckered his skin. He inhaled slowly, keeping himself relaxed through the burn. A few moments later, she was going at him with the small, curved needle. She made a distressed, little noise each time she had to pierce it through his skin, and he wondered if she knew she was making it, even as he focused on the wood grain in the table to keep from flinching under the pain.

“Verdammt,” she hissed after some time, her voice shaking. “This is long.”

His own voice was tight when he answered. “You are doing well.”

“You say that, but you can’t see what’s happening back here,” she huffed, that unsteadiness still
there, even as she tried to diffuse it with humor. “You might look like Frankenstein’s monster when I am finished.”

“Very manly,” he assured her with mock seriousness. “Women will love it.”

Gaby’s forehead connected with his shoulder, and he felt, more than heard, her laughing, then she kissed him there, a soft brush of her lips that made his heart jump, his blood run hotter. “Well, this woman *hates* it.”

“That is too bad then,” he told her, his voice deep, all but forgetting the pain in the rush her light touch had brought. “Because you are the only one that matters.”

Gaby’s hands were still shaking as she settled them on the sides of the tub to lift herself out. It was the most wonderful tub she’d ever seen in her life, deep with a high back. In another time and place, she could spend hours there, letting the hot water soothe her battered body, but there was no time for luxuriating. Even if there were, she wouldn’t have been able to enjoy it. She couldn’t get the sight of Illya’s wound out of her mind.

If the knife had been any truer. If it had been a stab instead of a slash… he would be gone.

Drawing in a trembling breath, she looked at herself in the faded mirror, swiping away the fog. She hadn’t bothered to wash her hair, merely finger combed it out and twisted it to the top of her head with a ribbon. The thought of trying to tend it with her injured shoulder was daunting. Turning her back to the mirror, she tried to see the extent of the abrasion there, but couldn’t quite contort herself that way. What she could see, still held little bits of dirt and gravel, even after her bath.

The ring, the one Illya had given her, (*it seemed like a lifetime ago now,* ) glinted at her from where it sat on the back of the sink, and she ran a fingertip over the band, her mouth twisting downward. The fake pearl was broken, the internal mechanism and the ring of diamonds caked in blood. Dropping her hand and looking away, she left it behind, taking up a wood handled hairbrush instead. *One injury at a time.*

She exited the bathroom, a plush, white towel wrapped around her body and secured just above her breasts. Her thumb played with the false wedding band still on her finger as she reached the end of the hall, and looked out at the cozy living room.

Illya was laying out the bits of their medical supplies with his usual precision, and he looked up when she entered, standing up straight and wiping his hands on his hips where the loose, knit trousers he wore hung low, revealing the entire length of his torso. She let her eyes inspect him, both for other injuries and simply because he was beautiful to look at. Rounded shoulders and a broad chest that was covered with dark, golden hair. His long, lean abdomen leading down to narrow hips where the still-healing bullet wound stood out pink on his pale skin. There were other scars as well, older, thicker, uglier, but they didn’t disgust or offend her. Instead, she wanted to trace her fingers along each one and make him tell her its story, like drawing out poison.

“I couldn’t get all the grit out,” she said, turning her shoulder to him, then waved the hairbrush. “And I can’t quite reach up to brush my hair. I think there’s still some glass in it.”

“Come,” he said, pulling out the chair he’d been sitting in before. “I will do it for you.”
With a nod, she accepted the offered seat. He took the brush from her, and she settled her hands on her thighs. She felt him tug at the ribbon, and her hair fell down around her shoulders, then the ribbon dropped into her lap, and she watched it curl, bright red, against the white of the towel. Lifting a section of her hair, Illya’s fingertips brushed her cheek, and she shivered.

With even more care than she had imagined, Illya worked the knots and coils from her matted tresses, section by section, until the brush ran through without hindrance. A few bits of glass fell to the floor, and he tsked, tipping her head forward so he could inspect her scalp, and she almost smiled at his mothering. When he was done, he brushed it all to the side, over her uninjured shoulder and sat down beside her in the other chair.

“Is this the worst of it?” he asked, referencing her shoulder. He lifted her arm, his fingers cool and careful, his touch sending a hum of energy through her. Some part of her mind insisted she shouldn’t feel like this when they were both wounded, but her gaze fell to his lips anyway.

“Mhm,” she hummed. “I think so.”

He checked her arms and then her legs. Both held a smattering of superficial cuts from crawling through the glass and scrambling through the woods, but her clothing had done a good job protecting her. He touched on earlier injuries, the scrape on her thigh, the scratches at her collarbone, before he ran his fingers gently over the bruises on her throat, his mouth drawing into a grim line. “Tell me you killed the man who did this.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. I just knocked him out.”

He made a low, growling sound, and lifted her chin, gentle despite the angry sentiment. “Can you swallow without pain?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

Gaby rolled her eyes, but swallowed as he asked, paying attention to how it felt this time. There was no pain, and he hummed when she told him so. He released his hold on her chin, and she lowered it, her eyes connecting with his. His fingers traced the line of her jaw for a moment, then he drew away, turning back to the tools on the table.

He lifted the iodine, and she smirked. “Is it going to sting?”

“I am sorry,” he said softly, taking her arm. His fingers could entirely encircle her there, but he held it with such caution, his thumb stroking tenderly. He wiped the disinfectant over the abrasion, and she hissed, looking away so he wouldn’t see the tears that sprung into her eyes. Then he sighed, the sound heavy. “This part is going to be worse.”

She turned to see him lift the tweezers, and they made eye contact for a second, then he lowered his gaze to the task, digging the larger pieces of grit from deep inside her torn skin.

Gaby jerked her head away again, and gritted her teeth against the pain. Little by little, bit by bit, he cleaned the wound, his hand holding her steady, his deep voice attempting to offer comfort. Finally, she heard him set the metal tool aside, and she relaxed her shoulders, released her pent-up breath. Still holding her arm, Illya’s other hand came up to caress the place where her neck joined her shoulder. She felt the heat of his breath, and she twisted to watch his lips brush lightly over her skin, a whisper touch. He kissed the undamaged part of her upper arm, and then the front of her shoulder, and she exhaled sharply at the sensation.
He looked up and found her watching. His eyes were earnest - soft, and tinged with that lingering fear she knew was echoed in her own. She could have lost him, so easily, in so many ways. It wasn’t the first time, it wouldn’t be the last. And, yes, someday he would leave her, neither of them could do anything about that, but right now… Right now, he was here with her and she was here with him.

Gaby closed her eyes and let her head fall forward until it rested against his, and he didn’t pull away. Inhaling slowly, he leaned into the touch, as the air between them seemed to grow thick, dense with all the things they had been holding back. Desire slid down the back of Gaby’s throat, making her tremble. In unison, they tilted their heads, eyebrows pressing together, noses brushing, until their lips were just millimeters apart.

“This is bad idea,” Illya whispered against her mouth, and she breathed it in.

“I know,” she answered.

And then they were kissing, their mouths fusing together in a hot, needful rush.

Illya whimpered into the crush of their lips, and it reverberated across Gaby’s skin, that electric bite of arousal she felt every time they touched, arching over her nerve endings a thousand times greater from the place where their lips met. His kiss was ravenous, and her hand flew up to grasp his cheek, fingertips catching on the growth of his beard as she tried to keep him there. She pressed back into him, lips parted and heart pounding.

His broad hand slid to the back of her head, shifting their angle so he could deepen the kiss. Gaby opened for the stroke of his tongue, her head falling back into his hold, as he licked into her mouth, and she whimpered, her entire body ablaze.

Their lips met and parted, again and again, breaths rushed, kisses growing more and more restless. Gaby felt a desperate surge of lust slice through her, and she flung her uninjured arm over his shoulders, yanking him in tighter, fingers grasping and needy. She returned his kisses, just as hard, just as urgent, biting at his lower lip and taking advantage of his gasp to delve her tongue inside. Illya moaned against it, and pulled her body flush to his, one hand open and spread between her shoulder blades to anchor her. When he finally pulled back, both panting for breath, she slid her fingers into the short hair at the base of his skull and held on.

“Illya,” she said, little more than a moan. She knew it was a risk, a razor’s edge, but she couldn’t hold back anymore. “I want you.”

His exhale was sharp, and she felt his chest flinch where she was held snug against him. He pressed his forehead to her temple, shaking his head, and for a moment she thought he was going to refuse her. Then his voice rumbled over her cheek, and he didn’t move away. Instead, his grip tightened.

“My head… Gaby, I am so tired of thinking,” he said, voice low and strained. “I want you too.”

“Then stop thinking,” she demanded, breathless, turning him so she could look into his eyes. “I am done with wanting you, Illya. I need to have you.”

The sound he made was closer to a sob than anything else, and then he was kissing her again. His arms encircled her as he lifted her from the chair, standing to his feet. Gaby wrapped her legs around him, felt the solid strength of him between her naked thighs and grasped at his head and shoulders as she kissed him back, pushing in to taste him in turn, a urgent cry of her own escaping.

Illya carried her to the bedroom, kisses unrelenting, roaming from her lips to her jaw, brushing whisper-light over the base of her throat as his hands held her firm. Then he stilled and groused,
leaving her lips to look over her shoulder, and she turned to see what had made him stop.

Beast was in the middle of the mattress, fast asleep again. She had checked on him earlier, but seeing him well and safe, here with them, soothed her in a way she hadn’t realized she needed. It wasn’t enough to dull the fire that was burning inside her, however, and she turned back, bringing Illya’s face to hers and kissing him again, using the leverage of her legs around him to lift up, get closer, and kiss him deeper. He growled, squeezing her tight, and spun around, carrying her in long strides to the sofa.

He hissed as he sat, pulling her solidly into his lap, and she drew back, eyes wide with concern. “Your stitches!”

Illya just shook his head and grabbed her, huge hand in her hair, and dragged her down, his mouth closing over hers once more. A hand on her hip brought her in snug against him, and she gasped as she felt the firm length of his arousal pressed to the heat between her thighs. Gaby whimpered at the pleasure of it, rolling herself instinctively into that hardness, and Illya groaned through their kiss, before sliding his hot mouth over her jaw to kiss and bite at the space behind her ear.

She let her head fall back, giving him access to her bruised throat, and he traced cautious fingers over it, following them with light busses of his lips. He ran the tip of his tongue over her collarbone, kissed her scratches, the places the backpack had rubbed her skin raw. Each touch was almost painfully tender, and she tightened her grip on him, her heart tight. The move tugged at the wound in her shoulder, making it burn, but she hardly cared as the blessing of Illya’s touch washed over her.

Illya tipped her backward and mouthed at her chest, his tongue drawing a line along the edge where the towel still covered her. She pushed at his shoulders, leaning into his resistance to force him back, and he looked up at her, his chest heaving as his eyes watched her through those long lashes. She gave him a small, reassuring smile and leaned away, her fingers coming to the precise fold between her breasts and releasing it.

His gaze dropped to her chest as she opened the towel and let it fall, leaving her naked before him. Her breasts cooled in the open air, her nipples peaking under his intent gaze, and he made a sexy, greedy sound, his mouth soft as he took her in. His attention drifted over her breasts and lower, to the dark curls nestled against the bulge hidden by his trousers.

His hands slid down to her thighs, wide thumbs brushing over her skin and gliding upward as he licked at his lower lip. Gaby held her breath, watching the slow advance of those hands in shameless anticipation, but they slipped up over her hips instead, settling at the small of her back. Illya used the leverage to draw her in even closer, his attention returning to her breasts. Gaby cried out as his mouth closed over a nipple, suckling greedily as one hand cupped her other breast, massaging it with strong but gentle fingers. She gasped, clutching at the back of his head, and watching in awe as he sucked her deep into his mouth, rolling her nipple on his tongue.

“Illya,” she whimpered, squirming in his grip, and he looked up at her before ducking back down to kiss the valley between her breasts.

“You are beautiful, Solnyshka,” he murmured. “Perfect.” He moved to her other breast, tugging with lips and tongue until she was mindless, striking her hips into his, seeking friction where she needed it, but it wasn’t enough.

“Please, please…” She pushed her hands down between them to touch him, fingers slipping inside the waist of his trousers and finding the silky head of his cock. His mouth broke from her, choking on a gasp, and she shifted her hips back to give herself access, pulling at the waistband to get to all of him. Her hand closed over his erection, hot and smooth against her palm, and squeezed, watched a
pearl of liquid form at the tip.

“Wait,” he pleaded against her throat, the scratch of facial hair just adding to her overloaded senses.

Gaby closed her eyes, her hand going still. She tilted her head, looking at his face, her breath ragged. “I thought you wanted—”

He brought her close again for a kiss, slow and deep, then drew back. “I do,” he sighed against her lips. He groaned as her hand tightened around him again, stroking upward. “We need… zashchita.” He inhaled and kissed her again, tongue licking into her mouth like he couldn’t resist, like it would somehow steady him.

“Condom,” he finally managed, and a shock of awareness bolted through her. There was a baby in the bed just feet away, but she’d been too lost to her arousal to think of it. She had been taking an oral contraceptive since the beginning of her life as a spy, for control over her cycle if for no other reason, but her last dose was nearly two weeks behind her, the pills deserted in a hotel in Iestrye.

She nodded sharply but didn’t release him. “There were some in the medical kit. On the table.” Even as she spoke, her hand squeezed him, unable to deny herself the buck of his hips, the groan that tore from his throat.

“Fuck.” His nostrils flared, his eyes sliding closed. “Gaby…” He pulled her too him, and his teeth slid over the skin on her uninjured shoulder. She sighed, leaning backward, offering her breasts to him again, and he accepted, taking them into his mouth in turn. She felt his hand glide along her hip, thick, calloused fingers dragging over her skin, and then he was caressing between her legs, his fingers tracing a circle where she was wet and needing him.

Sobbing, she shunted her hips into the press, and he pushed a finger inside her. She seized onto his head, holding it to her chest as he drew that finger out and thrust it in again. A desperate sound escaped her as he continued, steady and persistent, adding a second, broad finger and murmuring into the side of her breast.

His thumb slid over her clit, and she realized she was going to come, the onslaught overtaking her more swiftly than she could ever remember it happening before. Her body was coiling tight like a spring, hot and cold at once as the pleasure built from the thrust of his fingers. She huffed out a sharp, shocked breath, and pulsed her hips onto his hand, matching his rhythm. “Illya! Hnn, oh—oh god,” she voiced, raspy and dry, into the top of his head. “I’m gonna—” her voice cut off with a gasp.

“Yes,” he breathed, the hiss of it hot on her chest. “Yes, Gaby, come, come.” He repeated it, nosing at her skin, fighting the clutch of her hands to get to her breast and suckle more. His mouth closing over her nipple, plus the curl of his fingers inside, had her flying over the edge, her body jerking in his embrace and he moaned his delight. “Velikolepnyy,” he rumbled. “Bezuprechnyy…”

The climax rippled beneath her skin, carrying on for several long, heated moments, and she lost herself to everything else but that pleasure, and the tight syllables of his name in her mouth as she repeated them, over and over. Then she cried out, startled, as Illya stood swiftly to his feet again, taking her with him. The rush of being lifted swooped in, joining the vestiges of her orgasm to make her dizzy. She collapsed against him, boneless and flushed, and he wrapped an arm beneath to support her.

He grabbed the condoms off the table before carrying her right back to the sofa, and she pulled herself together long enough to cup his cheeks, making him look at her. “Put me down first. You’ll hurt yourself.”
His grip on her tightened, and she could feel that trepidation too, an echo in her bones. She didn’t want to separate from him either, but she also didn’t want to redo the stitches she’d put into his skin. He tugged her in for a deep, voracious kiss and then relented, setting her on her feet. Her thighs shook, muscles relaxed and empty from the orgasm. He held her against his body for a moment longer, keeping her steady, his broad hand caressing down the line of her back to her buttocks.

Gaby’s hand on his chest descended on its own path, tracing over a smattering of scars, his abdomen, and the line of his hip. She pushed his trousers to the floor and glided her fingers up one of his muscled thighs to the heavy weight of him between his legs. She cupped him, then dragged a hand over his erection, circling a thumb over the wet tip. He closed his eyes, a rough gasp escaping him, before he made himself step away, kicking his trousers from around his ankles. Gaby hung back, her eyes drinking him in, greedy for the sight of him like this, naked and aroused.

Settling into his seat again, Illya took her hand, pulling her after him. She stepped forward and straddled his knees, waiting as he opened one of the condoms, tossing the others aside. Gaby collected it from him and watched him swallow as she took his erection in hand. She stroked him twice, more than pleased with the size of him, and absorbed the half-desperate sound he uttered. Then she placed the condom on his tip and slid it down over the length of his cock. She followed that with several more passes of her hand, taking the measure of him with her fingers. Her gaze lifted, blinking slowly as she looked from his cock to his face, dark eyes full of everything she wanted, and he reached for her, hands over her hips to pull her in.

“Blizhe,” he said, a deep rumble of sound that moved through her like thunder. Gaby closed her eyes as he dragged her into place against him, their bodies pressed tightly together.

“Da,” she gasped, “Blizhe,” and closed her mouth over his, tasting him again and wondering if she would ever tire of it. Her hands cupped his cheeks, scratching at the lengthy stubble, as she raised up on her knees to get the angle she wanted, kissing him deeply, sliding her tongue over his in hungry strokes. His hands slid into her hair, holding her to him as he kissed her back.

When she couldn’t wait any longer, she drew away, running a hand down his torso and taking him in hand again, positioning him between her legs where she was more than ready. Illya’s palms raced down her back, tracing over her ribs to her hips. He gasped as the head of his cock brushed her entrance, but his grip restrained her when she would have sunk down, and she looked up, questioning, into his eyes.

“Are you ever going to trust me?” His voice dragged over his throat, and the worry behind the question was palpable. All that deeply brewed insecurity, that she knew he struggled with, a crackle of tension in the air between them. Gaby brushed the hair back from his forehead, then skated her hand down to hold his face, keep him looking at her.

“Are you ever going to trust me?” she admonished, and his eyes widened. His mouth opened to respond, but she stopped him with a tender kiss. “Yes, Illya,” she said, ghosting the words over his lips. “I want this. I want you.” She felt a burst of nerves and leaned back, looking into his eyes again. “You… want me?”

“Yes.” His body had been tense, holding his breath, but it relaxed in her grip as he exhaled. “Yes, I —” His mouth closed on the words, and he seemed to wrestle with himself, his eyes scanning her face like he would memorize her. “It is… it is more,” he said then, hands moving up to her waist and holding her snug and sure. “But yes, I want you.”

She pressed her forehead to his, closing her eyes against the intensity in his gaze. Of course, it was more, didn’t they both know that already? Reaching between them, Gaby traced her fingers over his
cock, listening to the catch of his breath at her touch. She set him at her entrance again, and then leaned back just enough to see his face as she took him inside her. This time, neither of them hesitated.

Gaby choked on a sob of gratification as the hard breadth of him bore her open, filling her up, making her complete in a way she had never even imagined existed. Illya moaned, jaw tight but eyes on hers, and lifted her, shifting their position. When he let her down again, it was a perfect, aching slide, and then he was completely inside her.

They stayed like that, breathing hard, lost in the moment of joining, this exquisite culmination of everything they were, everything they had been. Every word, every look, every act of their partnership, leading up to this moment, binding them together and making them One.

Gaby’s heart twisted in her chest as she accepted the truth of it, the rightness. This was always meant to happen, the two of them together, and for that moment, she put aside the impossibility, the cruelty of the design. That this man, of all the men on earth, was the one so meant for her, and yet… she would never get to keep him. She clutched the side of his face and kissed him, this time with something more than hunger, whimpering quietly as she fought the sting behind her eyes.

Then she was moving. They were moving. Together. Hips and bodies shifting in unison, a sweet rhythm that had fire streaking down her spine. She watched Illya’s face contort with pleasure and revealed in it. A long-held secret wish, to see him like this, that went back farther than she wanted to admit. First, because of the feeling of power it would have given her, now - because she wanted it for him, because he deserved it, because she loved him.

It was a stupid stupid thing to do, but God she loved him.

She watched his mouth fall open on a shuddering gasp, and felt the echo of that bliss in her own body. She indulged in the roll of her hips on to his, in his large hands moving with her, pulling her down as he pushed up into that last inch to complete the thrust. The most wanton, dirty sounds escaped her, dragged from her throat, falling from her lips, and she couldn’t stop them. She could only hold onto Illya, gripping his shoulders, fingertips digging into taut, flexing muscle, gasping at the feel of him, the rising tide of pleasure in her own body. He tipped her back so he could get to her breasts again, assailing her with the heat of his mouth, biting gently at a nipple.

“Illya!” It was a desperate cry, and he yanked her closer, kissing her hard, his lips going sloppy, his breathing harsh. She took it in as her own, staying so close, mouths barely parted and sharing breath. Her body shook as he continued to drive upward, spreading his thighs to bring her deeper, sinking his cock into her again and again.

She whimpered, clinging to him as the white-hot rush rose up inside her. She could hear the sumptuous, wet sound of them joining and parting, and her belly clenched, a flash of lust jolting through her core. Illya groaned as the sensation passed to him, and Gaby had to close her eyes, totally lost to the immense, bright ecstasy. She slid her hands into his hair, gripping the top where it was longer and holding him as she leaned back, striving into that feeling at a new angle.

Illya’s blue eyes stared up at her, wide and earnest. He said her name, breathed it out in a litany, an invocation, as if it were his anchor in the storm. She saw it in him then, everything he felt for her, everything he hoped for beyond this moment—beyond the sex, the pleasure—and it arced through her like lightning, striking her heart.

She held his gaze, fingers fanned out over his cheek. Her false wedding ring caught the dim light, and she dragged in a shaking breath. “Me too,” she exhaled. It was the closest she could get to that confession. “Illya, me too.”
His body trembled under hers, and then he was pushing a hand between them, the pad of his thumb brushing over her clit again, and she shouted, her head falling back as the orgasm that had been approaching her from a distance suddenly rushed forward, tingling up through her hips, flowing out from the place where they were joined. Pressure filled her body, her skin fevered with the need to release.

“Ohgod—” She bucked against him, and his other hand snapped up to hold her in place as the climax moved through her, slow at first, almost a tease, then surged to a crushing onslaught of pleasure that swelled and pulsed until, finally, it yanked her under, and she came, shouting his name again, thrashing in his grip as it drummed through her, beat after glorious beat.

Illya growled, then he was lifting her up again, changing positions, and she clung to him, still lost in the climax, her hands grasping at his shoulders. She felt the plush cushions of the sofa against her back as he laid her out beneath him. His hand spread wide at the small of her back, over the dimples above her ass, and lifted her up to him. Her thighs slung over his, as one of his feet hit the floor, the opposite knee digging into the pillows. He bowed over her, thrusting deep, snapping his hips in a quick, sharp rhythm that had her crying out, reigniting the tail end of her orgasm into something hot and lush.

Five, six thrusts and he was holding her to him as he shook, and groaned out his release. Gaby arched up, trying to see his face but taking in the taut line of his throat instead, tendons standing out in relief against his pale flesh. She cried out as if his pleasure were her own, and dragged her hands down his sides to press up into the curve of his body.

Illya saved her from the full brunt of his weight, catching it on his elbows as he collapsed, panting into the cushions above her head. Gaby kissed his chest, wrapping her arms tight around his torso before remembering his stitches. They stayed like that for a few moments, Illya’s chest heaving above her, before he moved down, sliding from her body, making her hum sadly at the loss. He grabbed his trousers from the floor and used them to deal with the condom without leaving, then he gingerly settled himself in beside her, between her body and the sofa back. His lips brushed her shoulder, then the corner of her jaw before he finally lifted up to look her in the eye, self-conscious and a little wary.

Gaby took his face in her hands and pulled him in for a lingering kiss. “Hey,” she said when they parted, a smile dimpling her cheek. It broke the rising tension, and he relaxed against her.

“Hey,” he returned, still shy but no longer wary, his eyes on her lips. Gaby chuckled, and he glanced up, nervous. “What?”

She shook her head, a thumb caressing the line of his bristled chin. “I’m wishing we hadn’t waited so long to do that,” she confessed. “We could have had that all this time?”

He huffed out a small laugh and kissed her. His lips were soft, gentle, his tongue giving a quick touch to hers. “Maybe it would not have been the same,” he hummed into her cheek.

“You think it was the anticipation?” she asked. “Are you saying next time will be mediocre now that we’ve burned away all that tension?”

Illya looked at her cautiously. “Next time?”

She shoved a hand into his hair, mussing it more. “You don’t think I’m going to stop now, do you?”

“I—don’t know,” he returned, remaining serious. “Things are complicated.”
Gaby lifted her chin. “You think I don’t know that? I know that, Illya, I—”

“You don’t care?” He sounded skeptical.

“I want to have what we can now,” she explained, then swallowed. “Have what we can have, while we can have it.”

His eyes were sad. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, voice heavy with regret. “When I… when they—” Gaby touched her fingers to his lips, cutting him off.

“I think we both know it’s too late to save each other from that pain,” she whispered, and he dropped his head to her chest. One of his hands slid up over her thigh, her hip, settling at her back to pull her a little closer.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m…” Gaby paused, the words echoing in her mind before she’d even said them. They were true, as much as they stung and sliced at the vulnerable parts of her heart, they were true. “I’m not.”

He lifted his head in surprise, and studied her with a frown of concern. She couldn’t say anything else, couldn’t voice the words that would make him understand. They would only be slivers in the wound. So, instead, she pulled him in and pressed them into his skin with her kiss.

Chapter End Notes

To say I’m nervous over here would be an understatement. Seven months and 24 chapters…. Guys, I only hope and pray that this moment lived up to the hype. lol Please don’t leave me hanging! <3<3
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Pillow talk, pride and playing detective.

Chapter Notes

Hello my fiends! I hope this update finds you well.

Quick business! My lovely, amazing, wonderful, hard working beta, diadema, is in the throes of getting her Master's Degree, and that means, 100% understandably, that she does not have time to go over my stuff. She has looked at everything at least once but, unless I take another hiatus, (which I really don't want to do,) I'm going to have to do the best I can on my own going forward. So, please forgive any crazy errors, overly repeated words and/or themes!

Now, enough boring author notes!

Illya was stretched out on the sofa, one foot on the floor, the other on the armrest. His frame was far too long for the piece of furniture, but at the moment, he didn’t mind. Gaby lay on his chest, her hips between his thighs, both of them still naked. She was drawing circles on his skin with graceful fingers, and he felt so contented it scared him. This was too good… he was too happy. It couldn’t possibly last.

“You're thinking again,” Gaby sang from beneath his chin, and he huffed out a surprised laugh.

“Am I to stop forever?” he inquired, latching onto the distraction. Something to keep him from his pessimistic thoughts. “I will never accomplish anything.”

“Really?” She pushed up. “I think you accomplished plenty when you weren’t thinking.” She punctuated the statement with a slow drag of her eyes down his body so he couldn’t mistake her meaning. He felt himself flush hot, pride and embarrassment mixing with the renewal of desire that was already hinting at his edges.

“Gaby,” was all he managed to say as a response. She smirked, and pushed his hair off his forehead, dragging her fingers through it.

“I like you like this,” she reflected.

“And how is that?” His voice rumbled low, his gaze falling to her lips.
Her smirk widened into a grin. “Wrecked.”

He hummed, quiet and low. “Because you wrecked me.”

“Mmmhm,” she agreed, with a slow, exaggerated nod, then kissed him. Her mouth was warm, and the tender press stirred the wild, foolish, wanting thing in his chest. When she pulled back her face was serious, her eyes gazing into his intently. “You wreck me too.”

He pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear, his heart in his throat. What could he say? He knew what he wanted to say, but he had already made the mistake once of blurt it out in the heat of the moment, almost done it again earlier, when they had been joined together so intimately. He had craved her that way for so long, but he wanted her to know, needed her to know, this was more than just sexual desire… so he wouldn’t say the words flippantly again. The next time he told her he loved her, it would be in a way she couldn’t doubt it was true.

She laid her head back on his chest, her cheek pressed over his heart, and he wrapped his arms more snugly around her, nosing at the top of her head, breathing her in.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, and he felt a flood of panic wash over him. “About the mission, I mean.” She waved a finger between them. “Not this.”

“Oh.” He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed by the reprieve. “I am not sure yet,” he answered truthfully. “We will need to come up with a plan.” She hummed, and he rubbed a hand over her back, careful to avoid the abrasion on her shoulder. “Did you come in clean?”

“Yes,” she said. “I triple checked my path. I wasn’t followed. But I’m not sure that matters. They keep finding us anyway.”

“No, not without help,” he offered. “The hops farmer, the man in the barn.”

“You think they reported us?”

“I think they mentioned us to someone.” Illya exhaled slowly, thinking back. “And that your instincts were right about THRUSH having a stronger network here.” He hugged her to him, pangs of regret and self-admonishment rising up. “We should have stayed in the cottage by the gulf. They would have thought we were dead, and then perhaps your Frenchman would have found us.”

Gaby shook her head. “No.” She lifted up, crossing her arms on his chest to support herself as she faced him. “They would have looked for us along the coast, just to be sure.” Her mouth pulled in to a grim line. “They would have found us before my message even got through.”

“Are you disappointed he has not come?” he asked, hating himself for it, for the jealousy that roiled inside him at the thought.

“A little.”

He tensed at her words. A knowing smile teased at the corner of her lips, then she shook her head, and had mercy on him.

“I didn’t ask René to come rescue us.” She shoved at his chest. “You... durak,” she scolded, using his own language against him. It stung, even as it flooded him with affection for her.

“But you—”

“We couldn’t contact Waverly, anything going to the US or the UK was sure to be flagged.”
He nodded his agreement.

“But who’s going to be watching René?” she asked. “I told him to get Solo.”

“You sent for Cowboy?”

“I asked René to fetch him for me.” She gave a little shrug, a proud smirk, and he pulled her into a hard kiss, only half ashamed of his relief.

Gaby kissed him back readily, but shook her head again when she pulled away. “I can’t believe you are still jealous.”

He opened his mouth to deny it, then thought better of the lie. They were talking now, as she had said at the safe house. “He *flirts* with you, without shame.”

“So?”

“He,” he swallowed. “Touches your knee; says outrageous things. *Inappropriate* things.”

“They are just *words*, Illya.”

He let out a shaky breath. “You seem to enjoy it.”

“What woman wouldn’t enjoy such attention? It doesn’t *mean* anything.”

“I cannot…” He hesitated, the hand on her back flexing. “I cannot give you that,” he explained. “I am not that man.”

Gaby looked deftly into his eyes. “*Illya*, René is fun, and most importantly, *useful,*” she stressed the last word, then shifted between his thighs, rubbing her body against him. “But *you* are the one I am lying naked with right now.”

He felt himself tremble, and his hands slid down her back to rest just above the curve of her bottom. He knew he didn’t have the right to ask this, but he needed to know. “And you have never…?”

“With René?” She scoffed, giving him another of her reproving looks. “*No.*” She rose up, one of her legs moving to slide over his hip and his hand fell to her upper thigh, just under the crease of her flank. “Not with him, or anyone else since I left East Berlin.” She took a breath, and paused, her eyes darting away and back again before holding his steadily. “What about you?”

He stared at her in surprise. “*No.*” He shook his head. “Not since before… no one.”

She settled back onto his chest, and her breasts felt divine against him. “Good, then we are equal.”

“I have not wanted anyone but you for a very long time, *Solnyshka,*” he murmured into her hair, and felt her smile.

“Same for me.”

Illya felt the rush of that confession. He had *known*, he realized. He hadn’t been certain he could *believe* it, but he had known. Now, the *reality* of it, her words, the openness between them, the emotional release… all of this, along with the sweet press of her body on his, had him going hard in the hollow of her hip.

“Oh.” Gaby shifted against the line of his erection, and it made him feel hot. “I wasn’t expecting that so soon.”
He ran a hand up her thigh, and over the curve of her ass, then down between, where she was warm and slick. A little gasp escaped her lips as he touched her there. “As you said.” He could not hold back the smile tugging at his lips. “You are quite naked.”

“I am,” she returned, sounding breathless, and he loved that he did that to her, that he was allowed to do that to her, and enjoy it freely. “What will you do with me?”

“Well,” he rumbled, fingers teasing gently, drawing out another soft, feminine sound. “I will start with this…” He kissed her on the mouth and tasted her lips with his tongue. “And then…” he pressed his fingers deeper, sliding one inside her, and she whined.

“Illya.”

“Mmmm.” He felt her close over his finger, so hot, tight. His cock grew harder, his blood racing, as his mind began thinking of all the things he wanted to do to her. She mewled against his throat, her fingertips dimpling his skin as his fingers stroked into her.

He was just sorting out how to maneuver her into position over his mouth, wanting to taste her, when a very different sort of cry shattered the air, and for a second, he was confused. Gaby made a sharp sound of disappointment as he removed his finger, both of them dazed with lust.

“The baby,” he realized, as some blood finally returned to his brain. He started to get up, but Gaby stopped him, patting his chest gently.

“I will go,” she said, sliding off him. He hated it instantly, but released her, hands gliding lightly over her skin as she stood to her feet. She walked toward the bedroom, stark naked in the blue of the emergency light, then glanced over her shoulder to see him watching her. He almost looked away, but thought better of it, holding on to all they had just shared, and letting his gaze slide up her incredible legs to the sweet curve of her ass. It was one view of her he had not yet gotten to enjoy.

She pulled a shirt from the bag on her way, and he groaned in disappointment as she slipped it over her head.

Gaby laughed. “I know he’s just a baby…” she shrugged, “But still.”

Pushing himself up to a sitting position, cautious of the way his stitches pulled, he ran a hand through his hair and stared, entranced, as Gaby scooped up the bawling child. Beast’s cries stopped, and she pulled him to her shoulder, kissing the side of his head.

Illya felt his stomach twist, his heart falling to his feet at the sight. Here was Gaby as a mother. Half-dressed and rumpled, cradling an infant in the moonlight. It mocked him, a glimpse from that impossible future, his nonsensical dream. It ached so badly, he had to look away.

“We are friends now,” she announced, and he could hear the pride there. “Aren’t we, Schatz.” He lifted his eyes again to watch her bounce the infant gently in her arms, her hand smoothing circles on his back. Something had certainly changed between them, he noted, as the baby remained quietly content on her shoulder.

“I am very happy about that.” He stood to his feet and joined her at the stolen duffel bag.

“I see nappies,” she said, moving things around. “Is the formula in the kitchen?”

“Yes, I fed him when we arrived.”

“Will we have enough?” She looked over at him with the question, then down his body. A quick glance, followed by a slow, intent perusal that had a wild mix of emotions flooding through his
Gaby smirked, and turned her attention back to Beast. She laid him down and began changing him like it was second nature to her.

Illya pulled out a clean pair of trousers, a utilitarian twill in dark blue, and a pair of boxers, pulling the latter on first. "Probably not," he said, answering her question. He fastened his fly, tucking himself away carefully in hopes it would help calm his libido. "I think we are safe here, for now, but going into town is a risk. Being seen at all is a risk." His fingers curled into a fist.

"We’ll think of something." Gaby laid a hand on his chest. It was warm, and the weight of it eased the edge of foreboding that had begun building inside of him the moment she’d left him on the sofa, the moment her skin had parted from his. Relaxing his fist, he laid his hand over hers and held it there, where his heart was beating. She blinked her eyes closed, then looked up at him with a soft smile.

"Yes," he agreed, bringing her hand up to kiss her palm. "We will. We always do."

... 

The voice on the other end of the line had all but faded to white noise. Solo stared out the window of his hired room, taking in the rustic, Italian countryside while Sanders railed on in his ear.

"CIA equipment was found at the scene!" his handler was shouting, and Solo imagined the veins on his forehead standing out against his skull, his face tinged red. It wasn’t often that Sanders completely lost his cool, but Solo had driven him to it a time or two. This, however, was not his doing, though the man seemed determined to think otherwise. "And you’re telling me you had nothing to do with it?"

“I’m sorry? What exactly are you accusing me of?”

“The safe house in Northern Italy,” Sanders bit out in a way that told Solo it wasn’t the first time.

“We have a safe house in Northern Italy?”

The growl he got in return for that was very satisfying. He frowned at the notes he’d taken, and tapped his pen on the tabletop.

A now familiar knock sounded from the room’s door. It swung open, and he glanced up to see René sauntering in, a newspaper held aloft in his hand. He looked as though he had just rolled out of bed, but Solo wasn’t fooled.

His own hair was perfectly coiffed, his suit freshly pressed, and he ran a hand over his shirt front as he cut off his handler mid-rant. "I’m sorry, sir, but I’m afraid I have to go. Some information pertinent to this enigma has just come up. I’ll give you a full debrief when I’m back in the states.” With that he hung up, the man’s voice filling the room until the moment the receiver settled into the cradle.

“Your leash holder I assume?” René asked, and Solo just avoided closing his eyes in exasperation. Lovely, another one.
“I’m feeling rather proud right now,” he proclaimed instead. “Don’t ruin it for me.”

René frowned at the unexpected words. “Why is that?”

“One of my pupils has successfully broken into a CIA safe-house. Those locks are no joke.”

“You know where our two little pigeons are then?”

Solo smiled, the image of Illya as a "little pigeon" more than enough to cheer him, despite the bad news. “No. I’m afraid, once again, I only know where they have been.”

“Kuryakin found one of your safe-houses?”

“Honestly, if I wasn’t worried about the damage it might do to UNCLE relations, I’d try to inform Langley that they have a significant leak. Peril knows too much, and he didn’t get the information from me.”

“They are likely armed then, probably fed as well,” René mused.

This was a concern Solo had not voiced aloud. Illya and Gaby were both resourceful, both survivors, but after the barn incident outside Veneto, they’d dropped out of the world. They hadn’t been seen in towns. No one had reported any theft, food or otherwise. Then there had been that cottage. He remembered the bag of supplies left behind in the dirt, the small pair of UNCLE issued boots in the bathroom. Gaby was down her weapons, and Peril, even the prepared machine he was capable of being, could only have so much ammo left. So the safe house was, in his opinion, an acceptable sacrifice, not that he had all that much loyalty to the CIA side of things.

What worried him most, was that THRUSH kept finding them, while he was left trailing after like a lost child, always several steps behind.

“Yes, my boss was just giving me a dressing down about that,” he offered to René. "Our weapons were found… somewhere.” He picked up his notes. “I always find it difficult to listen to the man.”

“Well.” René held up the paper. “I think I can put these two things together for you.”

Solo took in the heading on the front page.

_Gunfight at Local Train Yard has Police Baffled._ It read in Italian.

He gave a shake of his head. _Crime scene_, Sanders had said. “Who else could _that_ be?” He grabbed his pistol from the table and slid it into his holster, then his notepad into the inner pocket of his jacket. “Let’s go have a look, shall we?”

…

There was a small, yellow flag stuck in the ground through the trigger guard of a Browning High Power. It was laying in the mud next to a body with a knife through the chest. Solo checked the face against the handful of THRUSH agents he had seen, and then stood to his feet. It was a random thug, no one he recognized.

“This is some impressive damage,” René observed, strolling up in a pilfered police uniform. “Which of them would have set up the bombs?”
Solo’s smile was subtle, and he turned it into a smirk before acknowledging the man. “That would be Peril. He’s the strategist, though, usually, his plans have a little more nuance, and a lot less… flair.” He raised an eyebrow as he turned back to the body with the knife and added, almost under his breath, “Unless there’s a boat involved.”

“Oh…” René perused the scene, his lower lip jutting out, impressed. “Well, I would say this has plenty of flair.”

“Of course, you would like the bombs.”

René’s return smile was rather shark-like, in Solo’s opinion. “You know me so well.” There was a sigh, and he set a hand over his flat belly. “If only they had been purchased from me!” he lamented, and peered back at Solo from the corner of his eye. “Perhaps we should go have a look at this safe-house. Just for clues, you understand.”

Solo shook his head and walked away. “They mentioned that a locomotive had been stolen,” he said over his shoulder, making his way down the tracks. He was dressed as a railroad employee, coveralls over his suit, cap pulled low.

“They stole a train?” René called back. “How dramatic.”

Joining the crowd, they hopped onto a cart, which carried them down the tracks for several miles, to where the locomotive had been found. The old, diesel engine had jumped the tracks on a tight corner, going full speed, leaving behind a path of destruction - churned soil, splintered trees - leading to the place where it had finally come to rest.

There were any number of people milling about, some investigating the area, others just taking in the spectacle. Solo and René tried to blend in, pretending they belonged there, an officer being shown around by an employee. The Frenchman was the one to point out the blood on the railing, the dots of it along the metal floor. Solo looked grim, but held back the worry that tried to distract him. It wasn’t a large amount of blood, and there was always a chance it wasn’t even theirs, though the size fifteen boot print that tracked through it hinted otherwise. He stepped down from the side lying locomotive, and gazed back along the tracks.

Peril wasn’t the type to accidentally wreck a train. Gaby on the other hand… well, he wouldn’t put it past her to think she could take the corner faster than she should. And he wouldn’t have put it past either of them to wreck it on purpose, jumping off earlier and leaving the train to run on without them in order to better cover their exit point.

Which meant they could have bailed out anywhere between this place and the train yard… a very large search zone. Good for them, bad for THRUSH, and not so great for Solo.

“Any ideas?” Rene asked, coming to stand beside him.

Solo took another survey of the people surrounding them. A few of them stood apart from the others, their stature and mien hinting at a different purpose to their presence. The bulge of weapons was barely concealed beneath their coveralls.

“Well, at least we can be fairly certain they weren’t captured.” He set his jaw, biting back on his frustration as he tossed his cap into the trees.

Once again, he was left behind waiting for second-hand news.
Once again, Illya found himself watching Gaby sleep. It was definitely a pastime he could grow accustomed to. What did that say about him? Probably something he didn't want to know. He could hear the shrink in Moscow commenting on his perversion, his twisted mind. Always bringing up Illya’s mother, the croak of the man's voice alluding to some darker intention that Illya had somehow never known about himself.

The thought made him turn away from Gaby’s face, so at peace and vulnerable.

"Why do you think you responded that way?"

Dr. Poole's words rang out in his mind. They felt so tangible, that he looked up sharply as if, somehow, she was in the same room with them. She wasn't, of course. He was still in the cottage in Italy, still curled up on the bed with Gaby across from him, Beast asleep between.

The baby slept on his back, and Illya traced a finger over his tiny fists, then down to Gaby's hand resting on the infant’s belly. As though, even in her sleep, she needed to know he was there and safe. Illya lifted his gaze, giving in to his need to see her face.

Why did he think he responded that way? Why did he think he couldn't take his eyes off of her, asleep or otherwise? Because she was the most beautiful thing he had ever known, more precious to him than anything he had ever held.

And he was hopelessly, madly in love with her.

He was dreaming again. Thinking of that impossible morning where Gaby was his - his woman, his wife… That future could never be. So many things made it impossible, but right now? Well, he had right now.

Holding his breath, he slid from beneath the covers. He scooped Beast up, carefully dislodging
Gaby's hand, and moved him to the drawer they had set up for him. Safer to leave him alone in than the middle of the bed. Illya covered him gently with the corner of the blanket, and crawled back onto the mattress. He drew back the bedspread, revealing Gaby's body to the daylight, still dressed in one of the button ups they had stolen from the CIA.

The idea hadn't lost its thrill. *Stolen from the CIA.* It filled him with a certain smugness, pride, but those feelings were overshadowed by the sight of the woman he loved, stretching out onto her back as he moved to hover over her.

She made a humming sound in the back of her throat, and Illya ducked down to where the shirt had opened, revealing the swell of one breast. He kissed her there - a long, tender kiss - before using a finger to gently tug the material aside and gain better access.

Gaby's hand slid into his hair as he exposed her breast, her fingers warm and sleep-slow. Her nipple was a pinkish-brown in the light filtering in around the shutters, and he watched it pucker in the cooler air before closing his mouth over it. Her skin was salty on his tongue, and her fingers tightened in his hair as he sucked at the small peak. Gaby moaned, and her other hand joined the first, gliding over his neck and down to his shoulder.

"Illya?" she asked, and he grunted into her skin. As if someone else would be making love to her? "Oh god, I thought I was dreaming," she mumbled, and arched up into him.

"You are dreaming," he told her, letting a hand drift down over her hip, over her thigh to soft skin, then back up again, pushing her shirt out of the way as he slid his body down. "We both are."

"Where's Beast?" She grew breathless as he kissed the hollow of her hip, hooking an arm under her knee to pull her leg aside and open her up to him. He hummed at the view of her sex, gold-pink, and shining. *God,* he had dreamed of this… too many times. He kissed the inside of her thigh, and tasted the skin there with the tip of his tongue. "Illya?"

"Hmm?"

She inhaled. "The baby?"

*Oh right.*

"He is in his drawer," he answered. "Asleep." His kisses drifted upward slowly, the growth of beard on his cheek and chin brushing against her. "If you are very quiet, maybe he will stay that way."

Her hand hadn't left his head, and she scratched at his scalp. She was watching him now, sloe-eyed, knowing. "Are you sure that's what you want?" She huffed as he blew a slow breath over her folds. She was *perfect.* He already felt intoxicated on the scent of her. "You want me quiet?" she asked, her voice a hoarse tease, and he groaned. *No.* No, he did *not* want that, but if he was going to get to finish this task, she would have to be.

"Beggars cannot be choosers." He curled his arms beneath her thighs and pulled them open further. The movement tugged at his stitches, but not enough to tear, so he ignored the sting, and nuzzled into her curls.

"Oh my god, Illya!" she groaned, cutting off on the end to control her volume.

"What I want," he continued, voice a deep rumble. "Is to taste you." He dragged the tip of his nose over the pink bud of her clitoris, making her gasp. "If you are loud we will have to stop." With that, he ran the flat of his tongue over her, and she bucked up, forcing him to adjust, and use his weight, the breadth of his shoulders to restrain her.
Sinking in again, Illya teased her with his tongue, groaning at his first taste of her. Gaby cried out, and bit down on the heel of her hand as he pushed his tongue inside her. The taste of her filled his mouth and he moaned. It was so much better than he had imagined. Her low whimper, the roll of her hips had him rock hard, and he tugged her a bit closer, going deeper. She sobbed, seizing his hair.

He took his time, testing her, learning her - her flavor, her signals, what made her whine, what made her want to shout - he needed to know it all. He had spent so many nights fantasizing about this, not just of having her, but of giving her pleasure, how she would sound, how she would respond, and now he was here, and it was more than his imagination could ever have conjured.

"Illya," she gasped. "Illya, yes... Oh, fuck, more..."

His whole body pulsed with sharp, needy arousal at her demand and he took her ass in his hands, held her to him, rumbling into her greedily as he worked. He knew this couldn’t last, that this was all just another kind of fantasy, but for now, he would pretend. Pretend she was his and he was hers. Pretend that they could have this forever.

...

Sometime later, they set up in the kitchen, Gaby's hair a mess and Illya still wearing only trousers. Gaby cradled Beast in the crook of her arm, feeding him while Illya reheated some beans on the stove.

"There is quite a lot of food here for an empty house," Gaby reflected. "Do you think the owners could be back anytime?"

Illya stopped mid-stir and closed his eyes. "I do not think we need to worry about that." It wasn't that he didn’t want her to know, but it was a long story, full of secrets he had never thought he would reveal. Hopeless plans that might never come to pass.

"How did you know about this place?" There was an odd note to her voice when she added, "Is it a KGB Safe-house?"

He turned to check her expression, remembering her last reaction to one of his agency’s hideouts. "No." He sighed, this was going to be complicated. "Thi—"

A knock at the front door interrupted him, and they both went very still. Illya quickly switched off the stove and snatched up his pistol from the counter, moving out to the living room. Gaby adjusted the bottle in Beast's mouth, holding it with her chin, and grabbed the second gun, moving to wait in the doorway.

"I doubt THRUSH is going to knock," she whispered harshly.

"They have tried everything else," he offered with a quick glance back at her.

Her response was to roll her eyes, but a smile hid at the corner of her lips.

Illya slid up with his back to the wall, and peered out through the crack in the shutters. An elderly woman stood on the stone laid front entrance. She had a basket of cleaning supplies and Illya recognized her immediately.
"It is the caretaker," he whispered, hurrying back toward the kitchen.

Gaby looked at him with a mix of concern and questions.

"Is all right," he said, holding up his hands. "But I need the shirt."

"What?" Her face scrunch up in confusion, and he found it far too endearing. She was cute when she was befuddled. He didn't see her that way very often.

"Do you trust me?" he asked softly.

She narrowed her eyes at him, her jaw working at a more biting response, but then she took a small breath. More knocking rang through the small house. "You know I do."

It had not been a test, but somehow her answer acted like a balm, soothing over him, inside and out, and his shoulders relaxed. "Then I need the shirt. I cannot go to the door like this." He gestured to his bare chest.

Gaby raised an eyebrow. "And what am I supposed to wear?" she demanded. "You do remember I am completely naked under here?"

He swallowed, tracing his eyes over her. "Da." The word rolled out, rough and deep, but he didn't have time to be distracted by her. They needed to hurry, before the woman went away and mentioned not being able to get into the house. "But I need you to take Beast and hide."

"Are you serious?" She had already started unbuttoning the front of the shirt, Beast wiggling in one arm as he tried to lean around to see Illya.

"They are looking for us," he said. "Man." He pointed to his chest, then her and Beast. "Woman, child. I do not believe she means us harm, but if she mentions me to anyone, I want it to be a man alone."

Gaby nodded, and handed Beast over to him so she could hurry. He held the baby up, and looked into his brown eyes. They were alert, bright and he gave Illya a baby smile with milk drool dripping from the corner of his mouth. Illya kissed his forehead, and traded him back with Gaby for the shirt as a third round of knocks sounded.

"One moment!" he called out, and glanced up from his buttons to Gaby, stark naked in the kitchen, and felt his stomach clench, his arousal stir. She smirked at him, like she knew the exact reaction she had caused, then padded off on bare feet to the back room where the pantry and washing machine were kept.

When she was out of sight, and most of his buttons were done, he hurried to the door and pulled it open in a rush.

"Oh!" the woman startled and took a step back. "Signore Amosov! I wasn't expecting you."

"Signora Gervasoni," he greeted, giving her a soft smile. "It is good to see you again. I apologize for not informing you of my intent to visit," he rushed out. "It was a last minute decision and I came in very late."

She flapped a worried hand at him. "I would have had it ready for you," she lamented. "Stocked the refrigerator and cupboards. Had a meal waiting!" She pressed inside, right past his tall frame and, despite very much not wanting her there, he couldn't help but smile at her fussing.
"It is all right," he assured her. "Is not your fault. You have done a fine job with the house. I am very pleased."

She preened at his words, and held up a cloth. "Do you want me to do the dusting?"

"Thank you, but no, I have much work to do and need solitude." He scratched the back of his head, then darted a look back toward the kitchen. "Perhaps you could run into town for some food items though? It would save me some time." And he or Gaby from being seen.

"Of course!" she exclaimed, waving her hand again. "Make me a quick list and I will send my boys into the village for it."

"Thank you." He grabbed a piece of paper from the front of the duffle bag, and several bills of the Italian cash they’d made sure to take. He handed her the list a moment later, and waited as she read it over. She frowned, pointing to the infant formula. He flicked his eyes away, letting his nerves show through as embarrassment, gave an awkward shrug. "I was out of milk for my coffee once, and now I like the taste." He grimaced. That was a terrible excuse, but Beast needed real food. The version he made worked in a pinch, but it was not good for the long term.

She chuckled at him. "Who am I to judge?" Patting his arm, she tucked the list into her apron pocket. "My daughter has some for her children - just in case. I will bring it to you so the boys won't have to fetch it, and your secret will be safe with me."

Illya donned a sheepish expression as immense relief flooded his veins. At this point, he feared any purchases for the infant would draw THRUSH right to them. "Grazie."

She patted his arm and moved to leave. A mewl from Beast echoed from the back of the house and she stopped, turning back with a frown. "What was that?"

Illya felt a chill run through him. "I think there is a cat. I heard him last night as well."

She frowned. "I hope there is not a mouse! I promise I have kept the place very clean."

"I can see that you have," he assured her. "If there is a mouse, the cat will take care of it."

"I suppose that is true," she remarked as she walked out the door. "I'll send the boys with the supplies later this afternoon."

"There is no rush. Tell them to leave them at the door, I will be working."

"A businessman." She nodded as if this was only right. "Always working, even on his vacation."

Illya allowed a quiet chuckle in response to her lament. Vacation indeed. Once she had stepped away, he closed the door and leaned against it in relief. Gaby stepped out of the kitchen, still completely naked, and he watched as she laid Beast in his drawer and went to the duffel bag.

"I'm going to get dressed and then you are going to explain," she said, her voice deceptively even.

"Wait." His eyes trailed over her as she went through the bag, a pair of small men's briefs in her hand. He knew they needed to talk, but maybe she was angry, but he couldn’t resist. She stood up to frown at him questioningly, but he was already there, scooping her up into his arms so he could kiss her. She wrapped her uninjured arm around his shoulders and kissed him back.

"Illya," she admonished breathlessly when he pulled back. He was holding her off the ground, one arm curled under her ass, one hand spread over her bare back.
"Hmmm?" He couldn't help himself, he wanted her to stay like this. He had not gotten tired of looking at her yet, of holding her, touching her whenever he liked.

"The baby is still awake."

"It is not like he knows what is happening." He started walking her back toward the bed.

"He might interrupt us," she countered, already biting at the corner of his jaw.

"We will be quick?" he asked.

Gaby pulled back and shook her head. "I don't think so." Then she kissed him with a hard hungry press of her lips.

"It is my house," Illya said later, as they sat at the table again, finally eating the twice reheated beans. Beast lay in his drawer, which Illya had set on a chair between them. "It belonged to my family, before... well," he cleared his throat, then looked down at Gaby's hand sliding over his. It settled some of the anxiety twisting in his stomach, and he inhaled slowly, returning his attention to her face. "Now, it is mine."

"I didn't realize you were allowed to own property outside..." she trailed off and shrugged.

"It is... complicated."

Gaby nodded, and took a bite of her food. When she had swallowed, she studied him, eyes searching. She still hadn't removed her hand from his, and the weight of it seeped into him. "Do you come here often?"

He shook his head. "No. Occasionally to do repairs, see to things."

"I see." She took a moment. "So, complicated?"

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I knew you would not let that one go." He tapped his fork on the bowl. "I would like to leave it at that for now, however," he said softly. "If you will let me."

Gaby tilted her head, then glanced out over the kitchen. He could see she was deliberating. She was a spy, and a good one. A detective, a thinker. This was a mystery, and it would be difficult for her not to chase after it.

"Hmm." He felt her squeeze his hand. "For now. But you are not off the hook forever." She poked a single bean with her fork. "Are the KGB likely to show up here?"

"No," he said slowly. "They do not know about this place."

Gaby raised an eyebrow, looked at him intently. "Intriguing."

He shook his head at the subtle query. "Thank you for not pressing me about it."

Gaby studied him, the knit in his brow, the open way he returned her gaze. Yes, he was hiding something, but at least he was being honest about it. He trusted her that much.
And the walls were still down. Whether that was a good or bad thing, at least she wasn't alone in it.

"Do you think we are safe here?" she asked.

"We will not be safe," he said, lifting a bite to his mouth. "Until we are home, in New York, and Beast is back with his family."

Home, in New York. The words buzzed around her head. She realized it probably meant nothing, people often referred to the place they slept as ‘home,’ but somehow, coming from Illya, it felt like more. He was not usually frivolous with his words.

"But I think we are safe enough, for the moment." He looked up at her, blue eyes very bright in the early afternoon light. "Why? Are you concerned?"

"No." She gave a gentle shake of her head. "In fact, I think we should stay for a few days. Maybe try to contact Napoleon again." She took in the baby, the stiff way Illya was holding himself, felt the tight burn and ache in her own body. "And we could use some recovery time."

"That is true." His eyes traced over her, this time more of a critique. "You have lost weight, it is not good."

Gaby laughed softly, and shook her head again.

"You do not have any to spare," he insisted, frowning at her, and it was so genuine, so earnest, she couldn't be angry at him for the high handed commentary.

"Well then," she remarked, taking up her fork. "I guess I had better eat all my beans."

"You are teasing me." His gaze dropped to his plate. "It was not the right thing to say."

Gaby smiled at him, she couldn't help herself, and watched him soften in the face of it. "No woman ever wants to hear that her appearance is anything less than perfect," she said. "Especially from her lover."

She caught herself off guard with the word, and it definitely affected Illya, she heard the low catch of his breath.

"Is that what we are?" he asked, turning his hand over so hers settled in his palm, and closing his fingers over it.

She sobered. "Are we not?"

"Gaby," he admonished, but she didn’t know what he was asking.

No, that wasn't true, she knew exactly what he was asking, she just wasn't sure how to answer him. "We have a few days," she said slowly. "A mission to complete…” she pushed her beans around despite her promise to eat them. "Then we will... reassess."

He let out a breath. "Reassess…"

Beast cried out, interrupting the moment, and Illya's hand slid out from beneath hers as he moved to pick him up. She felt the loss of those cool fingers much more keenly than she should have, and she watched him closely as he checked the infant over, murmuring a few quiet words.

"You are feeling left out?" he asked. "No, you are wet. I will take care of that." He set the baby against his shoulder, patting him gently and leaned over to take one more bite of his beans.
The move was overtly domestic, and Gaby absorbed the picture like a blow, her breath catching. That vibrant bolt of craving pierced her heart - the same feeling that overtook her each time she saw him like this. It shook her, and she inhaled deeply to keep herself steady. Illya stood to his feet and she followed him with her eyes. He paused beside her and bent to kiss her, lips tender.

"You are beautiful," he said, eyes fond. "I would think so even if you were as round as the moon."

Those words, along with the fantasy her mind had already been weaving, put a picture into her head that had nothing to do with being overweight. Instead, her stomach was rounded, as Bonnie's had been, and Illya's hand rested possessively over the curve of it. The thought made her chest burn, and she dropped her hands to her lap. Realizing where her mind had gone, she exhaled sharply and pushed the thought away.

*You are only asking for pain,* she told herself, but her hands remained in place, spread tightly over her flat belly.
Rain pounded on the roof above him, beating against the windows in a rush of steady white noise that he might normally have found soothing. Instead, the all-encompassing nature of the sound added to the restless frustration trying to root deeper and deeper into his psyche.

Solo was not a fan of feeling useless, and as he turned to take in the space, a bare-bones room he’d rented at a local inn, he felt as though the walls were closing in around him.

It had been a week. A week of no word, no sign, nothing…

Peril and Gaby were out there, somewhere. They were likely injured - based on the blood he’d seen, and the fight they had so obviously taken on - yet he couldn’t get to them. He was always two steps behind the enemy, chasing bread crumbs and ghosts. The thought gnawed at his insides like a wild, bitter thing.

Obviously, they couldn’t reach out easily. Any attempt to make contact was more likely to bring the enemy than a friend, and yet, some part of him was still upset they hadn’t tried.

He supposed that was his ego.

His unsolicited companion was no help in the matter. René lounged back in the only armchair the room had to offer, smoking casually, as if this was just a stopover on the way to his next vacation. “This is very unfortunate,” the man complained, all yielding consonants and open vowels. “I am quite concerned for my Gabriella.”

The use of that term grated on Solo in any number of ways but he ignored it, focusing on the maps
he had laid out on the table.

“Can you not think of anything?” René asked. “They are your partners, certainly you can understand them.”

Solo closed his eyes. “Obviously, I can.” A con, maybe a lie, but he liked to think it was true. Perhaps he was conning himself. “They will work their way toward France, try to get to Paris where they have contacts to help them get back to New York.” He studied the map. “That only leaves a few hundred square miles for them to be hiding in.”

“So sarcastic, so American.” René took another drag of his cigarette and Solo stared at him, passive face hiding his disdain. The man’s lips closed over the butt, his cheeks hollowing as he sucked in the smoke, and Solo exhaled as he looked away, back to the maps.

There was something… something there, but he couldn’t pin it down. He ran his fingers over the lines of roads. Cars, buses, and trains… He needed to think, but in order to think, he needed to clear his head.

There were only two, sure-fire ways he knew to accomplish that, and he didn’t have a safe handy, so —

He tugged his jacket from the back of the chair, forcing René to shift. He inspected it for wrinkles then swung it over his shoulders.

“Where are you going?” Soft w, throaty R sound.

“Out,” Solo tossed over his shoulder, well intoned, mild.

René scoffed. “To get a drink? To find a fuck? Most people just go for a walk to clear their heads.”

Solo sighed and turned back to see the man grinning. “Your point?”

“Did you pay attention to this village when we arrived? The bar downstairs is the only one.” He took another quick pull on his cigarette. “But perhaps you like old men.” He shrugged and stood up, grabbing his own jacket and crossing the room. “Still, I think I will join you.”

Solo exhaled, and this time his agitation was evident. “Why are you here?” he demanded. “What’s your angle?”

René stilled in putting on his jacket and set careful eyes on him. “You really don’t understand. Or is it that you simply choose not to believe me?”

Solo was slow to respond. He took in the man before him, stupid disheveled hair, full lower lip. Appealing.

“No,” he said carefully. “But to be clear, I still despise you.”

René drew his mouth into a pout of indifference. “Hate is its own kind of passion, is it not?”
Solo’s eyes darkened and he reached out, fisting a hand in those ridiculous curls. “How about you shut the hell up for once,” he ordered, voice sharp, then he dragged René’s head back and ground their mouths together in a hard, biting kiss.

…

Illya looked down at the pot in his hand, contemplating the black char at the bottom. He couldn’t believe he had burned their dinner. Gaby passed behind him and he automatically followed her with his eyes.

Then again, he supposed he could believe it. He was surrounded by the best sort of distraction.

“What are you doing?” he asked, drying his hands on a dish towel and leaving the cookware to soak. Gaby had settled in a chair behind him, a chess set laid out on the tabletop. She lifted her shoulder, and it drew his eye to her injury, just visible beneath the fabric of her shirt. It was mostly scabbed over now, a generous amount of ointment keeping it somewhat flexible. She began arranging the pieces on the board.

“I thought I might teach myself to play,” she answered. “There always seems to be one of these around and sometimes missions get boring.”

Illya discarded the hand towel and moved toward her. “You are the one who wanted to sit still and recuperate,” he reminded. Though they had hardly been still, or recuperating. He let his gaze trace the line of her neck, revealed to him by the knot she’d twisted her hair into. She was wearing a man’s button up in pale blue, he was in a pair of checked boxers, there hardly seemed a point to putting much else back on. Every time Beast fell asleep, they found themselves taking it all back off again.

Which was exactly how he had ended up burning dinner.

“That is not what I meant,” she said, glancing up at - and then down him. She turned back to the chess board and he moved to stand behind her.

“Why teach yourself when you have a knowledgeable tutor right here?” he offered, kissing her neck.

“Because, then you will know all my moves.”

He chuckled, lifting her up and dropping into the chair beneath her before settling her in his lap. Gaby didn’t protest the new arrangement, simply adjusting her position until she was comfortable. Illya nuzzled into her hair, taking in the scent of her beneath the shampoo and the smell of food that clung to both of them after cooking in the small space.

“I must tell you, that is very likely to be true in any case.”

“Why?” she demanded. “You think I can’t outwit you?”

He smiled softly into her hair. Oh, she outwitted him at every turn. Didn’t she know how completely she had wrecked him? How thoroughly she possessed him?

“No, but because there are only so many moves," he explained, voice deep and faux-serious. "And I know all of them.”
“Oh, do you?” She was challenging him but, in this, he was very confident. She moved a piece on the board and he tutted. “What?”

“You do not want to do that, they will take your Queen.” He set his hands on her legs, dragging them up over her warm skin, feeling the muscles twitch beneath his touch.

“So?” she asked, and there was a hitch of breath beneath the words.

“Queen is most important piece in chess,” he murmured, brushing a kiss on her earlobe. “You do not want to sacrifice her.” He slid his hands a little higher on her thigh, brushing the tails of the shirt out of his way.

Gaby took a quick breath, hummed. “I thought the King was the most important.”

Illya nodded, his nose brushing her ear. “Yes, but he is useless.” He trailed his fingertips over the inside of her thigh. “You need to keep your Queen in the game as long as possible.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be making mistakes if you weren’t distracting me,” she said, wiggling in his lap so that her perfect round bottom shifted against his growing erection.

“Distracting you?” he teased, voice low. His fingers reached the edge of her underwear, a small pair of men’s briefs that should not look as attractive on her as they did, and slipped just beneath. “Why would I do that?” He kissed her neck and brought his other hand up to cup her breast through the fabric of the shirt.

“Illya,” she breathed, her head falling back to his shoulder, and he sighed, bringing her more snugly against him.

He couldn’t get enough of her. All the times he had told himself he couldn’t have this, couldn’t be with her in this way, and now here she was, in his arms. What she had said before, about reassessing when the mission was over, rattled through him. He didn’t know what that meant, but he knew nothing had changed in the world outside. The two of them were still just as impossible. He still belonged to the KGB, she belonged to the West. Circumstance would pull them apart one day. To say they would take what they could get was a fool’s dream, but here he was, taking what he could get, while he could get it.

Gaby dropped the pawn she had been toying with and carded her fingers into his hair, drawing him in, and he let his fingers slip all the way beneath the band of cotton at her legs, stroking over her intimately. She mewled, rolling her hips into the touch.

“You’re insatiable,” she murmured.

“I am insatiable?” he remarked, nosing down the side of her throat, past the collar of her shirt, and sucking a small love bite into her shoulder. “You are the one who attacked me in the kitchen.” She sighed at his attentions, and he hummed, adding, “While I was cooking.”

Gaby smiled, and twisted to look at him over her shoulder. “Attacked you?” she returned. “If that’s how you feel about my blow jobs then I’ll—” He kissed her hard, cutting off the words with a grunt. If he even thought about her lips around his cock, the way her wicked dark eyes had stared up at him as she’d taken him into her mouth, he was going to go off much sooner than he wanted.

He reached down and tugged her thighs over his, so that she was open to him, then slid one hand up inside her shirt to cup her naked breast, glancing calloused fingertips over a taut nipple. His other hand returned to that place between her legs, where she was already growing wet with arousal.
His fingers drew a gentle line down, dipping for a moment into her entrance. “Are you sore?”

“No,” she huffed, shaking her head. She clasped her fingers around his wrist as if he might pull away.

She pressed back into him, rolling her bottom over his cock, the friction making him fully hard. He roamed a dark moan into her skin as his fingers found her clit, and Gaby gasped as he drew a light circle over it. His kiss swallowed the sound, drew out another. Her legs tried to close on reflex, but they were caught on his knees, his spread thighs keeping hers wide-open to his touch. She whimpered as he sucked at her bottom lip, and vexed her clitoris with docile little circles. Every few strokes, his fingers drifted down to tease her entrance, test her readiness, taunting her until she was panting and restless.

“Illya,” she admonished. “Sto— ah!”

He cut off her protest by slipping a thick finger inside her. Hips jutting forward, Gaby’s head fell back to his shoulder again, one hand clutching his beneath her shirt where he held her breast, the other scratching at the back of his scalp. He squeezed her breast and massaged her nipple as the finger of his other hand penetrated her, pushing inside again and again, until she was mewling with pleasure, a fine sheen of sweat making her skin glow.

She was trying to ride his hand, and the result was her bottom grinding up and down his cock in a pulsing rhythm. It was just shy of enough stimulation to move his arousal forward, but it was definitely a sweet kind of torture. The sensation, mixed with the sounds she was making and the wetness he was thrusting into, had him lost in some sexual daze where this was all there was, all that mattered. Feeding Gaby’s gratification as she fed his. He withdrew his finger, and Gaby protested until he added a second, sliding deep and crooking them inside her. She jerked and cried out as her body began to rock savagely against his hand.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Right there… just -” she swallowed, “like-” her nails dug into his scalp, “tha- -Oh, oh-oh!” She sucked in a desperate breath, and then she was coming, releasing it in a series of soft whimpers. Her body clamped down on his fingers, her inner muscles brutally tight, making his cock throb with jealousy.

When she went limp in his arms, he kissed her neck and murmured his pleasure into her skin, holding back the words of love he wanted to say. It wasn’t the time, he didn’t love her because of this… and he needed her to know that. When the time was right, he would say it again, he would tell her everything.

It only took her a moment to recover enough of her senses to drag his face back to hers for a needy kiss, and then try to wriggle her hands between them. She reached into his boxers and wrapped her fingers around his erection. It was like an electric shock of pleasure, and his body trembled, a desperate moan escaping him.

“Gaby,” he groaned, pushing up into her grip.

“Yes,” she insisted in a rush. “Yes, inside me, please.”

“Is Beast in the bed?” he asked between sloppy kisses to the corner of her jaw.

“It doesn’t matter.” She shook her head, letting go of his cock, and he was almost ashamed of the whine that escaped him at the loss of her touch. “Let me up.”

He closed his legs so she could stand to her feet, then looked up, enchanted by her, and she turned in
his arms, retrieving a condom from the shirt pocket. He stared at it with surprise, then up at her knowing smile.

“I always wondered if chess made you horny,” she said, holding it out to him. He blinked, processing her words and then shaking his head as he accepted the rubber.

“You make me ‘horny.’” The word felt strange in his mouth, but he understood the meaning well enough to know it was accurate.

Gaby gave him a sly smile, unbuttoning her shirt and dropping it slowly from her shoulders to the floor. “Do I?”

He scowled at her playfully. “I think you know.”

She leaned in and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him tenderly. His hands came up to her sides, condom still between his fingers, and tried to pull her back into his lap. Gaby resisted, drawing away after a moment, his bottom lip caught between her teeth. He groaned out a complaint, his hands sliding to her hips where the elastic of the briefs lay loose against her skin. She turned inside his hold, and presented her bottom to him, leaning over the table, shoving the chess set out of the way, so she had room to brace herself.

His eyes widened at the implication, and he smoothed a large hand over the curve of her ass, before slowly tugging the white cotton down to reveal her skin. She was paler here than anywhere else, and he leaned forward to press a kiss to one cheek, then drag his teeth over it in a gentle bite. Gaby made an eager sound, and he sighed against her skin.

“And here I thought you loved my legs the best.” Coy but breathless.

Illya shook his head. “I lo—” he took a quick breath to adjust his words. “I love all of your parts.”

“Then what is taking so long?” she demanded, wiggling in his palms.

“I am enjoying the view.” From his seat he had a very nice one: the firm muscles in her thighs and buttocks, as well as the soft pink of her center, but seeing how wet she was, only made him want to be inside her all the more, and he quickly shoved down his boxers and rolled on the condom. He leaned forward again, rising up to his feet, and kissed the dimples just above her ass, before running the tip of his nose slowly up her spine. Goosebumps broke out over her skin, and she shivered as she whispered his name.

He braced his hands beside hers on the table and bent to kiss her shoulders, the back of her neck. Lips greedily tasting her, tracing the line of her vertebrae, breath ruffling the wisps of hair that fringed her hairline. Gaby reached out, and took his hand, entwining her fingers with his. Illya looked at their joined hands, noting the contrast, hers so small in his. Affection for her welled up inside him, the surge so big, so overwhelming, he had to bury his face in her neck to keep from confessing it all right there.

Their height difference made this position challenging, but he was too entranced by her to try and change her mind. “Up, on your toes,” he whispered, and she obeyed. Together they shifted until he could set the crown of his cock at her entrance. Gaby hummed, and tried to press back, but he used one hand to still her as he tried to find his balance.

“Illya,” she complained when he continued to hold her hips still. He loved when she said his name, and that along with the feel of her, sent a shiver of need through him.

“No patience,” he admonished, but his voice was too breathless to carry any real authority. Flexing
his fingers into the curve of her hip, he held his breath and pushed forward, sliding into her heat with agonizing slowness.

He had been inside her a dozen times now, but the wonder of it had not faded. She was paradise wrapped around him. He let out a long groan as he bottomed out, and Gaby answered with one of her own.

“Gott, Illya,” she said, and his belly flinched, her voice and her body a barrage of sensation, and he held himself still in order to process without coming instantly.

Her tight heat cradled him, holding him as though he was a puzzle piece made to fit. Every time they joined like this, the rightness of it washed over him, the wholeness he felt being this close to her, merged with her as if they were one. As if they were meant to be one. He gasped at the wave of emotion that mixed with his desire. Shifting her hips to get the best angle, he withdrew and thrust in again, rocking her against the table.

Gaby’s body shook up on her toes, her thighs twitching, and he smoothed a hand over her leg, then hooked his arm around her hips to help hold her. She moaned loudly as he began a steady cadence with his hips, her fingers flexing in the hand she still held.

“More…” Her voice was scratchy, tight with hunger, and Illya shuddered, gave her what she asked for, driving deep - once, then twice - spurred on by the wanton noises that escaped her.

“Kak ty khorosha,” he breathed, falling into the rhythm, hips driving forward even as he pulled her back to him. “Incredible.”

Gaby cried out, and bucked against him, “You feel so good,” she gasped, and it went straight to the tension building behind his balls, in the base of his spine. “Oh gott,” she whimpered. “Illya, I— huuh,” her voice shook. She leaned forward, laying her cheek on the table and arching her back. “I need… hung, touch me please.”

The request snapped through him, and he choked on a breath as he loosened his hold on her hips to push his hand between her legs. Finding her clit, he dragged a circle over it with his fingertips. Her response was another cry, her body convulsing under his, and he felt the walls of her core clench around him.

The pressure of her orgasm was almost too pleasurable, and Illya gasped, one of his legs shifting back to give him better balance as he thrust into it. Gaby shouted, her fingers squeezing his as he bore her down to the table, pleasure rising inside him until he was nothing but the heat of Gaby’s body against his, the grasp of her sex, and the sweet pleading sounds that fell from her lips. Then it all burst open inside him, blinding him, and he whimpered, tugging her back tight to his hips as he came, spilling deep into that perfect, precious heat.

His forehead hit the table over her shoulder, and he managed just enough control not to let all of his weight fall on top of her. Heaving for breath, he felt Gaby’s hand slide up into his sweat-damp hair, her fingernails grazing tenderly over his scalp. Her other hand squeezed his, and he felt her lips press against his palm. Moved beyond words, he bowed up to kiss her shoulder, the back of her neck, tasting the salt of her there.

A cry from Beast broke into the moment, and they both pushed up, looking into the living room, Illya swearing as the table wobbled beneath them.

“He has a rather Solo-esque timing,” Gaby remarked, holding his hand to her chest.
Illya laughed softly and nuzzled into her hair, leaving another kiss there. “Not quite,” he offered. “If that were the case, he would have woken up five minutes ago.” Gaby chuckled, and he pulled away regretfully. “I will get him this time,” he said, but she stopped him, cupping his cheeks and pulling him back for several more slow kisses before releasing him to the task.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry?
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

A dance, a postcard, and stakes rising.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone. Happy Friday and Happy Birthday to me. I'm afraid I didn't manage to come up with anything extra to treat you all with, I'm sorry but still, here's another chapter. We are slowly but surely working our way to the end. :) 

Big thanks to everyone who is reading, to those who are commenting, and everyone who helped me along the way in both writing this and then getting it actually posting worthy. <3<3<3

Anyone who is reading this later, having waited until it was finished: I feel you bro.

Gaby used the palm of her hand to wipe away the veil of steam, and stared at herself in the hazy bathroom mirror. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, face glowing — she looked… happy.

She wanted to blame it on the sex, all the orgasms, but she knew they wasn’t the only reason she felt like this. She chewed at her lip, but even the niggling sense of anxiety about what the future would hold, couldn’t put a damper on the contentedness that had settled inside her chest, warm and precious gold.

At the corner of the sink, the broken ‘engagement’ ring caught her eye, and she lifted it up to catch the light. It was just a ring, but it felt so important, so deeply a part of her. Seeing the shattered faux-pearl brought a pang of grief, but even that wasn’t enough to dampen her lifted spirits.

Wrapping the ring in her fist, she carried it with her out to the main room. When she reached the end of the short hallway, however, she stopped, pausing to take in the sight she found there.

Music drifted toward her from the small radio, a slow song with a smooth swing of rhythm. Illya stood just inside the bedroom, the double doors open to the living room, with Beast on his shoulder. She watched him sway from side to side, spinning in a slow circle, one large hand patting gently at the infant’s back. He was dancing Beast back to sleep.

Once again, that sense of longing engulfed her. She continued to watch him, listened to him humming along to the music, slightly out of tune, and the glow of elation in her chest twisted into something deeper, something needy and wanting. This time she didn’t work to censor the thoughts.
Illya would be an amazing father. Firm but fair. Gruff, but loving and supportive, and she wanted that for him... more than that.

She wanted to be the one to give it to him, she wanted the child in his arms to be hers, to be theirs.

She took a slow steadying breath. The realization brought another solemn touch to the glow in her chest, and reminded her she needed to take care. She let the desire, the wanting, make its home inside her, accepted it for what it was, excepted the entire mess for what it was. A hopeless, beautiful disaster.

That was exactly what they were. Destined to love and hurt each other. And it was one thing to want, but their time in this place was coming to and end. She needed to get a handle on this feeling before it mutated into something really stupid.

Like hope.

“She thinks, perhaps, that we do not know she is observing us,” Illya said, a little too loudly to be intended only for Beast’s ears. He made that tsking sound he liked to scold her with, and looked at her from across the room. “Terrible spy tactics.”

Gaby let the teasing pull her from the darker side of her thoughts. She offered him a casual lift of her shoulder. “Who says I’m trying not to be seen?” she asked, stepping out into the room and walking toward him. “Sometimes the purpose is to distract your mark from something else.”

She sidled up to him, put her hand on the small of his back, the other on Beast’s diapered bottom, and started them back into the dance.

Illya gazed down at her, somber. “And what are you trying to distract me from, moya Solnyshka?”

“Everything else.”

“Mmm.” The sound rumbled in his chest, and he took the arm that wasn’t supporting Beast and wrapped it around her, bringing her in closer.

The song on the radio changed to something sweetly melancholy, filling the air around them, and they danced to it, a slow circle. She laid her head to Illya’s chest and listened to his heartbeat, so strong, so steady. She had no idea how long they stayed that way: songs beginning, songs ending, the universe collapsing in on itself and starting over again, Illya’s breath on her hair, and the weight of his hand at her back. When he finally stilled, she blinked up at him as though she was waking from a dream.

“He is asleep,” Illya murmured.

She didn’t want to wake up.

“Don’t put him in the bed,” she suggested and felt the hitch in his breathing. He nodded and stepped away to settle Beast into his drawer with towels and tablecloths as blankets and sheets. Illya’s towels. Illya’s tablecloths.

The idea of them, this place, still teased the curious parts of her mind, but she let it all go as she drew him back to her, sliding her arms up around his neck and pressing herself against him. He looked down, surprised, and let his hands descend to the small of her back. She moved them to the sway of the music, slow and sensual, and he followed her lead for several rotations before taking over.

“And you said you couldn’t dance,” she teased.
“This is not dancing,” he argued. “It is more like swaying in unison.”

Gaby smiled, her face dimpling, and Illya ducked to kiss her, lifting her up until her feet dangled off the ground. She adjusted her grip on his neck, wrapping her arms around as he crossed his beneath her bottom to keep her there. He kept swaying, turning them slowly even as they kissed, then Gaby laid her head on his shoulder. He rocked her a while longer, his body big and warm and solid against hers, and she sighed.

“Shall I rock you to sleep, Kroshka?” he questioned, his voice a fond roll of bass. “Put you to bed?”

Gaby kissed his neck, the corner of his jaw and then lifted up to see his face, shaking her head. “I need you to take me to bed.”

His needy exhale lit up the arousal, already a glowing ember in her belly.

“You’re right,” she admitted. “I am insatiable.” She smiled, brushing his lip with her thumb. “Take me to bed and make love to me, Illya. I can’t get enough of you.”

He whimpered gruffly, tugging her in for a fierce kiss. He carried her to the bed and laid her out beneath him. Gaby reached up pulling him down with her, not willing to part from him even for a second. They were naked again in moments, and Gaby tried to memorize the way his body felt aligned to hers. She kissed his eyelids and traced the line of his jaw with hungry lips. It wasn’t enough, it would never be enough, but she had this - they had this - and she was going to indulge in the time they had left.

She opened up her body, took him inside, made love to him with everything she had, swallowing his sounds of pleasure, the shortness of his breath, basking in the flex of his muscles, the bunch of his bicep, and the thrust of his hips. And when he came, groaning tender precious words in her ear, she pretended she could make that part of her as well, and let herself think stupidly impossible things.

They lay facing each other sometime later, both quiet. Illya’s hand was curled up next to his chin and his blue eyes seemed to chart the lines of her face. She wanted to ask him so many things, say so many things, but her heart was swollen, her throat closed, so she made do with simply gazing back at him.

Then he frowned.

“What?”

“Something is…” He lifted up and ran a hand over the sheets beneath him and came back with their ring.

“Oh,” Gaby said, her eyes fixing on it. She had forgotten she was holding it.

He studied the shattered glass, turning the bit of jewelry in his fingers, then lifted her right hand and inspected her ring finger, running the pad of his thumb over the yellowed bruise there.

“You did not tell me about this,” he murmured. “Is your finger all right?”

“Yes.” She took her hand back. “But, Illya, our ring is broken,” she explained, though that truth was obvious.

“Is okay,” he assured her, brushing a thumb over her cheek and pushing her hair behind her ear. “I will fix it.”
Gaby nodded, lost in the sincerity of his open gaze. She knew her heart was laid out in her own eye, but she couldn’t hold it back. “Good,” she whispered, and because she couldn’t say the things she needed him to know, she leaned in and did what she could to show them to him.

…

Solo traced his fingers over the lines of the map again, almost holding his breath. There was something there, at the edge of his thoughts, something…

“Are you going to eat any of this?” René asked, the clink of utensils accompanying his words. Solo sighed and hung his head.

“I thought you said you were here to help.”

“I am helping,” the man insisted. “We need food, sustenance if we are to find our little strays. Come, have breakfast.”

“I prefer not to eat breakfast,” Solo replied, returning his attention to the map.

René scoffed. It was an endlessly annoying sound, and Solo rolled his eyes.

“This is the problem with you Americans. What will you do? Eat while we are walking? Eat all your food in one meal? It will make you heavy and slow.”

“You certainly weren’t complaining last night,” Solo said blandly.

A huff of laughter met his ears, and he could just make out the shake of the man’s head as he went back to smearing cream on his pastry.

There was a knock on the door and Solo ignored it, shoving the first map to the side to study a second. René stood to his feet, white robe barely tied and crossed the room to answer it.

“Bordel de merde!”

Solo’s head snapped up at the curse, and René looked back at him grimly, turning the newspaper in his hands so Solo could see the front page. The pictures there made him stand up and drag in a tight breath. “Damn.”

He grabbed the paper and shook it out in front of him. His partners were front and center, the images blurry and undefined, but easily recognizable to him. Wanted for Kidnapping, Assault, and Murder, the headline read and his nervous energy escaped him in the form of a sigh.

“I was wondering if they would make this move.” His hands fell to his waist, paper still between them. “At least now we know for certain they haven’t been caught.” That had been the sharpest fear, the one he’d had to bury the deepest, the one that said they’d been taken, were being tortured or worse, and he was useless to help them. He tossed the paper onto the coffee table and set his hands on his hips. “And the pictures are shit.”

“Indeed,” René agreed, watching the paper flutter to a standstill. “But people will be reporting their own uncle for the money offered there…”

“Yeah,” was Solo’s only response.
Another knock had them spinning warily toward the entrance. René glanced back at Solo, then, as if they had spoken and agreed on it, the Frenchman went to the door again as Solo settled a hand on his gun.

“Yannick—” Solo heard René announce, surprise sounding genuine. There was a peal of French — what are you doing here? Oh, I see, yes, thank you for your haste — and Solo waited for the door to close.

“That was one of my local contacts,” René explained, his voice reflective. “He runs a bar in the next village.” He paused, a frown cutting a deep line in his brow. “I am starting to think my Gaby knows too much. I thought he was a secret.” Lifting his hand into the air, he offered Solo a square of white paper.

A postcard.

Eyes flying wide, Solo snatched it from his fingers. The address to René’s bar was written out in narrow, precise script. Perfectly angled loops, dotted i’s, and crossed t’s. He never thought he’d see a day he was happy to see Illya’s flawless handwriting. There were no words on this one and he wondered at it. At Illya sending the card, sending it to René, having faith it would reach him.

On the front was a picture of a train.

Solo exhaled, and let it fall to his side. Of course, the train. It was literally the only thing they hadn’t tried… well, if you didn’t count the dramatic escape over a week ago. “Treviso,” he said aloud. “I knew there was something there.”

He went back to the table and brought out some of the paperwork he’d been collecting. “There is a train from Venice to Paris. It makes a stop in Treviso, and from there, it is a sleeper train. Everyone will be in their berths, they would be undisturbed, much easier to stay under the radar… once they get on board.”

“But they will need to board with everyone watching, move through customs… all with their pictures plastered on the front page.”

Solo looked up at René, expression stoic. “That is definitely a concern.”

“I will secure some transportation,” René said. He waved a hand. “You call your Waverly fellow. And perhaps you should also tell him to check out this newspaper for some of these… what did you call them? These - THRUSH people.” He was gone a moment later and Solo went to make his call.

…

A tall man with a growth of dark gold beard and a rounded belly stepped up to the ticket counter at the Treviso Station. Two lines down, a young man in a flat cap and brown, corduroy jacket darted a look in his direction before stepping up to purchase a ticket. Small, battered hands laid out the needed paperwork and dark eyes watched the clerk check it over. A few moments later he was stepping up onto the train.

The bearded man was spotted down the hallway. He ducked into one of the private berths, a hand dropping to his distended stomach as an attendant approached, offering blankets. Waiting until the uniformed woman had moved off, the young man made his way down the hall, a canvas pack slung
over a slender shoulder. The door to the berth was shut, but with two, sharp raps it opened, and the man was there, yanking the boy inside.

The soft cap came off, and he was a she: Gaby, her hair falling in dark waves about her shoulders.

“Hurry,” Illya said quietly, already dragging off his coat. “He is waking up.”

Together they unbuttoned his shirt, and a sleepy Beast was liberated from the new makeshift wrap. Gaby smiled at him and tucked him into the crook of her arm. She flicked her gaze over Illya, his toned stomach, bare chest, and remembered handing him the wrap that morning.

“You’re turn to play pregnant,” she had teased. He had just rolled his eyes and kissed her. He did so again now, tugging her in and laying hungry lips to hers. They had split up several hours ago. He had hated the idea, but it had been for the best. With their pictures in the paper and THRUSH’s uncanny ability to find them so far, they needed to take every precaution they could.

In truth, she had hated having him out of her sight just as much. She slid off her pack and pulled out the can of formula she had purchased. The riskiest part of their acquisitions, and part of why they had separated early.

She had bought the formula and two baby gowns, and then walked back to one of the neighborhoods as if it was her home, watching for anyone who might be following. It had been an adventure, the entire time wondering if anyone would see through her disguise, take note of the woman beneath the trousers. But, as Illya had said, most people accepted what they saw as true.

Illya retrieved the bottle from his things, and together they hurried to make the milk so that it was on hand to stifle any crying. When Beast began to snuffle against her, Gaby did the honors, curling up into the corner and using her knees to support the baby’s weight.

“We think they are on the train?” she asked, as Illya shucked off his baggy clothing and retrieved something more fitted from his bag. If things went to plan, Waverly would be waiting for them in Paris with backup, and further ruse would not be needed.

“I think, at this point, it is safe to say that I am paranoid,” Illya said, stepping into gray slacks. “But, yes, I think they are on this train, and every train. Every bus, every road… Whatever their intentions,” his gaze fell on the infant in her arms. “They want to get him back very badly.”

“It scares me,” Gaby admitted, then shook her head.

Illya sat down beside her, setting a hand on her knee and giving it a squeeze. She looked up into his eyes, saw that she was not alone.

“Me too,” he said quietly, and Gaby twisted so that she and Beast were leaning against him. The three of them united.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Expanding the bubble.

Chapter Notes

Hi guys!!!! Happy Friday! It is suddenly spring here where I am and crazily coming up on the anniversary of me receiving my prompts for the Summer Solstice Exchange! What a thought! It's been almost a year since this idea first accosted me. ☹️ What a ride. Big thank yous to all my readers, I love hearing from you and sharing this with you and I hope you are all doing well.

Solo arrived in Treviso, with René in tow, at around two AM. Too late to wait in the crowd watching for his partners and with no way of knowing whether they had made the train tonight, last night, or would be coming through tomorrow. He needed more information.

To that end, he headed into the city, to a small bakery. René smiled at the plan, and Solo wondered briefly if it was the thought of pastries or getting a look at one of Waverly’s contacts that gave the man glee. Either way, he told the Frenchman to stay in the car, endured a few, choice French epithets that were tossed at his back, and walked up to the back door, a hand casually in his suit pocket where a .22 waited.

Beyond the glass of the back window, a middle-aged woman was kneading her bread, jet black hair pulled away from her face and secured at the nape of her neck, a few strands coming loose to sway at her cheek. Her sleeves were rolled up to reveal the flexing muscles of her forearm as she pushed the dough around on a floured table top. At Napoleon’s brisk knock she lifted her face, eyes connecting with his, and nodded before turning back to the dough. He waited as she gave it two more folds, then placed it in a bowl and covered it with a light towel. She wiped her hands on her apron and opened the door to let him enter.

“Salve,” Solo said, his Italian smooth but accented, and looked her over with a charming smile. “I am sorry about the late hour, but your Uncle said I just had to try the bomboloni.”

She shoved a lock of hair behind her ear, leaving a streak of flour on her cheek. Her dark eyes skimmed over his face. “Your Uncle has very good taste,” she returned, using the small mistake that had been agreed upon as the ‘all clear.’ “You are right,” she continued in English. “It is very late, but I suppose a craving won’t wait.” She drew the blinds at the window and led him into a cramped
room off the kitchen, a cluttered office with papers strewn across the desk, pictures of her family tacked haphazardly about the walls.

She took out a small radio and set it on her desk, checked the back and switched it on. A gentle, plucking guitar melody came through the speaker. She pointed at it. “Jammer,” she said, taking a seat behind the desk and lighting a cigarette. “Just in case. Pretty nice, yeah? My son Nico built it.”

Solo shifted his attention from the radio to her as he lowered into the opposite chair. “Your son knows about your side gig?”

“Gig?”

Solo shook his head. “Job.”

“Of course, this is something we do as a family. It is not much but,” she shrugged. “I do not want Nazi’s back in my country.”

Solo nodded at that.

“So, I have had my boys at the train station, the girls about town, no one has seen anyone that matches your description. But,” she held up a finger. “A young man was seen purchasing baby formula at the market this afternoon. Nico said a man followed him into one of the neighborhoods then left.”

Solo frowned. “Significance?”

“Zio said there was a baby involved,” she said and gave a little shrug. “And that young man was a stranger to Nico, as was the man following him. Nico knows everyone.”

His mind settled quietly into the idea that was forming. “Height?”

“Short, looked a bit young to be needing condoms, which he also purchased at the market.”

Solo’s brain rolled to a stop at that. The implications… He forced himself to put the thought aside. There would be plenty of time to go over that when he found them. The little… no wonder they had been off grid for over a week. “And that was this afternoon?” he checked. She nodded. “Anything else?”

“I am sorry,” she offered as she shook her head.

“It’s fine,” he told her, softening his charm as he smiled at her. “It means they are hiding well. The man following the boy broke off?”

“That is what Nico said.”

“Did you get a description of him?”

She shrugged her lips. “Italian, skinny, a long face.” She swirled her hand over her head. “Mop of hair.”

“Thank you very much for your trouble.” He gave her a nod and stood to his feet.

“Wait!” She stood too, and came around to him. “We must make it look as it should!”

“Wha—” before the word was out she was tugging at his tie, ruffling his hair. “Oh.” His smile this time was more genuine but no less charming. “Are you sure you don't want to make it a little more
real?” He took a moment to study her face. She was a handsome woman, if gently lined with age and touched by too much sun.

She took hold of his chin and gave him a shake. “This face,” she declared, and sighed. “Oh, that I could take you up on the offer, but, alas. I have many more loaves of bread to prepare.” She turned away and picked up a small package from her desk and handed it to him. “Your bomboloni.” She grinned. “Day old, but still not too bad, if I do say so myself.”

Solo laughed, tucked the package against his chest and gave her a little bow. “Your help, as well as the pastry, is very much appreciated.”

René was in the driver’s seat when Solo returned and the engine of the 250 GT roared to life as he slid into the passenger seat. René grabbed up the bag and looked him over with a cluck of his tongue. “Pity.”

“What?”

“You didn't really shag her.”

Solo frowned. “We’re here on rather important business right now. If you hadn’t noticed.”

Another scoff. Solo wondered if eventually, the man would manage to choke on that sound. “As if that would stop you.”

“Sounds like Gaby was in the city this afternoon,” he told him, ignoring the jibe. “And they wouldn’t hang around.”

“So, follow that train?” René asked around a large bite of donut.

“Follow that train,” Solo agreed, and René backed the car out of the small space with gusto.

“That woman makes delicious pastries!” René declared as they swerved out onto the main street. “She works very hard.” He maneuvered the car with one hand, waving the bomboloni with the other. “You definitely should have shagged her.”

H

Gaby emerged from the tiny bathroom, her face scrubbed clean of the dirt she had used to help disguise herself. Illya’s gaze drifted over her, taking a new mental picture to keep. Just in case, his mind said. Always just in case. She looked up at him and gave him a quiet smile. It touched her eyes and brought out the dimple in her cheek.

There was no harsh line to it, no shield of sarcasm hiding things she didn’t want him to see. Instead, her face was open to him and he saw Gaby. His Gaby. All her edges, soft and sharp, all her contradictions and consistencies. She wasn’t hiding from him anymore and it filled his entire being with a melancholy sort of peace.

She was everything, and he wished there was a way to tell her that which wouldn’t send her running. He knew she was still afraid, saw the ghosts of it dance across her eyes every once in a while.

Like now.
"Perhaps you should sleep." He patted the space beside him on the fold out bed.

She slid in next to him, still wearing the clothes she’d boarded in. Her hand smoothed over his chest and her touch, like always, was electric, and he sighed, reaching up to push back a lock of her hair.

“I don’t want to sleep,” she told him, her words heavy with meaning. She leaned up to kiss him, and he cupped her cheek, kissed her back. Her tongue was warm and sweet in his mouth. She shifted over him and he let her claim him, take him, own him. He was hers… he had been for a very long time.

“Solnyshka,” he breathed against her lips when she pulled away. “I thought you wanted to reassess.”

She kissed him lightly, prodded the tip of his nose with hers. “Later.” She climbed into his lap, dragged her fingers over his cheeks. “We can reassess later.”

Her follow up kiss was ravenous, and he groaned into it.

“We are out of CIA condoms,” he pointed out, tilting her head to kiss the underside of her jaw. It didn’t matter, there were other things they could do, other ways he could make her come, and collect all the sweet little noises she made, leave a mark of pleasure on her she would always have to equate to him.

She grinned against his lips, then she was gone, leaning over the side of the bed to her bag and coming back a moment later with a green box, setting it on his chest. “I guess we will have to settle for Italian ones.”

He glanced from the box to her, and brought her back in for another hot kiss, setting the box aside for the moment. He had a lot of work to do before he would allow himself that stage. If Gaby would allow him to do it. She was already unbuttoning his shirt.

“It was so much less drama buying those dressed as a boy!” she confessed between kisses. “No evil looks — or — mmm — or judging glares.” She kissed over his jaw her lips searing a path down to his chest as she parted the sides of his shirt.

He was a little lost, caught up in the feel of her, the way she kissed, the way her hips were tight against him where he was already getting hard. “What?”

“Condoms,” she murmured, finding his nipple and swirling the tip of her tongue over it. He moaned at that, his hand flexing between her shoulder blades.

She sat up and started unbuttoning her own shirt. “I used to walk all the way across the city so no one would know me,” she told him, nimble fingers darting over the front of her shirt and revealing a swath of smooth skin. His hands dropped to her hips as his attention settled on her chest. She peeled the shirt off her shoulders and threw it aside, leaving her in a men’s white a-shirt. Her dark nipples shown through the thin fabric, and Illya licked his lips and dragged her forward, closing his mouth over one, sucking it through the material and making her whine into his hair.

Gaby seized his head to hold him there, adrift in the magic of his mouth. He went from one breast to the other, leaving the wet material to cool against the abandoned nipple, and she felt more than heard the needy little sound she made in the back of her throat. “Illya,” she moaned, fingers gripping his hair. It was getting a bit long, and it was soft as it ran through her fingers.

He drew back and tugged the undershirt from her body, sending it off to join the other. He gazed up at her as his hands slid over her ribs to cup her breasts, large hands that could so easily dominate her small body, but instead caressed and petted, seeking only to give her pleasure.
“I do not want to know about this,” he said, pressing his mouth to her throat.

“Me buying condoms in East Berlin?” He hummed agreement, and she grinned. “You don’t want to know about why I needed them?”

“No.” Deep and harsh, a roll of thunder.

“You don’t want to hear all about the boy who was waiting for me to come back?” She was trying to put up a bit of bravado but the breathlessness in her voice undermined it. Illya sucked hard at her neck and she gasped.

“You will forget all about him when I am finished,” he growled, and she laughed, letting her head fall back, then he sucked a bared nipple into his hot mouth and it cut off into a gluttonous moan.

Soon they were both naked, and Illya had proved himself right. By the time she rolled one of the condoms over his length, she was well past thinking of the conversation she had started. He gripped her by the hips and picked her up as if she weighed nothing, and Gaby reached down to adjust his tip at her entrance. Her hands gripped his shoulders as she lowered herself onto him and watched the rapture of it move over his face.

She wanted to say this was the last time, or that they would stop when the mission ended. That sharp, cynical part of her wanted to draw a line in the sand, create the ending before it was created for her, but she knew it was all a lie. She couldn’t protect herself from what was coming, couldn’t stop herself from loving him, and as he filled her up with the broad width of his cock, made her feel divine, and complete, and timeless, she knew she wouldn’t stop until the universe made her stop. She cupped his cheeks and drew his gaze as she lifted up, sliding him out just a bit, then settled back down, bringing him in again and making them both gasp. Right here, right now, he was hers. And she was completely his.

“Gaby,” he whispered, “O Bozhe…” and she bent forward and swallowed the sound with her kiss.

...)

“You don’t believe me,” he said, annoyed.

Gaby was curled up on his chest, cozy and comfortable, her body still humming with post-coital bliss. She hadn’t meant to begin an argument. Now that it was begun, however, she pushed herself up so she could look at him.

“You constantly say you think I am capable but then you act as if I am not. You come rushing in to lift my bag, as if I am some fragile female who will break her nail and cry.” It was a lot of words but she realized she had been storing them up for awhile.

Illya frowned, eyes flitting over her face. “This is what you think?”

“What else am I supposed to think, Illya?”

She felt him fill his lungs with air, her body rising with the swell. He seemed to be considering his words. She wasn’t certain if that was a good or a bad thing. When he spoke, his voice was a rough bass, tumbling sounds.
“When I said you would succeed in carrying me off that mountain,” he began, and she squinted before she remembered that he was referring to their crossing the border into Slovenia. “I meant it.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but he set careful fingers against her lips, surprising her.

“You can do anything,” he said firmly. His attention fell to the place his fingers were touching her, and he let them fall away, looked into her eyes again. “Anything at all. I believe that. You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to, Solnyshka. You are more than enough. Carrying bags. It is not worthy of you. It is not that you are not capable, you should not have to… not when you have a cart horse like me around.”

She slapped him, and he jerked back. The rest of his words were still clattering around inside her mind, but that was one thing she wouldn’t allow.

“Don’t you ever call yourself that again,” she demanded, stunned at the catch in her voice, at how close it was to spilling over. “Never again.” He was staring up at her with shock. “You are more… you’re…” she shook her head. How could she even explain to him? There weren’t enough words in three languages. “You are everything too,” she whispered. “And I—” she choked on it, and cursed internally. That fucking fear holding her at bay. “I should be carrying your bags.”

“Gab—” he started, half whisper, half admonishment but she kissed it off him. Eventually, he surrendered and kissed her back. When he did, she sighed and gentled her assault, tasting him with soft sips, the tip of her tongue licking into his mouth. When she finally pulled back, his lips were red and wet, his body beneath hers relaxed.

He reached up to push the hair from her face, and peered so deeply into her that, for a moment, she felt overexposed. A large part of her wanted to hide, but she held steady, accepting his gaze, her vulnerability to him. She only wished she could believe in the sense of safety she felt as she gazed back.

“Gaby,” he gave a little shake of his head, eyes flitting over her face before returning. “You must know… surely you know that I… I lo—”

Beast woke up with a scream that had them both startling. It was not a cry for attention, and as he dragged in a breath, they heard the rasp of it like sandpaper over their own throats.

“No, not again!” Gaby cried, falling to her knees by his little nest of blankets. “Illya, why does it keep coming back? He was fine at the house.”

Illya didn’t answer her, he was standing up near the door, grabbing one of the pistols from the upper compartment and checking the clip. She felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

“Illya?”

“They would have heard that.”

A shiver ran down her spine. Beast coughed, harsh and dry, and tried to cry again. “We don’t even know for sure they are on board,” she said aloud, but she felt it too - the cold clench in her belly, a hum of danger over her skin. She stared down at Beast, his scrunched face, the tears on his tiny fringe of lashes, dread clawing at the base of her skull. “We have to help him.”

Illya turned back to her, his eyes bleak.

There was a rumble from somewhere in the distance, then the air filled with the screech of metal on metal, and the groan of twisting iron as the train’s brakes locked up beneath them. Gaby gasped,
snatched Beast up and tucked him into her chest, wrapping her body around his. She heard Illya bellow her name, felt her back slam into the wall, the crack of her skull smacking against steel, and everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Man, finally, all that sex and lovey dovey stuff is over. I know we were all just really tired of that. Now back to the plots. 😊
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Search and Despair

Chapter Notes

30! *whew*

Thank yous to my beta diadema and everyone who supported me through the crafting of this beast (beast hehe,) To everyone for reading and commenting. I hope you are all well. <3 I missed some of you guys in the comments last chapter and I hope it's just that you are nervous about this next phase and not something I said!

Here we go guys! Get your woobie and let's do this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sense of foreboding started long before Solo saw the glow of fire on the horizon. Gooseflesh erupted across his skin, hair rising on the back of his neck. His fingers were tapping, Red Peril like, on his knees as René sped the Berlinetta recklessly down the primitive access road. It cut through the rugged foothills, all sharp curves and loose gravel, chasing after the train like a trail of silver in the moonlight. When they crested a small hill, that sense of unease bore its fruit, and Solo’s stomach plummeted to his feet, his pulse racing as he took in the wreckage spread out before them. Fire lit the sky, train cars scattered over the valley below like matchbox toys.

René slammed on the brakes and the car drifted sideways in the gravel before coming to a jerky stop. “Merde…”

"We need to get down there," was Solo’s only verbal reaction, a flex of muscle rolling in the line of his jaw.

René nodded and started the car forward again, slowing at the bottom when the crush of people and debris began to hinder their progress. He rolled the car through the crowd until he could go no further, then he eased it over into the grass and both men climbed out. It didn't take much for Solo to appear as though he was just another concerned onlooker, rounding the back of the car in a rush, his eyes scouring the chaos.

“I guess we can assume they were on this train,” René said, his accent thick.

Solo released a long string of quiet swears. Always one step behind. Every turn, every path... It
grated at his last nerve. He took off his jacket, tossing it onto the roof of the car, and started folding up his sleeves, headed toward the part of the train that was still on the tracks. “Come on.”

“Do you really think we will find them?”

Solo set his jaw. No, he didn’t think they would find them… at least not alive. The thought sent a spike of anxiety through him and he shoved it down.

“Maybe it was simply a malfunction with the train,” René said, following him up the stairs into one of the cars. “It is a coincidence.”

Solo regarded him steadily. “You really believe that?” René’s face darkened and he shook his head. Somber, they returned to their search.

Pandemonium reigned over the scene, and there was no one to question them as they went from car to car, wreckage to wreckage. A tapestry of twisted metal, splintered wood, and broken luggage that spilled its contents across the ground to be trodden under foot. A child with a mud-streaked face staring wide-eyed and haunted. An old woman crying over a body she held in her arms.

Solo scanned the crowd again and again, face grim, blue eyes searching. A petite woman with Gaby's gait, a man who stood head and shoulders above the others… none were them. Part of him had to resist calling out their names. That was a secret their enemy hadn’t uncovered yet, and wouldn’t, not from him. Besides, it would have been pointless. If they had survived this, and they were free, they would already be making their way as far from here as they possibly could.

Car, by car, by car, he went, moving scrap, rolling over bodies, until he was covered in dirt, his hair was a disheveled mess falling onto his forehead, and he had started to feel like he was back in the war.

“Solo,” René called, and he snapped to attention at the sound of the man’s voice. There was a tightness to it he didn’t recognize, something apart from the devil-may-care, bohemian attitude he always tried to exude. Solo turned and saw the Frenchman standing just inside the hull of a wrecked car. René tilted his head toward the interior, then disappeared inside. Solo followed.

“This berth has been cut into from the outside,” René told him, gesturing with a hand to the hole in the wall where the window should have been.

There was a line of diapers strewn across the floor, a can of infant formula burst open, covering the place in a fine, white powder. “The window came out in the crash,” Solo offered, though again, coincidence mocked him.

“Oh, it is made to appear as though it did.” There was that tightness again, a frisson of something that told you this was, despite appearances, a very dangerous man. “And I found this.” He held out his hand, fingers pinched around something small. The flickering lights overhead caught on it, and sent of flash of sparkles dancing across the ceiling.

Diamonds.

Solo reached out and snatched it up, looking down at the familiar ring, a sense of doom plummeting through him. The fake pearl was gone, bug inside broken. He closed a fist around it, squeezing hard as emotion crashed through him.

“Motherfuc—
Gaby awoke to the sound of a man screaming. It filled her mind, a roar of agony that slowly peeled away the darkness that shrouded her. Cold seeped in through her legs, her hands, her cheek, and her eyes blinked open slowly.

Awareness blinded her with such force that she jerked, rattling the shackles that bound her hands. She went very still at the sound, taking a moment to orientate herself. She took in the dark cement walls, the bare concrete floor, the lack of furnishings, her eyes darting from one point to the next. She was alone.

*Where was Illya?*

She sat up at that thought, scanning the room in front of her one more time, then looked down at her bound hands. Wide metal cuffs encased her wrists, rusted and archaic. She was still wearing her clothes from the train, dungarees and a flannel shirt, but her feet were bare, her toes chilled.

The sound of screaming shattered the quiet again, and this time she knew *exactly* what she was hearing. A deep voiced cry of pain that ripped through the air as well as her heart. It cut off to heavy breathing through clenched teeth, and she whipped her head around to see behind her, finding more dim lit dungeon, more dark cement walls, and *Illya*. He was strapped to a chair, his jaw strained, skin drenched in sweat, exposed chest heaving.

“Oh look, your little partner is awake.” There was another man there as well. She didn't recognize him, but his accent had a decidedly American twang.

Gaby spared the stranger only a glance before her eyes locked with *Illya’s*. She saw relief there to accompany the pain he couldn't quite hide. His cherished face was battered, his lip split. The skin was broken over one eyebrow, which was the source of the blood that ran in a narrow stream down his cheek into the line of his beard. He was shirtless, as he’d been when she’d last seen him, but now there was a line of deep, angry welts along the left side of his chest. Burns from a device the stranger held in his hand.

“He was alive though, and her heart sent a little pulse of thanks out to the universe.

“Where’s the baby,” she demanded of the other man, though her eyes remained on Illya.

“Yes that,” The man looked between the two of them, setting down his little toy and taking a few steps toward her. “Is that a German accent?” He turned back to Illya as if this was a mutual conversation. “I think *that* is a German accent.”

His suit was expertly tailored, a dark jacket open over a half-buttoned white shirt, no tie. His shoes were a shiny, ink black as he strolled over and crouched down in front of her. He tilted his head as he grasped her chin in one hand, forcing her to face him. Illya fought his bindings, but Gaby glowered back at her enemy, unflinching. His face had a boyish handsomeness, but his hooded green eyes were cruel.

“What is a little kraut like you doing with a giant commie like this fella?” he asked, giving her head a shake. It made her insides roil with the desire to cut him open and watch him bleed.

“Where is the baby?” she demanded once more, and he grinned. It was a sharp-edged thing, but she saw how he could be charming if it suited him.
He moved away, flipping back a wave of dark blond hair with a jerk of his head. Standing to his feet, the man peered down at her, still smiling. “I get to ask the questions here, sweetheart.”

“Please, he’s sick,” Gaby said, and she didn’t have to fake the waver of concern that tinged her voice. Her last memory was of holding him in her arms as the train went to pieces around them. “The crash…”

“Would you look at the mothering instincts on this one,” he commented, cutting her off and glancing over his shoulder at Illya, who immediately stilled his hands. Their captor turned, cocking his head to the side as his gaze dropped to the leather bindings that held Illya’s wrists. One had begun to come loose from the wood. Their enemy chuckled. “You, comrade, are a machine.”

He twisted back to Gaby. “You know how many times I hit this guy and he didn’t make a sound? He broke the first set of shackles we put him in.” He gave her that pointed grin. It showed his teeth and crinkled the skin of his cheeks — a cross between a boy, and a shark. “You missed a lot while you were sleeping.”

She continued to glare at him without comment.

“All right then,” he drawled crossing the room to Illya’s side. “I don’t think I need to ask any more questions today. This guy here is clearly KGB.” He looked pointedly back at Gaby. “But you are not.” He lifted a small bottle of clear liquid and held it up to the dim bulb overhead before inserting a syringe through the cap. “Which means I need to go talk to my boss. And since this machine here doesn’t seem to have the ability to be cool…” He held up the syringe and tapped at it, checking for air bubbles. Satisfied, he stepped up to Illya, leaning into his space but speaking loud enough for Gaby to hear. “There is about a 5% chance this will make you feel really, really good,” he offered.

“No!” Gaby shouted, on her feet in a moment, gritting through the dizziness that came with the rush of blood to her cramped legs.

She charged at him, slamming into his shoulder and knocking the syringe from his hand. She didn’t settle for that though, using her front bound hands to loop around his neck and yank him down into an uplifted knee, two in quick succession. He turned his head, taking the blows to his cheek instead of his nose and then stood up, dragging her with him as she hung from his neck by her chains. Grunting, he swung her around and slammed her into the wall hard. Once, twice, three times, knocking the air from her lungs. Her head spun, bile rising in her throat. He wrenched her from him with a brutal grip, and she cried out as the move twisted her arms, sending pain shooting through her shoulders and elbows. She hit the ground hard, the impact an affront to her already wounded body.

Illya was cursing, struggling in his bindings as the man strode toward her, bending to lift the syringe as he did. Gaby tried to get her feet under her again. The back of her head screamed in pain, her brain throbbing inside her skull. He kicked her once in the ribs and then again in the cheek. The hard heel of his shoe split open her skin, and she went back down, pressing her face into the floor as she gasped in agony.

“No!” Illya shouted, and she twisted her head to find him. Their captor approached Illya, and she tried to bring the two of them into focus, tried to push herself up.

“Yes, Gaby,” the man called. “More information than I’ve gotten out of him all day.” He flipped the syringe into his fist and turned to look right at her. “Thank you, thank you very much.” She cried out as he thrust the needle into Illya’s corduroy covered thigh and depressed the plunger. Illya tensed, gritting his teeth as the sharp instrument pierced skin and muscle. When the needle was pulled free,
he immediately went limp.

Gaby watched him only, even as her enemy approached her once more, those glossy shoes clacking on the cement. The man grabbed her by her hair, and she uttered a hoarse shout at the pain, her brain pounding a pulse of agony behind her eyes. Illya whimpered, gaze tracking them as their enemy dragged her across the floor and threw her against the wall. He stretched her hands up over head, attaching her shackles to a ring waiting there.

Straightening, he shoved at his unruly hair and took a deep breath before crossing to the door. He gave it several sharp knocks. Two more men came in, both big and brutish, and they hauled Illya from the chair. He tried to fight them, but it was a lifeless struggle, and the very idea of Illya being that weak, frightened Gaby more than anything else so far.

They tossed him to the floor some distance away from her, where she could see but not possibly reach him, and he collapsed, as if boneless. She bit back another cry as he curled in on himself, trying to clutch at his leg where the syringe had pierced him, a moan escaping from his swollen lips. The two men tugged his hands away, shackling them to the wall with a long chain, leaving him in a prone position. They bound his feet as well, then strode silently from the room, but Gaby didn’t look away from Illya. His body convulsed, the chains rattling. He jerked his head toward her, his eyes wild as they stared at her, two pale lights in the gloom.

“Oh yes,” their torturer said, coming to kneel in front of her again, drawing her attention. “This is going to be fun.”

Illya bit down on a cry, and Gaby’s eyes snapped back to him, even as she felt the man watching her intently.

“The baby is upstairs,” he told her in a soft voice, mock concern. “He’ll be taken care of, don’t you worry.” He patted her knee and she flinched, but kept her focus on Illya. “After all, he won’t do us much good dead, will he?”

He stood to his feet, but Gaby didn’t bother to watch him cross to the exit this time. She heard the scrape of metal on cement as the heavy door was pulled open, but she didn’t turn to look. Illya’s body bucked, arcing up off the floor, and he let out the most excruciating sound Gaby had heard since she was a child and war had come to her city. Her breathing stopped, her heart stopped, nausea swirling in her belly as her hands twisted into fists until her knuckles burned.

A morbid chuckle drifted to her from the man at the door, echoing cruelly off the dark walls.

“You enjoy your evening.”

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Chapter End Notes

If you find that you need some spoilers or reassurances, beyond the tags, to get through this part, feel free to dm me on tumblr (not anon though or I can’t answer) or email me -
it's my username at gmail.

I want people to enjoy the story, and it is so encouraging to have you guys along as I am posting, plus I really appreciate the more specific detail of chapter by chapter feedback, so I'm willing to work the system. 😊

But if you can endure the journey, please let me take you on it! I worked hard and would like to know if I succeeded in making an intense and compelling story, but I also understand if you can't. Thanks guys. Big Love to all of you.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Torment, anguish and a measure of faith.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, happy Friday! I know everyone is probably anxious so I'll keep it short and sweet. Thank you for reading, you guys are the best.

Supplies:

Illya eventually stopped screaming and passed out. Gaby wasn't sure how long it had been, how long she had sat helpless as he writhed and twisted on the floor, crying out in pain until his voice gave out. It might have been hours, it felt like a lifetime. Her whole body shook, her ears rang, her heart broke over and over again. When he fell still, his head rolling back to reveal his sweat-soaked brow, the line of his throat, she concentrated for several moments before she could be sure of the rise and fall of his chest, to take assurance he was breathing.

She drew her knees up, and buried her face in them, her arms held over her head with thick shackles, her wrists raw where she had tugged at them, desperate to get to him, to do something… anything.

In the resulting silence she could hear her own heartbeat, hear her blood rushing through her veins, and the scritch of a spider scurrying across the floor. The side of her face throbbed, an itching scab developing over her cheekbone, and her palms burned where her short nails had pierced her skin. Tears stung the back of her eyes as her emotions tried to stabilize.

Gaby hated weakness, hated tears, but she had long ago learned to own them, to use them and she did so now, letting them fall, soaking into the denim that covered her knees, and taking with them the edge of fear and tension that was twisting tight inside her. She wasn't giving up, not yet.

What to do though?

"What to do?" she whispered aloud.

She looked over at Illya and her guts clenched. His wrists bled from his thrashing, and the burns on his chest appeared far worse up close than they had from across the room. She needed her strategist, she thought, her eyes flitting over his pale face. I need you, Illya.

The door to her left opened, and she jerked her head up. She took a deep breath as two men entered,
drawing herself back into the wall away from them. One of them appraised her with a sneer. She knew he had observed her withdrawal and saw fear, saw her tear-streaked face and interpreted it as weakness. It brought an odd sense of calm to the rawness of her soul.

Let them think she was weak and afraid. She was already a woman and small, let them underestimate her… she watched them maneuver Illya into a sitting position, heard him groan and flinch at the raw, hoarse sound. They shackled his hands behind him, restrained him above the elbow as well, and when they finished, he hung forward in the bindings, still unconscious, his head lolling on his chest. She glared at the men when they turned back to her and one of them laughed.

Let them underestimate her… it would make it that much more satisfying when she cut their hearts out.

…”

"Stop, he's bleeding!"

"Who cares? It's traitor's blood!"

"Remember this, Kuryakin. This is where you belong. On your face in the dirt."

…”

"Don't sew it; let it scar. It will remind him of who he is, where he stands…"

…”

The first thing his mind registered was pain. A throb in his brow, the sting and pull of ruptured stitches in his back, the deep, searing over his chest, and the raw bite of lacerations in his wrists and ankles. Beyond that: his lungs burned, his muscles felt depleted, hollowed out and empty, a deep, body wide agony and exhaustion.

He sat with it, making it a part of him. When he had been a child, he had learned to make pain his friend, and he engaged the power of it now, drawing it in with his breath and pushing it down into his soul. It was huge, endless, so profound he wondered if... Maybe he was dying.

_Can I just... let go?_

_No._

There was a reason he couldn't die now, he just couldn't quite put his finger on why.

"Illya?"
That voice… that was what he wanted - what he needed. Where was it? Up? Down? He felt a spike of pain as he frowned, and huffed out a breath that seared his throat.

"Illya, can you hear me?"

She was right there, right there with him… that was perfect. No! That was *bad*, she should be far from here… She needed to be —

With a sharp inhale, he awoke, his head jerking upward as air filled his lungs, and all the pain came rushing in with an even greater vibrancy. He groaned as he sought to bring it under his control and that brought pain too.

"Gaby." His throat spasmed. He tried to reach for it but his arms were bound and the working of his muscles was torment. He opened his eyes and the room spun, as dark as it had been from behind his eyelids. She said his name again, and he turned in the direction of her voice and there she was. He let his head fall back against the wall as relief washed through him and he allowed himself to devour the sight of her.

Her cheek was swollen and marred, she was smudged with dirt, her hair in tangles, but she was alive, her eyes still vibrant — filled with concern but not dulled with pain.

"Solnyshka," he breathed, the feel of the name in his mouth a centering thing despite the burn it caused.

She gave him a small, tremulous smile. "It's about time you woke up." He could hear the depth of fear behind her attempt to tease him.

"Mmmm," he groaned again. "I think it is because you wore me out." His voice was a croak of sound.

She choked on a shaky laugh, her head falling back against the wall. "Oh Mein Gott," she huffed, and closed her eyes. When she opened them, they caught his and the two of them shared an aching look, staring into each other until their breaths synced and heartbeats slowed.

"Are you all right?" He regarded her carefully one more time, the way her knees were pulled to her chest, the spot of blood on her shirt over her injured shoulder, the cut in her cheek. Still he asked stupidly, "Did they hurt you?"

"Me?" This time, her laugh was dark. She shook her head. "I've been watching them torture you," she said. "So, no I'm not all right, but you are the one I am worried about."

He frowned. He remembered earlier, the beating, the burning — his chest throbbed. The image of Gaby crying out as she was thrown to the ground came back to him and he flinched.

*The syringe*, he realized. There had been weakness, then the *fire* — bright, searing flames that had licked out from this thigh, scalding his veins as it moved out to the rest of his body.

The ache and weariness throughout indicated it had gone on for hours, he didn't recall most of it… which meant it hadn't really been for *him*.

His eyes flashed to Gaby, and hers were haunted as she gazed back at him.

"How long?" he asked, and his voice was an abrasion.

She stayed silent for several beats. "Too long."
"Gaby, I—"

"If you say you are sorry," she ground out, cutting him off. “I will stab you the first chance I get.” She turned away from him, tipping her face up to the ceiling, and he swallowed the words at the sight of a tear trailing down her cheek. Several moments passed, then she exhaled on a tremor. "We have to get out of here."

He didn't disagree, but as consciousness continued to settle over him, the full weight of their situation did as well. They were both bound, and quite thoroughly. He took a moment to study Gaby's shackles and was sickened by the deep chafing on her wrists. They were alone, without backup, without a plan, and no one knew where they were.

Hopelessness opened up like a seed. Only, instead of a tiny vine seeking the light, it birthed darkness, the roots reaching out, burrowing into his soul. He took a breath to ease the sensation and locked his eyes on hers. "It will be okay."

"Don't lie to make me feel better, Illya," she scoffed. "I think you know me better than that." Her eyes glittered in the darkness, solid and unrelenting.

He did. He knew her better than that. She didn't need lies or pretty words. She deserves pretty words, he thought absently, but pushed it aside. First she needed to be safe.

"Then what do you want from me?" A humble, broken question, his voice catching. Whatever he could give her he would, whatever it took, he would do it - for her.

Her eyes bored into him with fire, and something else so profound he could not dare believe it. Something that looked so much like faith.

"I want you to Make. It. True."

He inhaled as the command settled, seizing onto his will and soaking into his skin. He accepted the unwavering thrall of her gaze, felt it - felt her - penetrate his soul.

The door opened, and they both snapped their attention toward it as the man who had tortured him strode inside. He studied them both carefully, his focus resting on Gaby the longest, before he turned to Illya.

"So, you came through that fairly well." He paused, gave a pointed smirk. "Didn't he, Gaby?" Illya's jaw clenched at hearing the man say her name, and the pain that accompanied the action stunned him. He had apparently cracked one of his teeth. "Many people don't, you know?"

"What do you want?" Gaby's question was more sigh than voice, her head falling back between her arms, drawing both men's attention.

Settling on his haunches, their captor looked Gaby over, then reached out and hooked a hand behind the curve of her calf. Illya jerked forward and shouted, "Take your hands off her," in hoarse but menacing Russian.

The other man grinned. He tipped his head toward Illya, but kept his attention on Gaby. "This guy, huh? A little too easy to pull his strings, dontcha think?"

Gaby said nothing, held his gaze, chin lifted.

"I see." He dropped his head, and removed his hand from Gaby's leg. Reaching up to cradle her jaw instead, curl the fingers of a large hand behind her neck. He brought his attention back to her face,
ice cold, and dug his thumb into the cut on her cheek, the one his heel had made. She huffed out a
breath of pain, her lower lip shaking as he broke the scab back open, drawing fresh blood. It ran in a
little rivulet down to her chin, and everything inside Illya morphed into rage as he wrenched at his
chains, ignoring the way it tore at his wrists.

"You don't see though, do you?" Their enemy continued, tipping her head back with the force of his
thumb. "You don't have any power here, Gaby. You can answer my questions… or not. I'm not
really that invested. I'm just," he shrugged, "curious. So all your bravado, all your stoicism? It won't
save you, or him, or that baby. It won't shield the people you are working for. You will die at the
end of this." Illya saw the muscle twitch in her jaw as she clenched her teeth. Their torturer pulled his
thumb back and licked it clean of her blood. "And we'll find out why you tried to stand against us.
It's all very, very simple."

Illya growled, a torn rasp of sound, and fought even harder against his shackles, but it was useless, a
show only of his weakness. As the man stood to his feet, Illya swore in a long stream of curses he'd
be ashamed for Gaby to hear under any other circumstances. Anguish tore at him and his eyes
burned.

The man laughed. "I think my only real dilemma here is trying to decide if it would be more fun to
kill you in front of him, or him in front of you."

Illya breathed hard, words dying off, and Gaby turned all her attention to him. Her eyes were
shuttered in that way that had always frustrated him before, but today it seemed, instead, to push a
rod of steadiness into him. He was reminded of her strength, her will. When she looked back at the
other man, a lone tear slipped from her lower lashes, coursing over her cheek and mixing with her
blood. It scorched Illya like an ember.

"I just want to know, please," Gaby begged, her accent a little thicker than usual, her voice shaking.
"Is the baby all right?"

The man opened his mouth, whether to answer her or mock her further they wouldn't discover,
because the door opened and another man popped his head inside. Swarthy skin and a mop of
disheveled black hair atop a long, slender face.

"Mr. Corbin," the intruder called, and their tormentor swung around with an angry scowl.

"Did you just say my name, asshole?"

The other man quailed, small eyes widening in fear. "I'm sorry sir! I — the baby — he's worse.
Maybe we should call the doct—"

"And deal with a bunch of questions!? Are you a fucking moron?"

"No! I—"

"Get the fuck out, Avi!" Corbin shouted, then held up a hand. "Wait." He turned back to Gaby,
studying her, his narrow green eyes intent. She had jumped at the sound of the door, and now she
was gawking at the other man, the corners of her mouth twisted down sharply. Illya felt a small
flicker of recognition, an awareness that fought against the blossoming hopelessness inside him as he
realized his beautiful, brilliant Solnyshka, was making a play.

"Let’s take the little mama here," Corbin said, jutting his chin at her. "Go get Max though, I doubt
she'll go without trying something."

"No!" Illya snapped and Gaby turned to him, her eyes wide. He gazed back, the spark of
communication catching between them, letting her know he understood, would go along, despite anything he might say to the contrary. Twisting to pin a fierce glare on Corbin, he spit out, "You are not taking her anywhere."

Corbin laughed, an abrupt bark of a thing that fell off quickly. Then he took a step closer to Illya and kicked him in the side. Illya groaned, his teeth grinding together. It was hardly dramatized, the pain throughout every inch of his body was an acute, bitter thing.

"Stop!" Gaby cried. "I know what to do! I know! Please, don't hurt him! Just… let me see the baby. I can help! Please."

Corbin laughed. "See, here's the thing with women and babies," he offered to the room at large. "You can always count on them getting attached."

A third man, Illya assumed ‘Max,’ entered the room. He was big, thickly muscled, with a brutish set to his jaw. Gaby flinched at the sight of him and it didn't seem feigned. Illya watched, useless, as the brute sneered at her before reaching down to release her shackles from the wall. Max freed her arms first, then crouched to unfasten her ankles. Gaby's eyes flicked over the meaty hands, a swift assessment, then she studied her wrists, checking her injuries and blowing under the shackles to ease the sting of her torn skin.

"Gaby," Illya called softly, and she turned to him with a wan smile.

"It'll be okay," she tried to assure him, and that wobble in her voice hurt, like pressure on a bruise, even though he knew she was putting it on. "I'll be right back. I just need to make sure Beast is well."

Max yanked her to her feet, her hands still bound in front of her, and Corbin reached out to put a hand on her right shoulder, where her scab was hidden by her shirt. He gave it a squeeze and she gasped, bending under the pain it caused, unable to escape. Illya growled and rattled his chains like the impotent ghost he was. Powerless, nothing, a vapor.

"Yeah, Buddy," Corbin said over his shoulder as he led Gaby out of the room. "It'll be okay," he mocked Gaby’s words. His grin spread wide over his boyish face, curling up at the corners like the villain from a comic book as he regarded Illya. "We'll take really good care of her and, um, then I'll be back. So we can have a chat."

Gaby didn't look back at him as they ushered her from the room, but he didn't take his eyes off her until she disappeared, and the steel door was shut with a bang behind her.

Left alone, Illya stared at that door, his chest tight and heart pounding. He tried to focus on his breath, but the pain was everywhere. There was no escape from it. Having Gaby out of sight began to gnaw at his mind. The way that man had spoken to her, touched her… the stark realization that he wouldn’t be able to reach her if she needed help overwhelmed him. He thought of Beast crying in the twisted metal of the train, when he couldn’t see either of them, couldn’t get to them. A swell of frustration and rage began to rise inside him, pounding with his racing pulse and the throb of agony that dominated every cell. His respiration became harsh, ragged, his jaw flexing despite the bitter pang that shot through his skull at the action.

Surrendering to the veil of red closing over his vision, clouding his thoughts, he roared at the empty room, the effort tearing at his throat, the sound echoing off the walls, futile and stupid. He thrashed at his chains, arms flexed, shoulders straining, throwing his body weight against them. He growled into the pain it brought. Just one more ‘noise’ in and overwhelming cacophony of torment.
Then something changed.

Illya went still, panting as he tried to figure out what it had been, reel his mind in from the edge. He jerked at his chains again, and his heart jumped when he felt the slight give of tension. Focus returned in a rush as he repeated the action. It was small, almost infinitesimal, but there was a weakness in the place he was bound to the wall.
**Chapter 32**

Chapter Summary

Hard times continue...

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday everyone. I love you, you are awesome, thank you so much for all the support you guys are giving me.

I am issuing a minor noncon warning for this chapter. I stand by not tagging for noncon, but if you are very sensitive (no condemnation loves) I want to give you a heads up.

*SPOILERS WITHIN!!* <-- Mouse over for spoilers.

The staircase was built of a rustic stone that curved upward around a broad center pillar. It reminded Gaby of the staircase in a villain’s lair from one of the terrible movies Solo had made her go see with him back home. She thought of Napoleon then, wondered if he had received her message. Had he come for them? How close had he gotten before this had happened? Was there even any hope of him finding them now?

At the top of the stairs, her captors exchanged a slew of heated words in Italian. When they finished, Gaby watched the man, Corbin, leave with narrowed eyes. She spared a moment to imagine him falling down those steps, cracking open his skull, but then Max’s hand was grasping her arm and she was yanked back to harsh reality. He dragged her along behind him as he exited through an ornate wooden door and the two of them stepped out into a luxurious foyer. She felt plush carpet beneath her cold, bare feet and the warmth of the sunlight pouring in through the front windows warmed her chilled skin. She raised her hands to shield her eyes, squinting into the brightness, and the chains at her wrists jangled loudly.

“Come,” Max ordered thickly.

He was a tall man. Not as tall as Illya, but much broader, broader even than Solo. The memory of him strangling her in the train yard set her on edge. By the bruising grip he had on her arm, she'd say he remembered her too.

He guided her roughly to the left, marching her past a sweeping staircase that led up to the next level, and down a narrow hallway paneled in decoratively carved oak. She tried to catalogue as many...
details as she could. They hadn’t gone very far when she heard Beast crying, the sound little more than a wheeze.

“Oh mein Gott!” she shouted, twisting in Max’s grip as she tried to go to him. The brute jerked her back, yanking her off her feet and into his side. His body was uncomfortably hot against her and the action made the newly reopened abrasion on her shoulder burn. She disregarded it, funneling the pain into the menace her eyes held as she scowled up at him. “Let me go!” she spat. “Let me go to him! You can’t let him cry like that, it makes it worse!”

Her desperation seemed to have some effect, because he released her, shoving her into a room just to the right. She stumbled with his harsh treatment, but regained her balance quickly and all but ran to the bassinet waiting across the room. She surveyed the space with a swift, keen eye—the number of windows, the single exit behind her, no one else in the room—but after that, her eyes landed on Beast and her spy tactics faltered.

His little face was scrunched up and wet with tears, his cheeks mottled, lips tinged blue.

“Oh, Kleiner!” she gasped, scooping him up into her arms as gently as she could, aware of the chains and metal cuffs where they might injure him. “My poor Beast!” Her heart thundered as she pressed her face to the side of his head, breathed in his baby scent, and tried not to clutch at him. She was so relieved to have him in her arms and so frightened by his appearance that her hands trembled. Holding him away from her again, she checked him over, expression grim. She didn’t know much about croup, but she didn’t need Illya to tell her that blue lips were a bad thing. He stared back at her, his dark eyes wide, and she saw that he recognized her. A sob shuddered through him and he made a fussing sound, wheezy and hoarse, more complaint than cry, and she had to breathe through the rush of emotions that flooded her.

“I know, I know, mein armer, armer geliebter Junge,” she said, pulling him into her shoulder again and rubbing a circle over his back. “But don’t cry, please don’t cry, you will only hurt yourself.” She spun around and glowered at her burly guard. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Scusa?”

“The bathroom!” she insisted, frustration clawing at her. “Das Bad!” she shouted in German, and something must have clicked because understanding dawned on his blunt face. He looked uncomfortable.

“I must ask the Boss…”

“No,” Gaby sliced a hand through the air. “He needs help now! Hot water! Steam! Is there a shower?”

Beast cried at her raised voice and Gaby snarled, marching toward the door. She moved with such swift determination, Max was caught off guard and she managed to slip right passed him out into the hall.

“Hey!” his angry voice carried after her, but she didn’t go far. Off the kitchen there was a butler’s rooms with a narrow bath. She felt some small relief at the sight of the shower. Kleine Geschenke, she thought and went inside, slamming the door behind her. It opened a second later, Max following her in.

“If you close the door, I must come in,” he said sharply, and she rolled her eyes at him as she twisted the taps to the highest heat.
She pointedly surveyed the cramped, windowless room, then turned back to him with an arched brow. “Where exactly would I go?”

“It does not matter.”

“Fine,” she said, tossing a towel at him. “Make yourself useful then and put this at the bottom of the door. We need to hold the steam inside.” She didn’t bother waiting to see if he complied, but turned her attention to Beast, moving as close to the spray as she could without getting them both wet, and facing him into the shower stall. “Let’s hope a fancy house like this has a big hot water heater, mein Schatz,” she murmured to him, and kissed the downy hair on his head.

Illya leaned back, to the extent he was able with the restraints they had him in, settling into his elbows and putting a deep, consistent pressure on the shackles over his upper arms and the place where they were connected to the wall behind him. He tried to appear casual, unaffected, despite the worry he felt for Gaby and Beast, or the pain that drummed throughout his body like an incessant white noise. Pretending to make himself comfortable, he extended his long legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles as best he could with the shackles. It was odd that they hadn’t chained them to the wall like his hands, but he was not going to complain. Across from him, seated in a metal folding chair, the man who tortured him, Corbin, was shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, it sounded like you said MI6, but I’m pretty sure you meant to say, SSD.”

The turn of Illya’s lips was minuscule and smug. “Why would I lie about that?” he asked. “You know already she is German.”

“And you’re KGB, so she’s from your side of the sheets or you wouldn’t be working together.”

“She is an East German defector,” Illya explained, enjoying the unique satisfaction that came from deceiving your enemy with honesty. It was the truth what they said: reality could be stranger than fiction. “And she now, officially, answers to a man from British intelligence.” All right, so it wasn’t the perfect truth, but he would keep UNCLE’s name out of things for as long as he was able.

There was a faint laugh from Corbin. He leaned forward, squinting at Illya with narrow eyes. “And now you’re going to tell me you were taking her back home,” he said. “Am I right?”

Illya couldn’t stop the cocky grin that pulled up the corner of his lips. “That is exactly correct.” He made a frowning nod of faux approval. “You are a very smart man, I can see how you got this job.”

Corbin pushed to his feet and bowed his head as he pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he sighed and his arm swung out, backhanding Illya across the face. His head snapped to the side with the force, the skin on the inside of his cheek breaking open against his teeth, but he simply lifted his head again as if it was little more than a tap.

“You know,” the man drawled. “I have met quite a few commies in my time, and they've all been cocksure, sons a bitches, but you, my friend,” he put his hands on his hips and leered down at Illya from beneath his hair. “You are a little something else.”

Illya ran a tongue over the inside of his cheek and spit blood out onto the floor. Said nothing.
Corbin crouched down to look him in the eye. "You two probably think this is some grand rescue, some meaningful work to save the world or some shit. But the truth is, this is just a game. An elaborate stratagem played by rich, powerful people. Our lives, our morals, our motives— They mean nothing. You, me, the kid." He paused, his gaze keen. "That woman upstairs... We are all just pawns."

Illya remained silent, his jaw hard, and Corbin raked a hand through his hair and stood up again.

"Well, I guess I’ll go up and see how your little defector is doing.” He peered at him sideways, and Illya braced himself for a comment he wouldn’t like. “Bet she looks real sweet with a baby in her arms.” Corbin leaned forward again and braced himself on his knees, cocking his head to the side. “You have a piece of that yet? Hmm? You want one, I can tell that much.” His brow pulled into a mock scowl. “She doesn’t seem very soft…” The frown slowly morphed into that signature, biting smile. “But then, I kinda like them fiery.”

Illya set his jaw. “Do not touch her.”

Corbin laughed. “Hey, don’t worry, big guy. If I decide to have her, I’ll make sure you get to watch.”

Illya couldn’t stop himself from yanking at his restraints and hurling curses at the man. It was a good excuse to put more pressure on the bolt in the wall. He wished he could claim that excuse. Instead it was rage, frustration that flowed out of him at the threat. But even as his stomach twisted with revulsion and fear, he took comfort in one thing. Gaby was a pawn in no man’s game.

She was the Queen.

…

Gaby inhaled slowly, bringing more of the steam-filled air into her lungs. It was soothing, and she tried to relax her shoulders against the tile wall in hopes that some of her calm, as fragile as it was, might seep into the infant in her arms. That it might make him feel safe. Even if it was an illusion.

At least she had gotten Max to unchain her wrists.

Beast peered up at her from the crook of her elbow, his lips no longer blue. His breathing had eased but there was still a slight rattle each time he exhaled. She lifted him up to her shoulder again, thinking that being upright might help in some way.

Steam had filled the room, making her clothing cling to her sticky skin. Her hair was flat to her forehead, the already matted strands plastered to her neck, making her uncomfortable. Beast’s hair was also wet, his little cheeks pink. His eyes were bright and she felt encouraged by the sight. He tried to hold himself up off her shoulder to stare at her, and she hovered a hand at his back to support him as he wobbled.

She realized, achingly, that Corbin hadn’t been wrong. No, not all women were instantly attached to babies, that was ridiculous, but she was certainly attached to this one. She cooed at him softly. A crooked smile popped out on his tiny face in response, and her heart lurched with a mix of fear and affection.

Near the door, Max was watching her with increasing interest. She had noticed his gaze from the
beginning, her skin crawling, but now the energy coming off of him was palpable. Gaby knew her shirt had become translucent in the damp air, and that she wasn’t wearing anything beneath it. The memory of the time on the train filtered back to her, and the images of Illya groaning in pleasure beneath her and writhing in agony on the dungeon floor played against themselves in her mind, a horrifying contrast. She held Beast a little tighter as her insides roiled.

“We’ll get out of this somehow,” she whispered in his ear.

“I think the water is growing cold now,” Max called, and Gaby's attention slid sharply back to him. She could feel it too, the shift in the temperature of the room. She lifted Beast up and listened to his chest. It still wasn’t clear, but it was much improved.

“All right,” she said. “But we will have to do this again later.”

Max opened the door and waited for her to pass him, his hulking mass taking up most of the space, his eyes skating down her body. She lifted her chin and slid past him, forcing herself not to shudder in disgust when their bodies made contact.

He escorted her back to the study and she carried Beast to the bassinet. “He will probably eat and fall asleep now,” she said, settling him into the blankets.

The moment her hands were free of the baby, Max was on her, spinning her around and pulling her against his body. He crushed his mouth to hers, his lips thick, and too wet. She struggled against his grip, pushing at his sides, hands skating inside his jacket, yanking at his shirt. He left her mouth to suck at her neck, and she shuddered, hands sliding down to his hips, fingers catching on his pockets as she shoved at him.

“Stop!” she shouted. “Please — stop.” She struggled in his grip, twisting her body in the tight embrace of hard arms. He chuckled against into skin, then pulled back to sneer at her. Gaby’s hands were already in the air. With all the force she could muster, she brought both of them down onto his ears with a loud pop, and he jerked, stumbling away from her, stunned. She spun away to the nearby desk and grabbed up a letter opener, turning back to him with a snarl, wielding it as a knife.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

Corbin strolled into the room, eyes flicking from Max, who was holding his head as he swayed on his feet, to Gaby, eyes tracing over her before falling pointedly on her weapon. “You can put that down now,” he said with a quietness that did nothing to hide the menace behind the order.

She took a deep breath, let herself tremble as she lowered the letter opener to her side.

“On the desk, Gaby,” he intoned, and she glared at him as she complied. “That’s better.” He turned to Max and there was an angry exchange of words between them. Max left and Gaby watched him go while also staying aware of Corbin’s position in the room.

Beast let out a distressed cry and she moved to go to him, but Corbin held up his hand with an, “Ah.”

“It’s not good for him to cry with the croup,” she snapped. “It will make it worse again. Don’t undo all my work.” Her eyes were vicious. “You said you needed him alive, didn’t you?”

He waved a lazy hand toward the bassinet, indicating she should go, and she did, lifting Beast back into her arms. Corbin laughed. “I’m not sure which is more pathetic, the big guy down stairs trying to protect you, or you trying to protect that baby.” Gaby’s eyes drilled into him as he walked across the room and took a seat in one of the ornate, upholstered chairs. “It does work in my favor though, doesn’t it?” he said absently. Their attention shifted to the door as the narrow-faced man from before,
Avi, came in with a bottle of milk. Corbin gestured to Gaby, and the younger man crossed the room to her.

She accepted the bottle and looked around for a place to settle. The only other seat was the chair next to Corbin’s. Hesitantly, she lowered herself into it, adjusting Beast in her arms. She checked the temperature of the milk on her wrist, as Illya had showed her, to make sure it wasn’t too hot before offering it to him. She startled when Corbin’s hand came to rest on her knee. It was warm, humid, seeping through the denim of her trousers and she regarded it coldly. Everything inside her screamed to pull away, but she knew it would only invite further intrusion. Her gaze flicked to his smug face, her jaw set, her body going very still.

He smiled again, and it was unsettling in its charm. Boyish, handsome, condescending. Gaby turned away, focusing on the infant in her arms. Beast’s tiny waved at her as he drank, his dark eyes staring up at her full of trust.

“You certainly aren’t going anywhere without him now, are you?”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you feel I should have tagged for what happens in this chapter. I felt that it would have put people in mind of a place this fic doesn't go to and that's why I didn't use the tag. This is as bad as that sort of thing every gets.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

A declaration, a discovery, and a descent.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday! I want to, once again, thank you all for reading and hanging out with me here. I appreciate your comments and thoughts and having you all to share this with. Here is your trauma kit for this week. Take care everyone! Get some air, stay hydrated, and I’ll see you next week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Illya had no idea how long Gaby had been gone. There was nothing he could use to construct the passage of time for himself as he waited. His father's watch was gone, (something he had been trying not to think about,) so he didn’t even have the tick of a second hand at his wrist to help him think. He closed his eyes and balled his hands into fists, continuing the slow, steady tugs at his restraints. Moving from side to side, up and down, he focused on a consistent rhythm. He kept his movements small, so as not to draw attention if the door opened without warning. Which happened just then, making him lift his head and take a deep breath.

Gaby stumbled inside on her bare feet, shoved forward by her guards, and the sight of her immediately ease some of his anxiety. She used her momentum to come straight toward him, falling into his lap, her arms wrapping around his shoulders. He inhaled sharply at the pain, and blessing, of physical contact.

“Gaby—” he started to say, but she cut him off with a kiss. It was a bad idea, it gave so much away to their enemy, but he couldn't stop himself from surrendering, from accepting it—the kiss, the moment—and kissing her in return, pouring into it all the wonder, love and need he held for her.

One of her hands cupped the back of his head, holding him close, but the fingers of her other dug into his shoulder blade. He was so caught up in the rush of intimacy, that it took him a moment to feel the hard bite of metal in his skin, the unusual shape. Not her fingers.

A key.

Gaby pulled back, looking into his eyes steadily, and he said the words—said them because they were true, said them because he wanted her to know, because there was no strategic advantage for him to say them now so maybe, maybe, she would believe they were real.
“I love you.”

His voice was deep, still hoarse from earlier, but firm and assured. Because he had no doubts, no wondering, no uncertainty in the truth of his feelings for her.

Gaby’s eyes softened and she flicked them over his face, memorizing him as he so often did her.

Her smile was light, pure Gaby. Gaby at the wheel of a fast car. Gaby when she figured out how to make a troubled engine purr. Gaby after tackling him to the ground in the sparring room. Gaby, his Gaby.

“I know,” she said, her voice gentle as she focused on his eyes once more.

“All right! Well, that’s enough of that!”

Corbin’s voice broke the bubble they had created for themselves and a man hauled Gaby off of Illya’s lap. The key fell from where she’d pressed it and into the palm of his hand. He closed a fist around it, squeezing as he watched them chain her back to the wall.

“What is all this, anyway?” Corbin asked, looking from Gaby to Illya, who glared back at him with menace. A knowing grin pulled at the other man’s face. “Trying to get the taste of Max out of your mouth, Gaby?”

Though Corbin addressed her, those eyes didn’t leave Illya’s and he couldn’t stop himself from glancing at Gaby. She caught his gaze, held it, and he felt an ounce of relief. Whatever it was, she had handled it, and she was unharmed.

But for how long?

“You certainly solved my dilemma though.” Corbin was still speaking. He settled his hands on his hips and turned to Gaby, bending down to get into her face. “I am definitely killing you in front of him.”

…

“Please, tell me you have good news.”

Solo didn’t bother looking up when he heard René enter, but continued to focus on the wood grain in the tabletop as his mind searched for any connection that might help him find his partners. The other man dropped a pile of rolled up maps onto the coffee table, and they spilled into his line of sight.

“Well, I have news…” René offered half-heartedly, picking up one map and tossing it aside before grabbing a second. He unrolled it, and Solo reached out to help, pulling at the opposite side until it was laid out flat. He was surprised at the extensive amount of earth it covered.

“Where is this?”

“Northern Italy…”

Solo blinked down at it. “That is a very large area,” he remarked, lifting a brow at the other man.

“Yes, well, as I said, I have news.”
“Is this news? Because I’m pretty sure we already knew they were somewhere in Northern Italy.”

René’s laugh was a tired one. “Tu es vraiment un connard… Perhaps, if you would listen to someone, or something, other than your own ego for once.”

Solo exhaled loudly through his nose. Okay, maybe he was being an asshole. “All right, explain.”

His provisional companion had not lost the angry tension Solo had sensed from him at the train wreck, but it seemed to have banked down to an ember, still hot and ready to ignite when needed. It was something he understood, something he felt himself.

René sighed and dragged a hand over the map. “Your Baker Woman,” he began. “The man she described… the one following our Gaby in the market?”

That too had changed—“Our Gaby”—and it was something that gave Solo an uneasy pause. Because he found himself believing René now. Believing he actually cared about Gaby, believing he was here only to help her and, in that same thought, unable to deny that he, Solo, was grateful for it.

He was also taken by the realization, that, without being able to reach out to Waverly—and considering the coverage these people had, that seemed extremely risky—he was going to be dependent on the Frenchman’s connections if he was not only going to find his partners, but get them back alive.

“His name is Avi,” René continued. “He was in the bar in Treviso, bragging about his job, saying how he was working for very important people.” He scoffed, that same stupid sound that grated on Solo’s nerves but wasn’t quite as annoying when directed at someone else.

“He said ‘soon you will be giving me drinks for free.’” René shook his head. “In my bar? Can you believe?” He flapped a hand, dismissing his own words. “Quand même… he told Yannick that he would be leaving to his employer’s mansion in the mountains, and now we are here.”

“René…” Solo began. How many mansions in all the North… it was a needle in a haystack.

“I know, I know,” René waved him off, and paused to take two long pulls off his cigarette, then took out a manila folder. “It is not much to go on, but—” he opened the folder and set it on the littered coffee table, scratched the back of his head. “I figure they will need to have relatively easy access—they want to take that baby somewhere out of his grandfather’s reach but, they are not there yet I am guessing.” He started to lay out pictures, speaking around the cigarette stuck to his lips. “But also… something well-fortified, something decently secluded—”

Solo’s eyes focused on the pictures as René tossed them down. He shot his hand out and cut him off mid-sentence. “Wait!”

René held back, then dropped into the seat opposite as Solo lifted the second-to-last photo up for inspection. He trailed his gaze over the details, just to be sure the picture in his brain matched the one in his hand.

“This estate used to belong to the Vinciguerra family.” He spoke slowly, his mind whirring like a dial, tumblers falling into place.

“I don’t know who that is,” René said, leg bouncing as he blew out a stream of smoke.

“It doesn’t matter.” Solo shook his head. “This is it.” He tossed the photo down, and began going over the map again.
“How can you be sure?”

“I can’t.” Solo stood to his feet and pulled on his coat. “But I don’t believe in this kind of coincidence, and I’m guessing you don’t either.”

René crushed his cigarette out and stood as well. “I am not saying you are wrong, but I cannot agree, because, as I said, I do not know who we are talking about.”

Solo chuckled, a small sense of relief overtaking him at finally having a real lead. “I guess I’ll tell you about it on the way.”

Gaby felt disgusting. It was a stray, absent thought that drifted into her mind as she shut off the taps on the shower, cutting off the cooling water. The woman inside her wanted to climb under that spray—wash away the grime, the blood, this place, from her skin.

Ten thousand, ten thousand and one...

It wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

Beast made a gleeful little squealing sound in her arms, and she smiled at him. “You think it is funny, do you?” she asked. “Now that you are breathing, you are all smiles.” It had taken a couple of days to get him there, but now it was a relief to hear nothing but breath and his little heartbeat when she put her ear to his chest.

He tried to hold himself upright again, wobbling on his immature hips, and she made an 'op!' sound, snapping a wet hand up to support him. “Oh, you are a strong little man.”

“Now, isn’t this a sweet picture?” Corbin drawled, leaning against the open bathroom door.

Gaby ignored him and kept her eyes on Beast. “It’s time for a nap now, mein kleiner,” she told him, her voice tender. “So you can keep getting stronger.” She had fed him while he was in the steam to help ease his breathing, make sure he was satiated.

“Come on.” Corbin nodded his head toward the doorway. “Back to the study.”

Gaby veered around him, her chin up, and he took her arm, squeezing just to the point of discomfort as he pulled her into his side. She gave a halfhearted struggle, but he only tugged her in with more force, so she stopped fighting him, not wanting to unsettle Beast.

If he’s going to be left here alone, I don’t want it to be in fear.

The words flitted through her mind without permission and she shoved them aside. She wasn’t leaving him.

She wasn’t leaving him.

She held onto the thought as Corbin dragged her through the doors back into the study. Her eyes flicked to the windows where the setting sun cast an orange glow in the sky above the tree line. Her gaze touched on the outbuildings, the high stone wall that lay beyond a stretch of open grass.
Corbin tugged her close, leaned in and whispered, his breath hot against her ear. “It really is too bad you will never get to be a mother.”

She stiffened and he chuckled as he pushed her away. He strode across the room, and settled back on the edge of the ornate mahogany desk in the corner. “My boss will be here any moment,” he told her, pulling back the sleeve of his jacket to look at his wrist, and Gaby’s eyes locked onto the item there. “Your little charge there will be taken somewhere far away, where his continued welfare will be the bargaining chip for his Grandfather’s loyalty.” Gaby clenched her jaw, barely registering his words over her anger, bile stinging the back of her throat. “And then I get to put a bullet in your head—Oh!” He studied her keenly as he lifted his hand, showing her the face of Illya’s watch. “You like it? Spoils of war I think. It’s a very nice watch. There’s some kind of inscription on the back… too bad I don’t read Russian.”

Gaby twisted away from his knowing grin. “It will be difficult for me to get him to sleep if I am angry,” she offered sharply. “So, maybe you could shut up for five minutes.”

His eyebrows lifted to his hairline. “Well then, there’s that bite I’ve been waiting for.” He pushed up off the desk, smirking. “I’ll leave you to your womanly duty,” he remarked. “Oh and, in case you’re getting any ideas, we’ve removed all the letter openers and such, and someone will be right outside… if you need anything.” He gave her one more careful look as he closed the door, shutting her inside.

Gaby inhaled deep and released it slowly. She glanced at the clock on the wall, lifted Beast up onto her shoulder and pulled the heaviest blankets from his bassinet to cover him. Smoothing a hand over his back she realized she found his weight and warmth comforting. She exhaled a sharp bite of a laugh. Taking consolation in a baby… she should be the one giving it.

Her hand patted his bottom as she began to sing absently, walking around the room in little circles. She picked up the countdown in the back of her mind.

“Guten Abend, gute Nacht,” she murmured, her voice wavering a little. Singing of goodnight and of a cradle decorated with roses. “Morgen früh, wenn Gott will, wirst du wieder geweckt…” She stopped.

*If God wills, in the morning you will wake once again?*

“She said aloud, giving Beast a jiggle. Tucking her face into the side of this head. “All lullabies are creepy.”

She checked the clock again. *Ten thousand and fifty…*

There was a burst of sound from down below: steel crashing into cement, men shouting. Gaby stilled, eyes glancing toward the doors, before starting a new song. Her voice was firm as she moved toward the expanse of windows.

“Tili-tili-bom. Krichit nochnaya ptitsa…”

*[The night bird screams…]*

Her accent was terrible and it made her smile. She yanked on one of the latches, pushing one wide pane of glass out into the fresh, mountain air.

“On uzhe probralsya v dom. K tem, komu ne spitsya.”

*[He’s already in the house…]*
She peered down, wind whipping at her hair, carrying the scent of pine and distant snow. It was a decent drop to the ground, but nothing she couldn’t manage. She noted the distance to the perimeter wall. It was a long shot.

She was going to take it anyway.

Behind her, the doors to the study crashed open and Max stormed inside. Gaby’s eyes locked on him as she stepped up onto the stone windowsill.

“On idet,” she said, hardly even singing now.

[He is coming...]

“Give me that baby!” Max shouted, barreling toward her, pushing aside the chairs in his path.

“On uzhe...”

[He’s already...]

Her eyes left Max and fell, instead, on the form of the man coming up behind him. She smiled, locking eyes with Illya as he wrapped an arm around Max’s neck, yanking him backward into a naked choke.

“Blizhe...”

She spared one more look at the man she loved—and jumped out the window.

Chapter End Notes

I am really maxing out my use of that lullabye. 😊
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Desperation, daring, and the darkness before the dawn.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday!! It's April. I mean, I know it's been April for awhile but guys, it's almost over. Where does the time gooooo?

Big hugs and thank yous to each and everyone of you. I appreciate everyone who takes the time to read and comment. It's a wonderful thing when you guys pop up in my inbox. Long or short, every comment is a gift. I love you guys, thank you. And if you haven't had time or confidence to comment, don't worry, I love you too. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Illya’s already racing heart lurched, wild and sharp, as he watched Gaby disappear out the window with Beast in her arms. He didn’t have the luxury of fretting over their landing. In his hold, Max thrashed savagely. The skin on skin nature of the choke meant it was impossible to slide out of, but it hurt like hell and Illya gritted his teeth, squeezing harder.

The other man's weight gave him some leverage over Illya and he used it to yank them sideways, trying to shake the Russian loose. Both of them went careening into one of the ornate chairs. It clattered across the room to crack against the mahogany desk. Stumbling backward, they smashed into a wide bookcase, sending books crashing to the floor at their feet. The shelves splintered under the force and Illya grunted, the wound on his back throbbing, burns on his chest screaming from the friction. In an attempt to better secure his hold on the Italian, he locked a forearm over his battered wrist, then used his height to lift up, nearly taking the hulk of a man off his feet.

Max twisted forward and to the side with a shout. The move opened Illya’s weary body up to a backward strike to the groin, but he was ready for it. He lifted his leg and took the blow to his thigh instead, then yanked hard on the choke hold, growling at the effort, his lips peeled back over his teeth. He wrested Max back into place and the Italian swore through a clenched jaw, spittle flying from his lips as he struggled to no avail. His thick, blunt fingers clawed at Illya’s arm, nails biting into his skin. Illya grimaced at the sting but didn’t relent, using that pain, pulling it into himself like all the rest.

With one last effort, Max managed to reach back for the gun tucked into his waistband, but Illya wrenched to the left, making him lose his grip on the weapon, and it clattered to the floor. With a
heave and a long groan, the fight finally left the brute, his body going slack. Illya braced himself under the weight, holding the choke for several more seconds to ensure unconsciousness, then threw the hulking body to the ground.

Rough breathing burned his still raw throat and the misery throughout his body demanded attention, begging for respite, but an uproar from the front of the house reminded him he had no time for recovery. Snatching up the discarded gun, he checked the clip. It was full, so he slammed it back into place and snatched the extra from Max’s belt. He swiftly closed the doors to the study, barring them with the unbroken chair, then, with a deep breath, followed Gaby out the open window.

Illya rolled into the landing, his body protesting. The force of impact reverberated through aching bones and strained muscles, but he ignored it, using the inertia to push back to his feet before scanning the area for his partner. He spotted her quickly, sprinting across the grass with Beast secured close to her chest, two men on her tail.

Working to close the distance, he ran after her, his long legs eating up the ground beneath him. When he’d gained enough to make a shot, he was forced to slow in order to get a bead on one of her pursuers. He brought up Max’s gun and took aim, squeezing the trigger and feeling the ungainly kick of the Sig. His target hit the ground and Illya immediately adjusted the angle of his run, moving to get Gaby and Beast out of his line before firing again, taking the other man out. It was a headshot and Illya paused just long enough to watch the body collapse to the ground.

“Go!” he shouted, waving his hand when Gaby spared a glance back at him. Her gaze swept the house behind them before she changed her course, running toward the pump house.

Illya turned and scanned the roof and windows of the mansion himself one more time, then bolted off in the opposite direction, shooting a man coming around the corner. When he rounded the mansion, he began firing on the windows, the wall, anything in order to draw them to his position away from Gaby and the baby.

…

Gaby burst into the pump house and slammed the door behind her, leaning against it as she tried to regain control of her breathing. Her eyes darted around the room, making sure she was alone, then fell to Beast, checking that he was still all right. He stared up at her with awed, dark eyes.

The noise of the pumps surrounded them, enveloping them like a blanket of sound. She had worried he might cry at the volume but he didn’t. Instead, it was as Illya had predicted, the steady hum, as loud as it was, seemed to soothe him.

She bundled Beast snug in the blankets as Illya had shown her, a special wrap that held his arms and legs to his body, making him feel secure. With growing unease, she knelt down and tucked him into a small storage crate, using the thickest blanket as padding. She sat back on her haunches and took him in, nausea churning in her belly. He was so small and helpless.

“Next lesson in spy craft, Liebling,” she told him, her voice tight as she fussed with the blanket folds. “Sometimes you have to split up. No one likes it…” She took a deep, shaking breath, her eyes sliding shut. Oh god, was she really doing this? She looked down into his precious, innocent face and lost the fight to her tears. “No one likes it much at all, but sometimes it has to be done. Now you…” she swallowed a lump in her throat, “I need you to stay here, nice and quiet for a little while,
my love. Your tummy is full, so you should take a long nap.” She took another breath, and her voice was watery as she finished. “Illya and I will come back for you.”

She bowed forward and kissed him, then set her head gently to his belly for a moment as she tried to summon the strength to walk away. I'll be back, she told herself over and over. I'm not leaving him, I'm coming back.

Setting her jaw, Gaby shoved up to her feet and took in the rest of the room. She had only seen the pump house from one angle before, standing out against the distant boundary through the study’s windows. Now inside, she found she was more fortunate than she had expected; there was a small porthole on the backside she could fit through, hiding her exit from the view of the main house.

Refusing to turn back and look at Beast one last time, she used the various boxes and equipment to scale the wall. She flipped the little latch, pushing the window out, and crawled through, dropping to the ground outside on silent, bare feet. She laid a hand against the outer wall, finding she had to renew her determination to walk away, to set herself to this course. She curled her fingers on the stone as her heart broke, then shoved off quickly, her jaw tight.

Bushes lined the perimeter of the back garden and she used them for cover, making her way toward the front of the house. In the distance, she could hear the rattle of gunfire. It cracked in the air, echoing over the landscape, and she sent up a prayer to someone, anyone, that Illya would stay safe. She had given up on prayers being answered when she was a child and her father had never come back for her, but she couldn’t stop the desperate impulse now as her heart thundered within her chest. Please, she thought, keep him safe. Keep them both safe. Whatever happens, please let them escape somehow. Let us escape.

Thorns and branches tore at her clothing, scratched her skin and the debris strewn ground cut at her exposed feet. Still, she stayed in the shelter of the shrubbery until she’d reached a front angle on the imposing brick mansion.

A BMW 1500, sleek and black, sat unguarded near the massive front steps. The house lights gleamed in the sedan’s glossy paint, golden in the growing darkness. Double checking to be sure no one was around, Gaby darted forward. She unlatched the hood with swift, knowledgeable ease and looked down at the German engine.

“Es tut mir leid, mein Freund,” she murmured to the car as she yanked out the spark plug wires. “But it is for the greater good.” She tossed the components off as far as she could in several different directions, shoving the last one into her pocket.

While the use of the car was tempting, especially with the exhaustion pulling at her, she knew it was more important for her to stay out of sight. The hope was, once she disappeared, they would assume Beast was with her and take chase, leaving Illya to take him and make a real break for it. Separately one of them might be able to get help.

But there was every possibility their enemy wouldn’t fall for the ruse. Instead they might just let her go, focus on finding Beast and take him away. That was the thing she had to stop above all else, and though the agent in her realized this was for a greater purpose than Beast’s safety, that keeping him out of THRUSH’s hands would save more lives than just his own, he was all she was thinking of.

Lowering the hood with a clang, the sound loud enough to make her cringe, adrenaline spiking, she hurried out of sight. She used the shrubs as cover again, pushing through until she reached a stretch of open, terraced lawn that led to the high perimeter wall at the front of the mansion. With a quick, huffing breath she made a break for it, shooting out from the cover of the hedge, her legs pumping
beneath her, her feet striking quietly into the cool grass. Even as she ran, those words looped through her mind, an oath, a mantra on repeat.

*It's okay. I'm not leaving him. I'm coming back.*

*I'm coming back.*

As she reached the fence, a blur of motion to the left caught her eye, but it was too fast, too late to avoid. The body collided with hers and the force of impact sent them both to the ground, knocking the wind out of her. Corbin rolled her over and sat on her chest, slamming her shoulders back into the ground and pinning her arms beneath his knees. “You stupid bitch,” he spat and backhanded her hard across the face.

She couldn't breathe, her lungs seized inside her chest. She struggled against his weight as darkness crept in around the edge of her vision. Thoughts of Beast, of Illya, of the unreachable escape, clamored inside her mind, bringing panic and frenzy.

“I told you it was useless,” he growled, hitting her again. It hurt, splitting her lip and echoing through her skull. “But you just had to try—and make me look like a fool in the process.” He smacked her one more time, and she went limp, dizzy and out of air, her thoughts scattering. Standing to his feet, Corbin shoved his dark blonde hair out of his face, then reached down to take her by the arms. He yanked her upward and tossed her over his shoulder. The rough treatment had bile rising in her throat. “Now,” he bounced her, adjusting his stance, and she nearly retched. “Let’s go get your comrade.”

Illya had just broken through the bushes when he saw Corbin carrying Gaby. He had his gun trained on him in a fraction of a second as he skidded to a halt on the damp grass. His gaze flicked to the tips of Gaby’s hair, swaying out from behind the man’s back, and his fingers shifted on the butt of the Sig. Fear shuddered through him, the fence beyond a wavering mirage of fading hope.

“You really going to risk shooting her?” Corbin asked, waving his own gun, a mil-spec Springfield 1911, before pointing it at Illya.

Illya breathed, locked eyes with the man, and squeezed the trigger. He knew he wouldn't hit Gaby, knew he wouldn't miss. His aim had always been impeccable, near perfect. Corbin flinched, but there was no gunshot, no sound at all but the hammer falling on an empty chamber. Illya exhaled in a rush as the shock of it hit him like a blow to the gut.

Corbin recoiled, swearing. “You fucking commie son of a bitch!” He took two steps toward Illya, pistol jumping in his grip, before thinking better of it.

Illya had no such fear. He rushed at Corbin, determination in every line of his body, even with the gun pointed straight at him. At this range, Corbin was unlikely to miss, but the idea that he could still reach him, *kill him*, even with a gunshot wound, drove Illya forward. Gaby was the only thing that mattered.

Corbin seemed to understand that himself. He swung her off his shoulder and set her on her feet in front of him. Her head lolled to the side, her knees buckling like a rag doll, but Corbin dragged her up to standing, arm braced across her ribs, and set his pistol against her temple. Illya stopped, his
eyes fixing on her face, catching on the line of blood running up her bruised cheek from a split lip.

“You are a god damned machine. I’m almost impressed.” Corbin pulled in a breath, fingers shuffling on the grip of the gun he held to Gaby’s head. “Now,” he pondered, trying to regain some of his composure. “I want to shoot you right now, I really do but…” he made a clucking sound with his mouth, tilting his head to the side. “I already decided on the order of things.”

Illya didn’t need to catch Corbin’s quick glance to know there were men coming up behind him. He kept his attention trained on Gaby, waiting for her to move, open her eyes, anything. When she finally did, they locked on his, bleak as her mouth pulled into a grim line.

“And after all the trouble you two have caused me,” Corbin continued, peering intently down at Gaby. “I think I want to stick to my original plan.”

Several thugs gathered around Illya, pointing guns at him, grabbing his arms. “About time you guys caught up. I can’t believe you let one guy run you around like a bunch of morons! And with the boss here.” He gave a dark chuckle. “Glad I’m not the one that hired you. Now, tie this motherfucker up.” He looked at Illya, that sharp smile coming out to play. “And we can have a little discussion.”

Two of the men bound Illya’s wrists behind his back, the rope bitter against the broken skin there, and pushed him to his knees. He went willingly, still staring at Gaby as they wound a length of rope around his neck.

“Let her go and I will tell you where we hid the baby.” His voice was low, defeated as he clung to one, unshakable precept.

“Let her go?” Corbin asked, leaning down to try to catch his eye. “You mean like this?” He shoved Gaby to the ground and she made a soft cry as she landed, catching herself on her hands. Illya jolted forward by pure instinct, the need to go to her overriding logical thought. The rope around his neck stopped him, making him cough, and several hands reached out to restrain his shoulders. Gaby’s eyes were on him again quickly, and they widened as he felt the cold blade of a knife slide against his throat.

Corbin bent over and wrapped a fist in Gaby’s hair. Her hands flew up to ward off the pain as he used the grip to drag her back to her feet, placing the gun to her head once more. “Here’s the thing —” He broke off, then chuckled. “I can’t believe I still never got your name. I can’t decide if that means you’re good at your job or she is.” He shook Gaby by her hair and she cursed, gritting her teeth. “But whatever the case, I don’t need you to tell me where the baby is.” His voice was almost playful. “You didn’t go that far, he’s here—”

As if on cue, the sound of Beast screaming interrupted him, and Gaby’s heart sank to her feet at the sight of Avi running toward them with the infant clutched in his arms. The baby was wailing at the top of his lungs, his blanket half off, his little hands flailing.

“Found him, Boss,” Avi called, panting. “He was sound asleep in the pump house.”

“You see? Just like I said,” Corbin offered. “And that’s the end of the game.” He positioned the gun at her temple, leaning in to speak to her, his breath ghosting over her cold skin. “Say good-bye, Gaby.”

She made the mistake of looking at Illya, saw the darkness that overtook him, and everything inside her collapsed in on itself at the sight. He roared in the men’s hold, trying to shake them off. She saw the knife at his throat nick his skin.
“Wait!” she shouted, twisting in Corbin’s grip, turning to face him. “Stop, wait.”

He stared down at her, all arrogant menace and blade like grin. “Last words?” he asked. “Are you going to beg for your life, darlin’?”

She glared up at him and wrenched at his grip. “No,” she hissed, then swallowed. Her heart twisted. “But don’t make him watch,” she pleaded, words too low to carry to Illya’s keen ears, laying herself open to her enemy. Her last fortress. “I’ll tell you anything you want, I’ll… do anything, but,” her body was trembling and she couldn’t stop it. “Please. Don’t make him watch.”

Corbin pulled back and searched her face with that narrow-eyed gaze. Then he barked out a laugh. “I am really tired of all the melodrama, Gaby, you know that? This was supposed to be an easy job. You want me to kill him first?” He swung his arm up, pointing the gun at Illya. “Fine—”

“No!” Gaby hurled her body into Corbin’s, the crack of a gunshot resounding in her ears.

Chapter End Notes

I know you guys, I know! I’m an evil evil woman. I used that spoilery "hea" tag for a reason but, if I did my job well, you should be calling me a liar at some point, right? (I am not a liar though, just really evil.)

Here’s the trauma kit:
And things to throw at me for being evil:
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

BOOM

Chapter Notes

Here we go!

Recap: Last chapter ended with our villain taking a shot at Illya and Gaby trying to stop him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Corbin tugged Gaby by her hair and threw her away from him. She hit the ground hard, but snapped her head up immediately, ignoring the pain, to check for Illya. She found him pushing to his feet, arms still bound. Several of the men holding him had dived for cover and Illya was fighting those remaining, still restrained but bullet hole free.

Corbin’s shot had gone wide.

“All right, enough of this fucking bullshit!” Corbin shouted and Gaby cried out as a hard heel jabbed between her shoulder blades, shoving her chest to the ground. Her fingers slipped in the dew-damp grass as she tried to keep her hands under her. Beast was still bawling and she turned to look up from beneath her hair to find him.

“Corbin,” someone was saying. “A baby shouldn’t see this.”

Corbin sighed. “Avi, take that fucking thing and put it in the car!” Gaby heard him pull the slide on his pistol. Her breath caught as the cold metal tapped the back of her head. “And tell Liberty, everything out here is taken care of.”

“No!” Illya shouted and Gaby braced herself for the end, her heart skittering to a stop, her mind lost in all the things she needed to do, all the reasons she couldn't die here, now. Everything else seemed to recede, the moment stretching out in slow motion. She thought of Solo and Waverly, of Bonnie and the others, fellow agents she had begun to form friendships with. Of her neighbor Miranda watering her plants, and Arnie the butcher who always saved her the best cuts of meat.

She thought of Beast, to whom all her promises had become a lie.

Of Illya, and every word she had never said to him.
She didn’t see what happened next. There was the roar of Illya’s voice, screaming threats and obscenities. His despair and frustration were palpable, freezing her blood and sliding down her throat to choke her. She could hear the fading cry of Beast as he was carried away, hear the jeering from the men around them. Then there was another sound. Something rounded. Something deep and vivid. A rumble that vibrated in her bones and resonated from the ground through the palms of her hands. It was followed by a concussion that compressed the air around them—tight, tighter. Pressure thundered in her ears, hitting her body like a physical blow.

“What the hell?” She heard Corbin’s bewildered demand and felt a subtle release of weight from the boot on her spine. The noise and voices around her had changed, a panicked edge, but Gaby didn’t register the significance. A fierce, rasping cry tore from her throat as she forced all the strength she could muster into her arms. She flattened her palms to the ground and shoved her body upward into the weight of Corbin’s foot, propelling him off her. Reckless and desperate, she rolled to the side and scrambled out of his reach.

He cursed as he stumbled backward, losing grip on the 1911. Gaby watched the pistol slide across the grass, then glared at him as he spun toward her with barely veiled fury in his eyes. She bolted to her feet, her entire body aching, her head still ringing, and settled into a defensive stance, keeping one eye on that gun and the other on Corbin.

Another explosion rocked the air, and this time she realized what it actually was, what it might mean. Emotion swelled in her chest, her heart racing even faster.

Gaby sensed a struggle off to her right, the clamor of distressed voices, and Corbin’s eyes darted in that direction before snapping back to her. She could hear Illya, but didn’t dare look for him, didn’t dare take her focus off her enemy. If he was subdued, Corbin would be using it against her. Instead, he set his jaw and dived for his gun.

Gaby ran at him. She grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and wrenched him away from the weapon. He seized her by the wrists, his fingers bruising but unable to break her hold. They grappled like that, his greater weight tossing her around but she didn’t lose grip. She stepped deeper into his space, shouting into the strain, and dropped, using her hold to take him to the ground. Rolling with him, she wrapped an arm around his neck, yanking him into half a choke the way Illya had made her practice doing a thousand times.

Corbin thrashed against the restraint, legs kicking, jerking his shoulders, trying anything to shake her loose. Gaby wrapped her thighs around him, crossed her ankles over his belly, and tucked the corner of her thumb into the artery pounding beneath his jaw.

“Fucking Bitch!” he spat, voice half strangled, and arched to the side. She shouted hoarsely, struggling to keep him in her grasp. He reached up to push at her face and she took advantage, looping her arm under his to cross over her wrist, and pressing her forearm into the back of his head, securing her hold and tightening the choke. He flailed violently and Gaby huffed through her teeth, her overtaxed muscles rioting against the assault. When his body went limp, she took a constricted breath, waiting and counting the seconds as Illya had instructed.

She didn’t see his other hand pull the knife from his boot, didn’t see the knife at all until it was slicing down her forearm. Her arms released him on reflex and she cried out in pain. Corbin tried to break free, but her legs were still locked around him. She squeezed them tight, pulling him closer. Struggling to keep his body between herself and the gleaming blade, she grabbed for his knife hand, her fingers barely enclosing his wrist. They fought over the weapon, bodies flailing in the wet grass, churning it into mud. When they broke apart, she rolled away, gasping on her back-

With the knife in her fist.
Corbin lunged at her, and Gaby barely noted the blaze of rage on his face, hardly knew any victory at having driven him past his controlled demeanor. Fury and survival were her only thoughts. With a fierce cry, she brought the blade up and plunged it into his chest.

He fell forward, eyes wide with shock, hand wrapping around hers on the hilt, but it was too late. He was heavy, and the pommel was digging into her ribs as he slumped over her. “Gaby,” he coughed, blood dripping from his bottom lip. No more sharp smiles or taunting words.

“I’ll be taking that watch back now,” she growled, twisting the blade, driving it deeper.

He collapsed on top of her and all she could do was gasp for breath, dragging air into lungs that burned. Her entire body was screaming with exhaustion and pain, challenging her will and clouding her mind. It was thoughts of Illya, and the piercing sound of gunfire, that pulled her back to clarity. She shoved Corbin’s body off, grunting at his dead weight, and unbuckled the leather band of Illya’s watch from his wrist with shaking fingers. She quickly scanned the area, searching for him but, instead, found insanity. The mansion and its property had become a battlefield: fires, shouting, chaos. She could only hope at the purpose behind it all, but she didn’t have time or luxury to worry.

Staggering to her feet, she strapped the watch to her own wrist, checking that it wouldn’t fall off before snatching up Corbin’s gun. Jaw set, she lifted the heavy pistol into her hand, cleared the chamber and checked the clip.

The moment Corbin lost his gun, his lackeys jerked Illya backward by the rope around his neck. He’d been on his feet, fighting to break loose and he’d seen Gaby escape from Corbin a second before the force of it put him on the ground. They used the tether to drag him across the grass on his arms, his body bounding down the terraced incline. The pain was stunning, and he lost himself to it for too long.

A choked sound escaped him as he worked to regain his senses. The binding at his throat burned and breathing was almost impossible. Fighting for strategic thought, he flexed his stomach, using his core to bring his legs overhead with as much speed as he could summon. He hooked an ankle around the rope and used the weight of his body as leverage to yank it back toward himself. There was a shout of surprise as tension left the rope, the thud of a heavy body hitting the ground, and his momentum came to a stop.

Illya rolled to his feet with the quickness and reflex born from years of training, ingrained muscle memory, and a primal desperation to survive. Taking several steps back, he used a foot to sweep the trailing length of rope behind him, and scanned his enemy, blue eyes wild.

He couldn’t run. Aside from the rope dangling from his neck like a leash to be snagged, there was nowhere for him to go. Fight was the only option.

The biggest of them was just getting up from where Illya’s maneuver had taken him off his feet, but he wasn’t alone. Several of the others were already recovered from the surprise setback. They sneered and began spreading out, trying to form a circle to flank him. Illya supposed he seemed an easy target to them; a battered prisoner with his arms tied behind his back. It was one situation in which he didn’t mind being underestimated.
Only one of them still had a gun. He aimed it at Illya’s head and started toward him. Time seemed to slow as he tracked each one of his opponents, shifting slightly to keep them in his peripheral vision, even as he focused on the barrel pointed at him. He exhaled, counting the beat of his own pulse as he waited.

_Breathe in…_

_Breathe out…_

The gun man stepped into reach and Illya kicked out, the move almost impossibly fast. The gun snapped from the man’s grip and scuttled across the ground. Before anyone could react to the move, Illya hopped forward and laid a follow-up kick to the man’s sternum. The force of it sent him careening into one of his teammates, and they both tumbled to the ground with a shout of pain.

There was no time to see if the takedown was permanent because another guy was on him a moment later, trying to grab him by the neck and put him in a chokehold. Illya twisted sharply, knocking the man’s arm aside, then plowed into him with his shoulder, using the weight of his body to force him back several steps. Illya kicked him in the side of the knee, then the chest in rapid succession and the thug went down.

A third man approached him, then a fourth. Illya took a few, shuffling steps back. He brought the smaller one down with a sweeping ax kick, the other with a well-aimed headbutt to the bridge of the nose, then the other two were on him again. Illya fought them off with shocking elegance and brutal efficiency. Again and again, until they stopped getting up, the KGB agent made it clear he didn’t need his hands to win a fight.

The last man was another version of Max, a little taller but not as broad. He’d been standing to the side, watching the others, but now he charged at Illya like a bull. The Russian kicked out, aiming for the stomach, but his opponent was ready for it, catching his ankle. The abrasions there seared in the brutal grip, but Illya forced it out of his mind, dropping his weight into the hold and spinning his body with enough force to bring his other leg up, clocking the brute in the side of the face. Both men hit the ground hard.

Clenching his jaw to control the pain, Illya brought his knees under him and crawled to his opponent. The man tried to right himself but Illya put a knee in his chest, forcing him back to the ground. Feral and angry, he took a moment to look down into his opponent’s enraged eyes before smacking the corner of his skull into the thug’s temple.

As soon as the man went limp Illya whipped his head around, looking for the next attack. When it didn’t come, his shoulders dropped with relief. It was short-lived; there was no time for a reprieve. He flexed his hands and tried to analyze the bindings on his wrists but it was no use. Rolling onto his back, he gritted his teeth and pushed his hands down, straining his joints as he tried to bring them under his ass. The rope cut into his already mangled wrists, but it was thick and wet with his blood, easier to stretch and loosen than a thinner rope would have been.

He shouted into the pain, the pressure and hissed with relief when his hands finally slid over his thighs and he could pull his feet through, bringing them to the front. He flexed his fists and wriggled his fingers to get some feeling back before scrambling to his feet.

The binding had loosened but not enough to free him and the knot was too tight to be pulled with his teeth. Leaving them bound, he took account of his opponents. One of them was still wheezing around what was probably a broken rib. Illya grabbed the pistol laying nearby and fired it into his skull, then each of the others. When he looked up, his one thought was finding Gaby.
What he discovered was pandemonium. All around him the air was filled with the chaos of battle. People fighting, shooting, running in every direction. Some were making off with furniture, art, weapons, and Illya couldn’t decide if this was a rescue or a robbery. Ignoring it all, he coiled the leash of rope around his wrists and started to run.

An explosion to the right had him skewing sideways, but he continued, dodging debris, jumping hedges and shooting anyone who pointed a gun in his direction.

He mounted the terraced lawn where he’d last seen her in long strides. There was a body in the grass, and his heart stuttered before he realized it wasn’t hers. He swung around, sweeping the area, and his gaze fell on another form curled in on itself in the mud. Corbin. Illya strode forward and used a foot to roll him over. Lifeless eyes stared up at him, all charm and menace faded in death, a knife protruding from his chest. Illya bared his teeth. He had wanted to kill the выродок himself, but the fact that Gaby had done it, had defeated their tormentor, swelled inside him with possessiveness and pride.

Bozhe, ya yeye tak siľno lyublyu... But where was she now?

Flinching when another explosion went off, Illya turned to see the pump house disappear in an eruption of fire and smoke. His eyes widened as he remembered their plan, remembered Beast crying in Avi’s arms. His heart clenched. He had one more piece in this game besides Gaby. Sprinting back toward the mansion, he leaped off the last terrace and onto the gravel driveway. The sedan was still there, the hood open but otherwise abandoned, and he hurried toward it with his jaw tight.

A man wielding a knife flew at him from the darkness. Illya caught sight of the slash just in time to dodge it, throwing his body to the right and reaching up with his bound hands to push his assailant away. The kid came at him again—Illya kicked him hard in the chest, sending him flying. Waiting for his attacker to clamber back to his feet, Illya stood crouched and ready, bound hands open in front of him. The younger man lunged, his movements quick and practiced. He slashed at Illya with the switchblade and the trained agent had to respect his technique. A knife that size was for slicing, not stabbing, and this punk wielded it with an admirable grace.

But Illya had reach advantage and, despite his size and injuries, he wasn’t slow. As the knife wielder moved in, Illya feinted and brought his hands around, grabbing the assailant's wrists, fingers closing over the narrow bones. Squeezing viciously, he yanked upward and brought a knee into the kid’s diaphragm. The knife fell from his grip. Illya dropped him to the ground and knocked him unconscious with a two-handed blow to the cheek.

Grabbing up the knife, he flipped it in his palms to position the blade and used it to cut the ropes at his wrists. They fell away, soaked in his blood, and a sigh of relief escaped him as he shook out his hands, flexing numb fingers. He tested the binding at his neck but without being able to see it was too dangerous to cut it himself. Instead, he sliced through the extra length and tossed it away. His wrists stung, blood dripped from his fingertips, but he simply wiped it off on his pant leg and closed the switchblade, returning his attention to the sedan. He flung open the doors one at a time, searching the seats for any sign of the baby. It was empty.

The rev of an engine drew his attention and he twisted around in time to see a van speed away through the open front gates, disappearing from view. He growled and started after it. The rope around his neck seemed to shrink, cutting off his air, and his thighs resisted the exertion, but he refused to let up.

“Illya!”

He skidded to a stop, his eyes going wide at the sound of Gaby’s voice. He sucked in a tight breath
as he spun around and there she was, barreling toward him with fierce tenacity. Relief flooded his body at the sight of her, shirt torn, covered in blood and filth, but alive and full of that fire he loved so well. Their gazes locked. He saw his relief echoed back in those dark eyes and knew it was all they could take for themselves.

“Beast!” she shouted, still running full out.

He nodded sharply. “Come!” His voice was a bark of sound as he rushed to the closest section of the wall and crouched down, lacing his fingers together between his knees. Without missing a beat, Gaby’s foot, cold and bare, settled into the cradle of his hands. He grunted as he lifted, using his entire body to help propel her up and over the barrier. He didn’t waste time worrying about her landing, trusting in her agility. Digging in with his toes, he raced around to the gate, feet sliding in the loose gravel as he made the corner.

By the time he reached the van it was already stopped, the driver slumped over the steering wheel. Gaby burst out of the back and jumped to the ground, whipping her head around as she scanned the area, frantic.

“He’s not here!” She pushed a hand into her hair as she focused her attention on Illya. “He’s not here!”

Illya didn’t slow his pace, didn’t hesitate, didn’t even contemplate resisting the urge. All other concerns shrank to the background for one, coveted moment and he rushed to her, pulling her against him and dragging in a heavy sigh. At first she was stiff against him, adrenalin and concern coursing through her, then she gasped, her body going limp as she hugged him back. He lifted her up and she wrapped hers around his neck, squeezing so tightly it hurt. Pain didn’t matter, nothing mattered but this, Gaby in his arms, both of them alive and together. He kissed her then, hard and deep, and she kissed him back, neither giving a thought to busted lips and bruised jaws. Pulling away, he regarded her battered face, his heart anguished at the sight. He brushed a thumb over her chin, the only part of her features unmarred and kissed her again, soft and reverent.

“We have to find Beast, Illya,” she said, caressing his cheeks as if she was also pained by what she saw.

“I know.” He nodded, not taking his eyes off her as he set her back on her feet. “We will.”

Her gaze caught on the rope at his neck, and she jerked back, only to be stopped by his arm around her waist. “Was zur Hölle,” she breathed, running her fingers over the coil. She reached for the knot but he shook his head.

“Here.” He released her with reluctance and took the switchblade from his pocket, placing it in her palm.

She flipped it open and looked from the blade to his neck, askance. He knew what she saw, he could feel the band of it digging into his skin. “I’ll cut you—”

“Just do it,” he ordered roughly. “I trust you.”

She clenched her teeth and reached up. There was a prick to his skin and Gaby hissed, but all he felt was relief as the noose fell away. He groaned, rubbing his hands over where it had been, and took a deep breath. Gaby swiped her thumb at the nick she had made and he almost laughed. How many places was he bleeding from? Did one more really matter?

“Can you swallow?” she asked, still focused on his throat, but he just lifted her chin for another kiss.
Closing his eyes, he set his forehead to hers as he inhaled, then reached down to take her hand. “Let’s go get our baby.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay! Is everyone breathing? I'm sorry for that summary. This section was named that in scrivener right up until I cut everything into chapters and I just couldn't resist. ☺
Disarming the driver gave Illya a new weapon, and another search of the van revealed only supplies and food inside. Both agents fought to keep their frustration in line.

"If they haven't already left with him," Illya said, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of gunfire. “He will likely be in the house.”

"Gott." Gaby laid a hand on her stomach and peered up at him, her eyes desperate. "What if they’ve already left with him?"

He looked at her with a grim smile, brushed light knuckles over her cheek. "That bridge when we come to it, yes?"

Together they sprinted through the once majestic iron gates and back toward the mansion they’d been imprisoned in. Illya took the front steps two at a time, his gun at the ready. He slid in through one of the doors and scanned the foyer while Gaby watched his back. Once inside, they checked the first floor with a systematic precision. When they reached the study, Beast's Bassinet was gone and Gaby’s heart flopped hard against her ribs.

Where are you?

A ruckus from elsewhere in the house drew their attention and they made eye contact. Illya gestured to himself and then downward. Gaby nodded before pointing two fingers to the ceiling. They checked the hall and crossed the foyer where Illya paused to take one more long look at her. His blue eyes scanned over her face, and she knew he didn’t want to separate again any more than she did, but they had a mission to complete and a baby to rescue. She gave him a wink, and he shook his head with a hint of a smile, then ducked to head down the basement. Gaby waited until he disappeared in the gloom, then raised her gun to the second floor and hurried upward, keeping her back pressed to the wall.
She kicked in the first door, then the second, finding each room empty. A loud crash made her jump and she whipped her gun around to aim down the hall, when a man burst into view. He was carrying a vase, which he dropped when he saw her. He threw his hands in the air and shouted something at her in what sounded very much like French.

"Give me your weapons!" she demanded and he started tossing things out onto the floor. "Get on your knees!" Gaby took a few steps closer, her gun holding a steady bead on the center of his forehead. The man gaped up at her as he heeded her order and knelt to the ground.

"I am here with Faucheux," he offered, his accent heavy, throat dragging on some of the consonants.

Gaby's heart quickened. "René is here?"

"That is what this is about." He held his hands out now that his pockets were empty. "You are Gaby, yes? We come for you."

A little smile pulled at her lips. "Who else is in the house?"

"No one, there is no one here—"

"There's a baby!" Gaby insisted. "Have you seen anyone with a baby?"

He was shaking his head. "This house is empty, there is none. No bébé."

Gaby hissed.

"But there is a bomb."

"What?" Gaby's eyes widened as she shoved the gun back in his face.

"We will blow up the house," he said in a rush. "We need to hurry!"

She shook her head. "There's a baby." She hated the way her voice trembled. "Where is the baby?"

"There is none! There is none!" he cried. "We searched. He said to search careful and destroy everything."

"Who said?" She jabbed her gun at him and he flinched.

"Please, miss!"

"Who?" she shouted.

"The American!"

Gaby's heart jumped at the thought of Solo. thank god thank god...

The man pushed cautiously to his feet, eyeing her but clearly desperate. "S'il te plaît, nous devons partir." He skirted around her and she let him leave, ignoring his retreat and turning to the next room, her chin raised, her jaw a hard line.

A scream and the bark of gunfire had her spinning right back around. Two THRUSH agents rounded the top of the stairs, one of them firing down toward the foyer, the other aiming his gun at her. She dived into the closest bedroom as bullets splintered the wood paneling in the hallway. She rolled to her feet and spun around in search of an escape.
There was a glass door to the outside and she rushed for it, shoving it open and bursting out onto a narrow balcony. She pressed her hands to the railing and leaned over, peering at the ground below. It was too far to jump from this side of the house but she knew the balcony wrapped around to the front where the distance would be more manageable. Gunshots rang out behind her, shattering the door behind her. She ducked, arms up in an attempt to protect her head from flying glass and started to run, hurtling herself down the length of the mansion’s wall.

"Gaby!" Illya's voice reached her from down below and she glanced over the rail to see him running in step with her. He took a couple of shots at someone, but she locked her eyes onto him and pushed her legs to their limit. An explosion concussed the air around her, a deep rumble that built to a barrage of cracking stone as she felt the mansion shudder beneath her feet. Without slowing her pace, Gaby stepped up onto the railing and flung herself over the side.

With a grunt, Illya caught her in his arms, spinning with her momentum and swinging her into place without losing a step. Gaby wrapped her legs around his torso, anchoring herself to him, before leaning over his shoulder to take aim at the men who’d been chasing her, firing repeatedly. The first man fell through the railing, a bullet piercing his chest, the other was lost to the debris as the great house crumbled around him. The roar of it filled Gaby's ears and dust enveloped them. Illya ran faster, stone fragments and rubble nipping at his heels.

Several men appeared from within the cloud in pursuit. Gaby took them out, both hands wrapped around the grip of her gun. Illya cleared their way in the front, firing with two pistols, even as he ran, letting her legs do all the work of holding her to him. They made a dead sprint across the grounds, firing in all directions.

Gaby held on tight as Illya dodged attacks and danced over the debris that had once been various outbuildings for the expansive property. When they had cleared the chaos, he bolted for a hole in the perimeter wall. Shuffling to a stop, he ducked behind the remaining stone structure and leaned back against it to catch his breath. Gaby straightened up to check him over.

He was inspecting her right back. His large hand caressed the length of her thigh and he glanced down to where it was gripping his waist. "Comfortable?"

Gaby gave a little shrug. "You know how much I like a fast machine." Her smile was sly, teasing, and he tried to give her a look of annoyance in return but couldn't quite summon the expression. She kissed the attempt from him, soft and full of all the emotion swirling inside her.

"He was not in the house," Illya said when they parted. "There was nothing—" his jaw flexed. "He is gone."

Gaby cupped his cheek. "We’ll find him. We’ll get a car, go after them."

"We don’t know their plan. We have no idea where they are taking him."

"We'll figure it out," she said. "You will figure it out. You’re smarter than they are, we—" she took a breath, absorbed the look in his eyes—stunned but determined. "We can do this, Illya."

He nodded and set her on her feet. "Yes."

They hurried back in through the breach, hand in hand, slinking through the rubble and using the scattered debris as cover. Illya stopped suddenly at the end of a solitary stone wall. He squeezed Gaby’s hand and stepped back toward her, a gun following him into view.

Max appeared, angry, bruised, and hulking in the glow of fire behind him. He flicked a look from
Illya to Gaby and back again. "You should have killed me," he growled. "Now I am going to kill you. Then I will—"

A bullet to the head ended his diatribe, his hulking form tipping to the side before crumpling to the ground.

"I don't know about you, but I wasn't really interested in hearing his plans."

Gaby spun around at the sound of Solo's voice. He sauntered toward them across the lawn dressed in dark tactical gear, looking suave and unruffled. The hand without a gun was tucked into his pocket as if they were at a dinner party.

Illya slumped back against the wall with a vast exhale and Gaby launched herself at their partner. Jumping into his arms, she wrapped hers around him in a death grip. When she pulled back, she kissed him square on the mouth, quick and hard. An explosion sounded off to the left, a ball of fire lighting up the sky and they both turned toward it in surprise.

Solo's brows pulled into a little frown. "Hmm, I guess that was a stray."

Gaby grinned down at him. "René did as I asked, I see."

Solo regarded her, his gaze tracing over her face. She could see the heat of anger in the dark blue of his eyes, but he remained steady as he held her.

"For the record," he said. "I went to him first."

"You called René?" Her smile slipped from a cheeky smirk to something a bit more tender.

"Only my love for you could drive me to it, darling."

She patted his cheek and slid to her feet. "Thank you."

"Cowboy," Illya greeted, an attempt at their usual repartee. He was leaning forward, hands braced on his thighs, his exhaustion suddenly so much more evident.

"Peril," Solo returned, moving toward him. He scanned their partner and flicked a gaze back to Gaby, that flare of anger sparkling bright. She'd feel the same, did feel the same. Every time she looked at Illya, she wanted to kill Corbin all over again. Solo's voice, however, was modulated as he spoke. "I hope you realized the trouble you've caused me with that little safe house trick you pulled."

Illya's smile was knowing as he straightened. His relief at Solo's arrival was obvious, even through the genuine arrogance that tinted his smile. "CIA is terrible at keeping secrets," he told their partner. "Are you sure it is intelligence agency?"

"Solo," Gaby interjected before the American could offer a quip in return. Both men’s attention shifted back to her. "They still have Beast, they—" she broke off. How much information did Solo even have on what their mission had become? She couldn't imagine it was a great deal.

"The infant," Illya made an attempt to clarify. "The package—"

"I know that much," Solo assured, looking between them. "Where is he?"

Gaby shook her head, her chest tight. He could be anywhere, anywhere by now. Who knew what resources THRUSH had… the possibilities seemed endless.

"We don't know," Illya admitted. "We think their leader managed to escape with him during the
fight. I need a map and —"

"There you are." René's voice carried above the sound of the fires still roaring in the background. All three agents turned to watch him pick his way through the rubble. Avi was walking in front of him, half cowering and guided by the collar of his shirt which was fisted in René's grip. "All of you hiding over here when there is a fight going on." He tsked softly and shoved Avi to his knees at their feet. Gaby saw the bundle of familiar blankets in René's arms before the scrawny Italian had even hit the ground. It felt as though her heart stopped beating altogether.

"I found this *fils de pute* fleeing into the woods with this little fellow here." He held Beast up, gently pushing the material back to reveal his face. "I think he is important, no?"

Gaby flew forward, lifting the baby from René's arms and holding him up for inspection. She stripped away his blankets and Illya took them from her, his other hand running over the infant's back as they both checked him for injury.

René glanced at Solo with a raised brow. "Am I the only one who finds this oddly unsettling?"

Solo tipped his head to the side as his partners indulged in the domestic display—Illya counting tiny fingers, Gaby muttering endearments in German. "No, you are not."

"*Hallo, kleine* Beast." Gaby smiled up into his little face. He was frowning back at her and she wondered if he was mad she hadn't kept her word. "Next lesson in spying, my love, always take time to make useful contacts."

Illya chuckled softly, setting a kiss to the peachy fuzz on the infant’s head. Quietly he added, "And to trust your partner." He gazed down at Gaby, his eyes sincere. "*Always* trust your partner."

... 

It was several hours driving before they crossed over the border into Switzerland where Solo had felt it was safe to send word to Waverly, letting him know he'd found their 'strays." As René had put it.

Illya and Gaby slept the entire time.

They were far from being out of danger. There was always a chance that THRUSH, or whoever had been in charge of this particular endeavor, would send someone after them. Solo found it strangely... well he would never admit to *heart-warming*, but there was certainly *something* about your partners trusting you enough to sleep on your watch when a threat was still active.

Things had definitely changed between them. Though he had seen the two of them curled up together in sleep before, *this* was different somehow. Both the pose and the comfort in that pose, caught his attention. That, plus the way they had behaved with each other since he'd found them—the looks they exchanged, the absent-minded touches, so altered from before, smiles they usually hid out in the open—all of it told him his partners had finally crossed the line he'd been waiting for them to cross for some time now. Not just sex, though he was pretty sure they’d crossed that line as well, but emotionally. He didn't believe in the trappings of romance and true love, but he certainly knew the signs of two people who'd fallen into it.

He hadn't quite decided how he felt about the whole thing.
"It will not be the problem you think it will be," René said from the passenger seat where he was bouncing the Novak baby on his knee. He'd retrieved him from Gaby only after her arms had slipped, sleep claiming her, and she'd been forced to relinquish him.

"What are you talking about?" Solo asked, sparing a fraction of a glare before turning back to the road.

"Your partners being in love with each other," the man said. "I do not think they will leave you out in the cold."

"I really don't know what you mean," Solo replied blandly, another con. "Those two have been dancing around each other for an eternity. Them finally being together will be a relief."

He looked back into the mirror once more and found Gaby was still tucked into Illya's side, her hand resting in the center of his bare chest, fingers curled above his heart. Just to the right of her hand, a line of burns trailed down his torso, red and inflamed. The sight of those burns, along with Gaby's battered face, the wreck of their wounded bodies, had fury flaring up inside him again and he flexed his hands on the steering wheel.

Never again, he told himself. Never again are they going on a mission without me.

Though, what he thought his presence would have changed, he couldn't say.

"Look at this little fellow!" René cried out, pulling Solo from his thoughts. He was lifting the baby into the air and giving him a wiggle. "I think I would like to have some of these."

"What?" Solo asked, the very idea catching him off guard enough to keep him distracted.

"Little, fat, rolling bébés," René said. "Oui, oui, oui!" he continued, ducking into the baby's body and blowing on his belly to make a disgusting sound.

"You have got to be kidding me." Solo couldn't imagine taking on such a fate. He considered the infant, its drooling chin, its sagging diaper, and cringed internally.

"Not at all!" René laughed. "I am thinking at least... half a dozen."

Solo simply raised an eyebrow and turned back to the road.

Chapter End Notes

Only 36 chapters to get the band back together. I told you Solo was going to save the day. I mean he definitely helped... 😊
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Another bump in the road...

Chapter Notes

It's Friday! I hope everyone is well. Here's the next chapter. Guys, we are getting SO CLOSE!

"Hugh." Gaby said the name slowly and made a face. Beast was settled in the crook of her arm as she fed him his bottle, gazing up at her as if her face was the most fascinating thing in the room. "I'm not entirely sure how I feel about that."

"I admit, it will be difficult to think of him as anything other than Beast," Illya agreed, taking a seat on the corner of her desk. There was a pile of paperwork there waiting, but she took comfort in the fact it wasn't expected of her yet. There were still mysteries to be solved — who Corbin and the others had been working for, for one — but she was on recovery leave… or would be soon anyway. Illya too, she thought and noted the stiff way he moved in his suit.

He wore one of his turtle necks beneath the jacket, the collar hiding the rope marks and most of the yellowing bruises around his throat, but she knew each one, the image of his injuries burned on her brain. The clean shave of his jaw also revealed an array of contusions and small cuts, previously hidden by beard growth, to the cruel fluorescent light of their office.

Waverly himself had been waiting for them in Zürich, ready with food, clothing, diapers and medical care. There had been cars and hospitals, planes, more hospitals, more cars and far too many debriefings. She and Illya hadn't had a moment alone together since the mansion, and it was weighing heavily on her.

They had so much to talk about.

"Novak should be here soon," Waverly interjected from the chair opposite her desk. The jacket of his three-piece suit was open to reveal the matching vest beneath and his hands were folded, almost indolently, over his belly. He seemed his usual, calmly mannered self, but Gaby didn't miss the scrutiny he would pass over her face now and then, or the way he frowned when Illya's wrists emerged from the cover of his sleeves.
"I'm sure the man will heap endless gratitude on the two of you," Solo pronounced, bringing Gaby her third cup of coffee. She smiled as he set it down on her coaster and handed Illya another cup of tea, rather unceremoniously. Illya accepted it without comment, but made eye contact with Gaby when their partner had moved away.

*Someone is feeling guilty,* his eyes said.

*Someone was worried about us,* hers said back.

"I hope you fancy being an honorary princess, Gabs, because I'm seeing a tiara in your future," Solo continued, as he returned to his desk where he also had a pile of paperwork to ignore.

The constant reminder that Beast's grandfather was on his way, the whole reason she and Illya were at headquarters today, was wearing on her. The thought of letting him go, after holding on for so long, made her skin *itch*, and something stirred low in her belly, a nauseating thing that was dark, but oh so familiar.

*He's leaving.*

She looked down at Beast, his big brown eyes gazing at Illya now. Her partner leaned down to speak to him playfully in Russian and the corner of his mouth lifted, breaking suction on the bottle, to smile at him. Looking back at her, he reached up, with an uncoordinated hand, to touch her face and her heartbeat stuttered.

"Prime Minister Novak has arrived, Mr. Waverly," a young woman announced from the doorway, making Gaby jump. She took in the unfamiliar face and frowned.

"Where's Bonnie?" she asked, turning back to her superior.

Waverly buttoned his jacket as he stood to his feet. "She's gone," he explained. "On maternity leave."

Prime minister Novak was a regal man with broad shoulders, a handsome face, and kind, sad eyes. Illya supposed the sorrow was to be expected; the man's only daughter had been murdered. Illya couldn't imagine how that must feel, though he had some idea, he thought, about the pain of losing people you loved.

When Novak's gaze fell on Beast—Hugh, Illya reminded himself—the emotion that flooded the man's face was almost too great to witness, but it soothed Illya, quieted the worried little part of him that had balked at letting the infant go.

His attention shifted to Gaby as she approached with Hugh in her arms. The baby was trying to grab her face, a new activity he had begun on the plane ride to America. Illya was so enamored of the sight of her with the baby that he did not at first note her demeanor — the lift of her chin, the tightness in her jaw. When he did, the sight shot another dose of apprehension into his veins.

Novak, openly weeping, held out his hands for the child and Illya worried, fleetingly, that Gaby might not give him over. There was a jerkiness to her movements as she drew the baby closer, then she thrust him into Novak's arms and stepped away. Beast's fingers tangled in the strands of her
ponytail and her hands trembled as she worked to disengage them.

The minister spoke to them for some time, thanking them both, praising them, asking them again and again for the details he had surely already read in countless reports. Occasionally, the man would pause to stare at his grandson, press a kiss into his hair, or to swallow back tears before thanking them yet again. Illya heard it all as if through water.

Their hands were shaken repeatedly, promises made, and then the man was leaving, walking from the room with the baby over his shoulder, and Illya followed those wide, dark, curious eyes until Novak rounded the corner and Beast was gone.

The pain of it was worse than torture.

He moved toward Gaby, seeking comfort, seeking to give comfort, but she threw up a hand to ward him off, her gaze trained on the place where Beast had disappeared. The block was like a physical blow, and he stilled, pulling in a sharp breath.

"I can't," she whispered, as her hand dropped to her side. "I—"

He wanted to go to her, needed to go to her, but he could sense her holding him at bay with every ounce of her being. "Gaby—" he murmured and she jerked back, taking a step away from him.

"I need a drink of water, excuse me," she said, the words tumbling out. She turned and left the room, strolling at a deceptively sedate pace. Illya followed her departure with wounded, worried eyes. He tried to ignore Solo, certain the man had taken note of the entire exchange and would offer some remark.

"Peril..." Solo's voice floated toward him, but whatever he was going to say was lost when Waverly pushed in through the glass doors. Illya hadn't even noticed the man leaving.

Waverly glanced between the two agents, then focused on Illya. "Well, Kuryakin," he began with a passing attempt at equanimity. "It appears as though you will do your convalescing at home. In Moscow."

Illya frowned, his attention finally leaving the doors to settle on his superior. "What do you mean?"

The older man looked into him, through him, and Illya wondered what those veteran eyes found. Of all the people in his life, this man was the hardest to read. Illya held the gaze and thought he saw a flicker of sympathy... or something he hoped desperately wasn't pity.

"Your handler called, said you are needed at home." Waverly's words were steady, balanced and, as it often seemed, hiding things.

"When?"

"A few days," Waverly answered, blue eyes locking onto his again. "I told them we had a few loose ends to tie up here before we could let you go."

Illya nodded, looking to the door again. "For how long?"

"It was... open-ended." Waverly sent a quick glance at Solo.

Open-ended... Illya closed his eyes, balled a hand into a fist at his side.

"Kuryakin—"
"What is open-ended?" Gaby asked from the doors, pushing the rest of her way inside and walking toward them. Illya's heart stumbled. He turned to her, took in the paleness of her face, the dimness in her eyes. This was exactly what he had never wanted to do to her.

"I have to return to Moscow," he heard himself saying, his words flat, robotic.

She went still, staring at him several seconds before focusing on Waverly. "How long?"

The two men exchanged a look, almost a challenge to see who would tell her. They didn't need to, her quick mind caught up a moment later.

She let out an airless, cold laugh. "Oh."

"Open-ended… right." She shook herself and raised back up, lifting her chin. Illya watched, stricken, as a veil of ice fell over her like a fountain. "I think I'll go home now, sir," she said to Waverly. "Get all that rest the doctor prescribed."

"Gaby," Illya croaked out, his eyes searching her face. Her withdrawal was palpable. "Wait—"

"I'll see you later, Solo," she said, leaning to peek around Illya at the American, then her gaze flicked to his. "Illya," she said quietly, and spun on her heel, exiting the room with tight, squared shoulders.

Illya sucked in sharp breath, his whole body trembling at the loss. Panic flooded him, darkness pressing at his edges… then, without a thought to the other two men in the room, he tore off after her, nearly yanking the door off its hinges.

... 

Gaby felt certain she would disintegrate at any second. She couldn't possibly contain the pieces of herself that were flying apart inside the shell of her body. Hot and cold washed over her, and she wrapped her arms around herself as goose flesh broke out over her skin, squeezing so tightly she shook with it.

She had been right. She wasn't going to survive this.

"Gaby!" Illya's shout carried to her from down the hall and she almost stumbled to her knees at the onslaught. The pain in his voice, the need, echoed her own.

Gasping for breath, she spun around to face him, her arms flying out at her sides. "No, Illya!" she shouted, and he came to a stumbling stop in front of her. "No," she said again, this time softer, shaking her head.

He reached out, taking her face in his hands, and she closed her eyes. His cool palms and calloused fingers called to her, like home.

"Please, Gaby… I know this looks bad, this is… possibly… but I will come back. I swear to you," he growled the promise, and his voice shook. She could hardly stand it. "I swear to you, I will come back."

Gaby's heart fumbled through a few more beats, then went quiet as she thought of leaving Beast behind in the pump house, his face as his grandfather carried him off. She thought of his parents, sprawled dead on their mansion floor. She thought of her own father, Udo, his mournful gaze the last
time she'd seen him in the Vinciguerra's lab, of her foster father's gaunt face as he lay dying in his bed… her foster mother's sudden disappearance, her birth mother, pushed down into the mud by a soldier who's features she no longer remembered.

Wrapping her hands around Illya's wrists, she squeezed until her knuckles turned white. Her lower lip shook as she drew in a breath. "No, Illya. We have already hurt each other enough. All this will do is shred us into pieces until there is nothing left."

He stared at her in stunned silence. She pushed him away and his hands fell to his sides, pale eyes boring into hers, wells of hurt and stubbornness. "Gaby, no…"

She lifted her chin and it had never felt so heavy, her skin so cold. "I said I'd reassess," she told him, and damned her voice for shaking like it was. "And I have. We had our time and now it's over. When you—If—" she swallowed, couldn't even think of the alternative. "Then we need to go back to the status quo, back to being partners in work only."

Before he could argue any further, she spun away from him and rushed down the hall, pushing out through the door into the tailor shop that fronted HQ. Glenn behind the counter, handed her a garment bag. She accepted it by rote before hurrying out into the street where the noise of the city enveloped her, and the sun tried, but failed, to warm the chill that had settled over her skin.

…

Illya barely made it back to his apartment before the blackness swallowed him. His shaking hands fumbled his key into the lock and he stepped mechanically into the space he realized he had begun to think of as home.

It wasn't his home; it had never been. He did not have a home… had not had one since he was a boy.

The table just inside the door was stacked with mail and other odds-and-ends he usually emptied from his pockets when he arrived. He wiped the top clean with one harsh stroke of a broad hand.

It wasn't enough. He grabbed the table, lifted it by its legs and smashed it to the floor. The crash resounded in his ears, and he felt it splinter inside the grip of his fingers, but it still wasn't enough. The coffee table went next, then a framed photograph from the wall. None of it was enough. He leaned forward onto his thighs and tried, desperately, to breathe. The sound that escaped his throat was like that of a wounded animal.

Maybe that was all he was. A mongrel in a cage.

His mind ran over the same track again and again, rolling, zipping, darting — searching frantically for an answer, a resolution, an escape.

He had hurt Gaby.

It had been as inevitable as nightfall, as darkness, as winter. He'd known that, and still he'd given in. Still, he had let himself believe they could have something more. He was an unmitigated fool.

The look in her eyes, the tremble of her lip… the memory eviscerated him. Surely he could fix it if he could stay... he could soothe her, show her...
But he couldn’t stay; they were taking him back.

He would never leave her... He did not have that choice.

"This will shred us into pieces..."

He would come back to her, he would come back.

"We've hurt each other enough."

But he could never stay. They were always going to pull him back. They owned him. He would always hurt her. Again and again, he would hurt her.

"Traitor's son."

There was no help to be had.

"Traitor's blood."

An enemy in every corner.

"Let it scar."

Stupid, hopeless, pointless...

"Let it scar."

He was alone.

He had always been alone.

"It's all right, you're safe here."

His heart pounded, blood roaring in his ears, his pulse beating inside his skull.

"You know you're safe here, right?"

He stopped… his desperation ticking on that one moment, one thought, one word.

Safe.

In the institution it had been only him, crushed dreams and daunting fears. Letters from his mother he’d had to keep from discovery. In the military, only him, striving to make himself stronger, harder, faster. Shrinking further and further into his own mind, hiding his true thoughts and feelings to keep them both safe. In the KGB, the same, working to be the best, serving to make up for what they had gone through, to hide the truth, to keep them safe. It had always been him. Just him. Alone.

But now…

He thought of Gaby throwing herself into his arms in battle, thought of Cowboy stepping out of the chaos, thought of his Makarovs nestled in the case at the hotel in Íestrye, cleaned and oiled, packed by Waverly himself.

“Are you ever going to trust me?” Gaby’s voice echoed through his mind, her tone still admonishing, but he recalled the sweetness, the sacredness of that moment, their coming together. Yes, God yes, he trusted her. He trusted Gaby Teller, and she…
Maybe he wasn't alone anymore.

A knock at the door had him pulling his pistol, his heart kicking back up into high gear as he spun toward it, hand steady despite the turmoil raging inside him.

"Who's there?" He sounded harsh, breathless. It gave him away.

"It's Waverly," the familiar voice called, humor tinting the edges. "You can lower your gun, I promise I mean you no harm."

Illya glanced at the pistol in his hand, once again feeling the sense that the head of UNCLE was more than he appeared. He slid the weapon into its holster. The weight of it caused the burns on his chest to flare in pain. He ignored it and pulled open the door.

He looked down at Waverly, who was waiting with an air of confident patience, seeming completely at ease in a way that pricked at Illya's sense of self-loathing. A thought flashed through his mind: Gaby, chastising him for being so focused on hating himself he forgot to truly pay attention to others, and he took in a slow breath.

"I apologize for leaving headquarters in such haste." He felt shame at his loss of control, but worked to subdue it, keep the anger at bay. "Is there something else you needed from me?"

Waverly's eyes crinkled as a smile played over his lips, one quickly suppressed. "Only to make sure both my agents are recovering properly. We are a little short-handed at the moment, but I wanted to make sure you had everything you needed after being away for so long, so I came myself."

Illya blinked. "I—"

"Food in the cupboards?" The man pushed past him and entered the apartment. He moved nonchalantly into the room, completely ignoring the mess of strewn papers, shattered furniture and broken glass.

"I don't know…" Illya frowned. How long had he been away at this point?

Waverly systematically went through the kitchen, while Illya stood, arms hanging at his sides, unsure whether to offer the man a drink or be offered one. Unsure if he had anything in the place worth offering.

"I will call Rubik's," Waverly announced. "And have them deliver some groceries. Just the basics." His eyes flicked to the debris on his floor, then ran a finger over the window sill, leaving a line in the collected dust. "A cleaning service perhaps."

"Thank you, sir," Illya replied, feeling adrift. The rage from before had left him drained, but his newly dawning revelation was growing slowly brighter.

Waverly lifted the curtain to peer out the window and Illya waited for whatever further proclamations the man might have.

"You know, I haven't been to this neighborhood in quite some time," he reflected. "But I do seem to recall there was a pugilist establishment just down the street."

Illya frowned. "I am sorry?"

"A boxing gym," Waverly clarified. "Have you been?" Illya shook his head slowly, still frowning. "Good way to stay in shape." Waverly stepped away from the window, letting the utilitarian curtain
fall back into place. "And to… blow off some steam. I realize you are still healing but, when you are ready, tell the man there, McCarthy I believe, that I sent you."

"I… will do that," Illya replied haltingly, though he didn't know when that would be. Soon he would be in Moscow with no promise of return. His pulse kicked up and he flexed his jaw, refusing to let his mind dwell there.

"When you get back," Waverly said, as if reading his mind. The smile he offered was one that made him seem boundless, enigmatic and somehow, it gave Illya hope.

He found himself nodding. "When I get back."

Chapter End Notes

*runs away to hide*
Dr. Poole’s head lifted as Illya stepped into the room. She startled at his sudden appearance but smiled when she recognized him.

“Agent Kuryakin, welcome back,” she greeted in the gentle, modulated tone she always used. Standing to her feet, she came around the front of her desk. “Did we have an appointment?”

Illya took several breaths, all his thoughts coming forward in a rush and making it difficult to speak. He opened and closed his mouth like a fish before managing, “No.”

Her smile faded slightly and a hint of concern fell over her face. “I see.” She picked up her notebook and leaned back against the edge of her desktop. “I’m—”

“That,” he jumped in, pointing at the yellow pad. “What do you write down? How do you know no one else will read it? You ask us to open up our thoughts to you, our minds…” The words spilled out as if a dam had broken. “We are spies, agents from different countries, some with very contrasting viewpoints on many things. How can we know our secrets are safe with you? And, for that matter, what would keep someone from breaking into your files? What if one of the agents is here for purposes other than helping UNCLE? What if we are infiltrated by an enemy. What if there is—”

“That’s enough!” she said, and by the tone in her voice, it was not the first time. He had taken several steps across the room without realizing it and was looming over her, tall and broad, filling up her personal space. She didn’t cower though, standing steady in the face of his emotions. He drew back quickly and took a sharp breath. She held his gaze and offered her notebook. “Would you like to see?”

He jerked away as though the thing might burn him.

“I just finished talking with Agent Solo,” she said, and there was a sly tone to her voice as she gave the tablet a wiggle. “These are my notes on him.”
Illya’s hand reached out to accept the papers before he had made a conscious decision to do so, his eyes dropping to scan the top page. He glanced up at her, then at the paper again, flipping back to check the other pages as well. It was in code. An impressively complex code. He frowned, his mind immediately trying to decipher the scrawl of symbols.

Dr. Poole took the book back with a gentle tug and Illya’s attention followed it before returning to her face. “I’m sure your code-breaking mind could solve it eventually,” she remarked. “But, personally, I’m rather proud of it.”

She laid the tablet aside. “As for the files…” Pushing off the desk as she spoke, she rounded the heavy piece of furniture to the filing cabinet in the corner. A key hung from her waist and she used it to unlock the top drawer. Illya followed her to peer inside as she slid it open. It was empty.

“It’s for show. I don’t keep files on our agents,” she explained, turning to lean on the cabinet’s side. “Not like the ones other agencies keep.” She looked up at him, her expression open and sincere in a way he was surprised by. “I’m not here to find and exploit your weaknesses, Illya. I don’t—” she gave a little shrug and moved away, back to her desk, “—I don’t consider these things weaknesses anyway. I’m just here to help you to… to be well.”

Illya’s breath was coming fast, his heart beating in a reckless staccato. This was... this was going better than he had thought it would. He tried not to let the sudden swell of hope run away with him.

“I know you are Waverly’s daughter,” he challenged. One last thing he needed to cover. “Hannah Waverly, top of your class at Oxford,” he continued. “Adopted your mother’s name so—”

“So no one would whine about nepotism,” she finished. He turned and found her watching him. “Do you think that’s why I got the job?” Her voice was calm, untroubled. He searched her features but found no anger. “Do you think Waverly would hire me if I weren’t good at what I do?”

Illya didn’t have to consider his answer. “No.”

“Do you trust my father?”

He turned the question over in his mind. Alexander Waverly seemed sincere in his efforts to protect people, the world, his agents, but he was a man, human, as were all the other leaders Illya had reported to in his lifetime. Power could be a seductive thing. A corruptive thing. “I would like to,” he offered haltingly.

“But your own experiences make it difficult to trust anyone.”

“I trust Gaby.” He said it without hesitation, the shape of her name burning like an ember in his mouth. He swallowed. “I trust my partner and she trusts Waverly.” He looked up at Dr. Poole again. Her eyes were the same color as her father’s, and he could see now that the shape of them was similar as well. “And Waverly trusts you.”

She took a small breath. “He does.”

“How do I know you do not tell him?” His voice was gentle now, no longer feeling the rush of fear that led to accusation. “The things that are said here? He is your father. You wish to make him proud.”

“I do,” she agreed, and there was a steadiness to her gaze that he liked, a strength he had not taken account of before. “Which is exactly why I would never tell him anything that is said to me within these walls.”
Illya nodded, this final piece of information settling his mind. He went to the office door and twisted the bolt lock into place.

Hannah stood up and took a couple of steps toward him. “I usually leave it unlock—” she began, but Illya walked back, dropping his large frame into the center of the couch, and she broke off.

“I am still not going to lie down,” he decreed, sitting up very straight, resting his hands on his raised knees.

“Okay.” She tilted her head a little to the side, regarding him carefully.

“And, I think, in this case, we should tell Waverly.” He drew in a deep breath, one that stretched his bruised ribs and made his lungs ache. Every wound in his body made itself heard, but the wounds in his mind were the real threat today. It felt as though he was standing on a cliff face. Below him lay a finish line—whether it would end in tragedy or blessing, completely unknown. “But not just yet.”

“Illya,” she encouraged, her voice so gentle it was like a cool hand on his brow. “You really are safe here.” Rounding her desk again, she pulled something from a drawer. “But if it makes you feel better…” She offered him the small device, and he accepted it, turned it in his palms. A frequency jammer.

He looked at her one more time as he switched it on and set it on the coffee table. He thought of his words to Beast when he had finally been back in their arms. *Always trust your partner…*

“I have a small house in Italy,” he began, pressing his hands into his thighs. “No one knows about it except for me, Gaby, and now, you.” His eyes flicked up to hers, saw the realization light in her features. She didn’t pick up her notebook. “I have had a plan for some time,” he continued slowly. “To move my mother there. That is the first thing I must do…” he took a deep breath and let it out as he reflected on the reality of what he was about to admit. What he was about to say out loud. He had never before dared to even fully think the word that was on the tip of his tongue. Even now he couldn’t speak it, but it sat in his thoughts like a cracked doorway, waiting. “If I am ever going to leave them.”

Hannah Poole’s gaze locked onto his, widening slightly, and she stepped over to her chair, easing herself down into it. “You’re right,” she said, mildly breathless. “Bolting the door was probably a good idea.”

…

“What the hell are you doing here?” Solo demanded when he found Gaby in their office the next day. She was loading paperwork into an attaché case.

“I was bored sitting around home,” she groused. “Healing.” She said the word as though it were bitter. “I figured I might as well get a jump on this paperwork.” In truth, she needed some kind of distraction or she was going to drink herself into oblivion. Her fingers fumbled a stack of files and she shuffled them back together, tapping the edge sharply.

“You’re at home alone?” His eyes narrowed slightly. “I figured you and Peril would be… keeping each other company.”

Gaby slammed a thick folder down into her case, her chin lifting slightly. “You don’t know what
“Actually,” he drawled, moving in beside her and leaning on her desk. “I think I do. I saw the way you two were acting after this last mission. There’s no point in lying about it.”

“Fine.” Gaby closed her case with a snap that echoed her tone. “I *fucked* him. Are you happy?”

Solo’s grin was wide and unrepentant. “I *am*, because it’s about damn time. So, I ask again — what the hell are you doing *here*?”

Gaby ground her teeth, a million words clattering through her mind like spilled spark plugs, none of which were the ones she needed. “He’s leaving.”

“That is part of the point I’m making.”

She looked at him, her gaze cutting. “He probably isn’t coming back.”

Solo cocked his head to the side. “Hmm.”

“What is that?” she demanded, then mocked him. “*Hmmm.*”

“I guess I’m just surprised you don’t realize this.”

“I don’t realize what, exactly?” she scoffed. “That he loves me? I’m not stupid, but it changes nothing.”

“It changes a *few* things,” he offered, his voice lowering. “Like the fact that he would leave them for you, if you asked. Without a second thought.”

“Ilya *loves* his country.” Gaby shook her head. “You know how proud he is of being Russian. He wouldn’t leave. Not Russia and not his mother.”

“For you, he would. If you can’t see it, you’re blind.” He crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. Gaby ducked her head and leaned forward with both hands pressed to the edges of her attaché. “And if I loved him?” she challenged, her tone subdued. “Do you think I would ask him to?”

She lifted her eyes and caught Solo’s frown. He studied her, then glanced at the attaché case. “You hate paperwork. Let me go talk to Waverly and then I’ll take you out to brunch. That place on 9th.”

He held up a finger. “But no dancing. You’re supposed to be recovering.”

Her smile wobbled, but she gave a valiant effort at pretending he didn’t notice. “Oh, I like that you think you can stop me.”

His return smile was almost tender. “I’ll be right back.”

She reopened the case and began removing the papers, setting them back on her desk in haphazard piles. Solo’s voice from the doorway stopped her.

“I *do* get what you’re saying, Gaby.” He tapped a finger on the door frame. “But the thing is… yes, maybe you *should*.”

She went still, her heartbeat faltering. When she looked up again, Solo was gone.

Biting her lip, Gaby pulled open her desk drawer and reached inside. Her fingers touched smooth glass, a leather band. Bringing Illya’s watch out into the light, she laid it gently in her palm. She
hadn’t given it to him yet. It had been taken off her wrist at the hospital and put in with her things. Later, she had held on to it, saving it to return to him when they were alone again and she could finally try to tell him the truth.

Her heart pinched tight. She couldn’t do that now… but she couldn’t let him go home without his father’s watch. She would ask Solo to give it to him.

“Agent Teller, what are you doing here?”

Gaby’s head jerked up at the sound of Bonnie’s voice, and she spun toward her, sliding the loose band of Illya’s watch onto her wrist. She took note of the woman's rosy cheeks, her no longer bulging middle.

There was a small bundle of blankets in her arms and Gaby’s gaze fixed on it before dragging back to the woman's face. “Me?” She managed to get out past the sudden lump in her throat. “What are you doing here? I— I thought you were on maternity leave?”

“Oh, I know,” Bonnie said, waving a hand, “But I guess I’ve just gotten used to taking care of you three. When I heard you and Agent Kuryakin had made it back, I had to come in and get the details.” The woman’s eyes scanned Gaby’s face, making her aware once more of how she must appear. Especially since she hadn’t bothered with any makeup. The bruises on her face had only just begun to yellow, the cut on her cheek was particularly mottled and held together with sterile-strips. “How are you feeling?”

Gaby offered her a smile. “I would like to say it looks worse than it is, but…”

Bonnie laughed softly. “You’re a brave woman,” she said. “I’m proud to know you.”

“Please.” Gaby shook her head. “I think you’re just as brave, taking on this job.” She waved a hand toward the baby. “I’ve gained some experience since we last spoke,” she said smartly, then softened. “And I honestly can’t think of anything braver.”

“You’re humoring me,” Bonnie refuted with a soft laugh. “But I’ll take it.”

Gaby held her gaze. “I’m really not.”

Her focus returned to the bundle in Bonnie’s arms and her heart rolled over as she thought of Beast. All the times she’d almost lost him. When she’d found him in the train yard and he’d smiled at her for the first time.

“May I see him?” Gaby heard herself asking, before the desire to do so had fully registered. “I mean her,” she corrected. “It’s a girl, right?”

“Yeah,” Bonnie said, a little surprised. “Laurel. And sure, you can hold her if you like.”

Gaby held out her hands to accept the bundle, remembering to support the head as the infant’s weight was transferred to her. She drew the baby close and peered down into the swath of material. She was much lighter than Beast had been. Smaller too. Unbelievably small. Gaby ran a fingertip over one impossibly tiny hand. Fingers, fingernails, knuckles—all minuscule but so perfectly formed it was as if they had been carved by an artist from some translucent clay. How could anything so little even exist? Her chest was hot, her throat tight. “Laurel,” she repeated. “My foster mother’s name was Laurel.”

“Was it?” Bonnie asked, leaning in close so they could both see her child. “Well, I will consider that a good omen.”
Gaby wasn’t sure if it was or not, but something about it settled very pleasantly inside her heart.

“Hello, Laurel,” she murmured. “It’s nice to meet you.” The baby scrunched up her face and made a tiny grunting sound. Gaby laughed.

“She looks like her father when she does that,” Bonnie remarked, clearly enamored. “It’s ridiculously mushy and all,” she sighed. “But I just love the idea. You know?”

“What idea is that?” Gaby asked absently, absorbed in Laurel’s features as they returned to a peaceful expression.

“Oh, that she’s made up of both of us.” Bonnie brushed a finger over her daughter’s cheek. “A little bit of me, a little bit of him. Like our love made a whole new person.”

Gaby lost her breath as the memory of Illya dancing with Beast in the moonlight came to her, unbidden.

“Silly, huh?” Bonnie asked.

“No.” Gaby shook her head, then swallowed the lump in her throat. “No, I—it’s sweet and…” she had to pause, her chest tight. “She’s beautiful.” The words were sincere. Yes, Laurel was a little red and scrunched but also, somehow, profoundly beautiful.

“Thank you. It’s not the life for everyone, I know, but I’m happy. Blissfully happy.” Bonnie took her daughter back with gentle hands and a wide smile. Gaby felt the loss like a weight on her heart. She pulled in a breath of air, expanding her lungs as if she could dislodge it.

“Louis is probably waiting for me,” Bonnie said then, giving Gaby’s face another quick inspection. “I really am so glad you two made it back. From what I hear, it was a close thing. How’s Agent Kuryakin? He look as bad as you?”

Gaby coughed out a laugh. “Thank you for that.”

Bonnie grimaced.

“Honestly?” Gaby’s mind flooded with images of Illya. The good, the bad, all of it, flashing through her thoughts and ending on the moment she’d last seen him in the hall just days ago. His distraught expression, the anguish in his eyes transfixing her and stealing the air from her lungs. “He…” She choked on the words, despair enveloping her.

“Hello, ladies,” Solo called, breaking into the moment as he strolled in with his usual savoir-faire. Gaby lifted wide, haunted eyes toward him, but his focus was on their secretary.

“Bonnie! You look beautiful!” He moved in for a hug, then noted the infant. “Oh, and there’s your baby, that’s… sweet. Very cute,” he rambled, appearing subtly uncomfortable before regaining his poise, setting a hand over his chest. “Did you get my flowers?”

She beamed. “I did. They were the biggest bouquet in the room, ‘til Louis got jealous and went out to get me a bigger one.”

Solo’s grin was wicked. “What is a handsome boss for, if not to keep a husband on his toes?” he said with a wink before turning to Gaby. A subtle frown marred his brow when his gaze settled on her face. He glanced down at her hands and up again. “You ready?”

“I—” Her throat caught, a flutter of panic sending her pulse racing.
“Darling, are you in here?” Bonnie’s husband, Louis, called from the open doorway, drawing everyone’s attention. Gaby used the moment to ground herself, taking a slow, stabilizing breath in through her nose.

“Yes, love, I’ll be right there.” Bonnie’s gaze lifted to Gaby. “Again, I’m really glad you’re home safe. You go rest up. So will I, and we’ll be back to saving the world in no time.”

All Gaby could do was nod. Solo’s eyes flicked over her once more before he took Bonnie by the shoulders and kissed her cheek.

“Do hurry back, Angel. No one makes coffee quite like you and I am suffering.”

“Very funny,” Bonnie scoffed, shoving at his chest while her husband cleared his throat from the doorway. She started toward him saying, “You really are too much, Agent Solo.” They watched Louis loop an arm around her and peek down into the blankets, his face lighting up at the sight of their child.

“Well, that is a picture.” Solo crossed his arms over his chest, the shoulders of his tailored suit pulling tight as he settled onto the edge of her desk. “I have never put any stock in all that ‘true love’ fairytale,” he mused. “But every once in a while…” He turned back to her as his words faded off.

Gaby looked at him. “What?”

He shook his head and took her hand, bringing it up to kiss her knuckles. Her eyes narrowed on him.

“Are you ready?” he asked again.

She shot a glance to the now empty doorway.

Solo sighed and some of his mask fell away as his mouth settled into a stubborn line. “Gaby, go to Illya.”

Her breath caught and she gave the slightest shake of her head.

“Look, like I said—romance? True love? I’ve never believed it, never felt anything that could be labeled as such, but you and Peril? That’s something, and if you want it, then you should take it.”

Her eyes locked onto his, her heart pounding, her pulse dancing away in her wrists. “You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand?” He raised an eyebrow. “That you’re afraid? That you’ve lost so many people in your life that now you won’t even try to have more?”

She jerked back from him at the precise blows and he grabbed her hand again, holding her fingers in a gesture of comfort she never would have expected from him. He looked at the floor, the wall, his jaw flexing in the light, before he brought all his attention back to her, shockingly sincere.

“Now is all you have, Gaby. It’s all anybody has. If this is truly the end, and I’m not ready to concede that yet, do you honestly think you’re going to be in any less pain by letting him go early?”

Gaby knew she was trembling but couldn’t find the resources within to stop. “There’s no time,” she whispered. She’d wasted it. What had she done? She’d thrown away precious days. It was too late.

“Make time,” he pressed, eyes boring into hers. “And if you can’t do that?” His smirk was almost a complete return of the conman she knew as she felt the touch of cold glass and warm leather against
her palm. “Steal it.”

She looked down to see him closing her fingers around Illya’s watch. When had he taken it from her? “Crafty bastard,” she rushed out, breathless, squeezing the timepiece in her fist.

Solo stood up and kissed her forehead. “That’s me. Now, why are you still standing here?”
When Illya opened the door to find Gaby standing there, it was as if the entire world fell away and he was suspended — drifting in time and space — with only her eyes as an anchor. Dark and fathomless as they always were, he drowned in them. She blinked and, without a word, he stepped back to let her inside.

He had braced himself to not see her again before he left. That he might never see her again was a possibility he hadn’t allowed his mind to dwell on. Each time that future tried to assert itself, he forced it away. He had a strategy, a plan. Maybe she would want no part of it in the end, but… he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

Now, here she was, standing in his apartment. Standing so close to him he could smell her light perfume, sense the warmth radiating from her skin. She looked around the room, then up at him, and her eyes were no longer fathomless, no longer shielded. Instead, what he saw there was the universe unfolding in infinite, endless hope.

The sound of her purse hitting the floor echoed through the small space, and then she was kissing him.

Her mouth was fierce, desperate, her arms dragging him down to her level. At first, he was confused, tried to question, wanted to understand, but then he surrendered. If this was the last kiss he would ever have from her then, by god, he was going to kiss her. He lifted her off the floor, crossing his arms beneath her bottom, giving them both better access. Gaby made a needy, half broken sound against his mouth and his legs buckled—desire, and that never-ending ache he had for her, sending him to his knees.

In moments they were stretched out on his floor, Gaby on top, straddling his hips and kissing him wildly. Her hands rucked up the hem of his black turtleneck, her slender fingers sliding over his skin, carefully avoiding the bandages that covered his left side and trailing up through the hair on his chest.
She tilted her head, kissed him harder, deeper and he opened his mouth to let her in. She tasted like coffee with sugar and Gaby, and he groaned as she swept her tongue inside his mouth to taste him too.

She shoved at his shirt and he helped her remove it, breaking their kiss just long enough to yank it free before cupping her cheek and kissing her some more. She fumbled with the buckle on his belt and he tugged at the zipper of her dress, sliding it down and pushing inside to feel her sweet, perfect skin.

A soft whimper escaped as he hugged her tight against him, one hand inside her dress, wrapped around her waist, the other in her hair, angling her head so he could kiss her like he wanted too. She pushed back, catching him with her teeth, and he hissed at the touch of pain. Her hands were splayed over his belly and she flexed her fingers, breathing out an apology against his lips.

Then she was skating her touch into the waist of his pants and all he wanted was more and more of her skin. He pulled at her dress and she sat up to wrench it past her hips and off over her head. It joined his turtleneck, where ever it had landed, and her hands fell to his trouser button as he lost himself in gazing at her.

His focus swept over the soft swell of her breasts. The white lace of her demi-cup bra brought out the gold in her skin, as well as the line of bruising down her side. The matching panties were simple things, much like the ones she'd hung on the curtain rod in that Slovenian hotel. He had a fleeting realization that those panties were at the bottom of the Gulf of Trieste, as he brushed his hands up the length of her gorgeous thighs, ran careful fingers up her sides. Gaby wrapped her hands around his erection—a hot, firm grip—and squeezed, making him groan. After that, he wasn't thinking about anything but her.

He lifted his hips for her to yank his trousers out of the way, even as he was unclasping her bra. Her panties were tugged down, his boxers, everything stripped away until they were both wonderfully, perfectly naked. Skin to skin. The floor was hard at his back and his new stitches burned, but he was beyond caring, beyond anything but Gaby. Gaby, Gaby, Gaby, there, in his arms.

"I love you too," she said in a rush, gazing into his eyes, her focus darting from one to the other. "I should have told you,” she shook her head, “so many times but… I love you too. I’m sorry that I panicked before, that I held myself back, but I’m here now. And I don’t know what will happen, or how much time we will have, but… I want to be with you. If it’s one night or a million. I don’t care,” she drew in a shaky breath. "You are worth it to me."

He stared back at her, air gone from his lungs, his heart racing. "Say that again," he croaked, his throat closing around the words.
She smiled, then tilted her head. "You are worth it?"

"Not that part," he grumbled.

Her smile fell a little, "I don't know what's going to happen?"

He shook his head very slowly, reaching up to touch her cheek, her chin. "Solnyshka, please..."

"Ich liebe dich," she whispered, and he kissed it from her, leaning up to take her mouth. She gasped, pulling him in by his cheeks. "Ya lyublyu tebya," she cried between the press of their lips. "I love you—I love you—I love you."

They kissed and kissed, deep, tender things, their tears mingling, their hearts falling into the same rhythm. Finally parting, Illya cupped the back of her head and set his forehead to hers.

"I would like the million," he breathed, and Gaby laughed before kissing him again.

Clutching her tightly, Illya stood to his feet. She wrapped her arms and legs around his torso, clinging to him as he carried her across the apartment.

"Where are we going?" she asked, sly, leaning back to watch his face. He kept his eyes trained ahead of them, but the corner of his mouth quirked up into a smirk.

"To my bed. Like you said, we have little time."

Her smile was tender, sadness tingling the edges. "With a detour to the bathroom?"

"Definitely stopping at the bathroom," he agreed. He spun them both through the doorway, making her squeal in surprise. Then he pressed her up against the wall, gaze darkening as it fell to her lips again.

"Wait!" she exclaimed, a hand grasping at the back of his neck, and he dropped his head to her shoulder.

"Gabriella," he groaned into her sweet skin. Was she trying to torture him?

She patted him consolingly, kissed the crown of his head, then wiggled to be let down. Only, the wiggling made him want to keep her there. They didn't need to make it to the bedroom, there was a door... there was a sink...

"Illya." The admonishment in her voice was breathless and she sucked his earlobe into her mouth, giving him a gentle bite to get his attention. "I promise, I am coming right back."

He huffed and finally released her, letting her slide over his less injured side. She tapped his chest, glanced down the length of his body, and his stomach twitched at the heat in her eyes, then she was darting off across the room, leaving cool air in her place. His gaze followed her, tracing the lines of her naked form, here... in his flat, his spaces, with him.

She knelt down to her purse, which she'd dropped to the floor when she'd kissed him, and came back a moment later. A rush of recognition filled him as she held out his father's watch and he sucked in a breath. His hand shook as Gaby took it in hers, bringing it to her chest. She stopped when she looked at his wrist. The left one was in the worst shape of the two, one laceration deep enough to have required stitches. She lifted it to her mouth and kissed it tenderly.

"Perhaps you'd better wait." She settled the precious memoir into his palm instead and brushed her
fingers over it lightly before lifting her eyes to his again. "Here’s to us making more time."

He lost his breath, closed his fingers over the watch, and pulled her into his embrace.

"What are we going to do?" A question asked in the dying light of day. It cast her face in golden hues as he brushed a lock of hair from her cheek. They lay facing each other on the pillows, him taking her in, always taking her in, making a memory to carry with him into this unknown future. To last him forever, if need be.

"That is something I must speak with you about," he began, his words slow, cautious. "I spoke to Doctor Poole…"

"You did?" She cupped his cheek, traced the line of his upper lip with her thumb.

He nodded, wrapping his fingers gently around her wrist, and kissed her palm. "And… we have come up with a rough strategy…" he took a deep breath, steadying himself to say that word aloud, to bring her in to the last secret he had from her. "For my defection."

Gaby's eyes widened. "Illya..."

"It includes you, if you want…"

"You love your country," she whispered. "It's your home. I can't ask you—"

"I have always had this plan," he told her. "Since long before we met, I have known I would have to leave some day."

Her gaze was sad and her empathy, her understanding, humbled him. If he lived a thousand lifetimes, he would never comprehend how she could love him. But he wasn't going to question such a gift. Not anymore.

"Even if that were not the case... Russia is no longer my home, has not been for some time now." He sighed, his eyes flitting over her face again. "Moya Solnyshka, you are my home. You," he drew a line down her chest with his fingertip until it lay over her heart, "Here," and lifted his gaze to hers. "If you will have me."

"Illya," she whispered, those dark eyes as solemn as the night. "Don't you know? You are already there."

She kissed him then and he felt the shift in his universe. Finding home at last.

Gaby was moving through his kitchen, checking cupboards and dancing to the music that played from his small radio, all while wearing nothing except his navy turtleneck. Illya, in his underwear, sat at the table where she had put him and watched her, pointing out where things were occasionally,
when he could guess what she was after. The muscles in her sleek, dancer’s legs bunched and flexed beneath bronzed skin. She stood on her tip-toes and the hem of his shirt rose higher, revealing the crease of her bottom.

Definitely going to be the death of him someday.

The entire display left him reeling. He had seen her in work clothes, designer clothes, tactical gear, and various costumes. On the last mission he had seen her in any number of other people's clothing, but here, right now, the clothes she was wearing were *his*. A wave of possessiveness stirred inside him, followed quickly by desire.

"What are you making?" he asked, when she bent down to search under his sink and he received a clear view of much more than her perfect legs and well-rounded bottom. He wasn't hungry... at least not for *food*. The night was waning and they wouldn't have much of the following day.

"Tea," she replied, coming up with his kettle.

"I don't want tea," he growled softly, and she frowned.

"What do you want?"

He stood to his feet and took the two steps necessary to reach her. Grasping her by the waist, he lifted her up, and set her on the counter, brushing aside the paraphernalia she had collected. He ran his hands up her thighs, stepping between them and pulling her to the edge of the counter where he could press against her, feel the heat of her sex through the cotton of his boxers. "Something else."

Gaby smiled and dropped the kettle. It landed in his sink with a *bang* that probably woke the neighbors, but the clamor was lost to him in the roar of her kiss.

Sometime later they were curled up in Ilya's bed once again, Gaby sprawled over his chest, panting for breath but still nuzzling into his neck, tasting the salt of his skin. She wanted to bring his scent inside her, make all of him a part of her somehow.

"At some point," he groaned, running a hand down her back, as short of breath as she was. "I would like to do this when we are *not* injured."

Gaby sighed quietly before rolling off him, the concept gelling inside her mind, the solid threat of ticking hours. When would they be doing this again? Neither of them could know.

She saw the moment his mind followed hers. He inhaled sharply through his nose, gazed down her body and his hands came up to tug her closer. She knew he wanted to drag her beneath him, make love to her again, and with the stamina she’d seen in him so far, it wouldn't be long before he could. He smoothed a hand from her hip to cup her breast, and she imagined all the ways he might keep her busy in the meantime. She closed her eyes when a thumb grazed her nipple, wanting it, she couldn't get enough of him, but there was another thought, another question she needed answered.

"Ilya," she moaned softly, and took his hand off her breast, then kissed his knuckles to soothe any hint of rejection. "Wait," she said, curling his fingers and tucking his hand under her chin.
He sighed and gave her a look, but waited as she had asked.

"Do you remember, back in Slovenia, when I asked you about children and you said they weren't a possibility for you?"

He drew back, a frown creasing his brow. "Yes, but..."

"Did you mean that you can't have children?" she asked quickly. "Because you have been very diligent with the condoms for someone who is infer--" he cut her off by kissing her mouth hard.

"I am not in-- Hmmm," he rumbled, kissing her one more time before laying back again. "I am capable of fathering children," he insisted. "But, with the KGB, I could never be a father to them."

"So, you don't want children?"

"Gaby, my life has not been, has never been... safe. How could I think of bringing—besides," he huffed. "I am a spy. Dangerous missions, constant travel, never at home... That is no life for a father to live."

"That is not what I asked," she admonished. His return gaze was wary. Gaby shuffled up to her elbow, holding herself over him, her hand resting over his heart. "If things were different, if we weren't spies, and... if you were free, would you want children? Because I have decided that, not now, of course, but at some point, I think I would like that. To have children, I mean." She shook her head and held up a finger. "At least one. I can't say after that but, the thing is," she stared into his eyes and fully accepted her fate. "I want any children of mine to also be yours, so if you don't want tha--" She didn't get to finish, because he cut her off again, this time with a kiss infinitely softer, rounder. Beggared. Rising off the bed to reach her, he cupped the back of her head and rolled her under him.

"Yes," he growled into her mouth, kissing her again and again. "I want that. Yes."

"I think we should keep this to ourselves as much as possible." His voice rumbled and she felt it reverberate where her cheek rested over his heart. She hummed, ran a finger along the edge of his chest hair where they had shaved it to treat his burns. The two of them really were a mess, she thought absently.

"Solo knows," she said, and felt more than heard him huff.

"Of course."

"He guessed about Italy but... he is also the reason I came to you... the reason I realized... that time really is all we have. All anyone has."

Illya squeezed her tightly. It pressed her bruises and ached in her bones, but she didn't mind. "Then I owe him."

"And Waverly will figure it out," she reflected. "If he hasn't already."

"That man is too smart." He seemed amused by the idea rather than worried.
"But he's a good man Illya," she insisted, lifting up to make eye contact.

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "I know. I have learned to trust my partner." He brushed a few loose strands of hair from her cheek. "But I think, from everyone else… especially outside agencies."

"Yes," she replied, flopping back down. "But it will be very difficult with the way you look at me."

"The way I look at you?" he scoffed. "You become very moony-eyed."

Gaby shoved up again and glared at him. "I most certainly do not!"

Illya sighed, wrapping his arms around her. "Mmmm, maybe that is only in my dream then."

He was so smugly proud of his little joke that Gaby's heart did a few shamefully girlish flip-flops inside her chest. She smacked him, then kissed his mouth, humming into it. "Dummkopf."

They were distracted by the kissing for a while.

Later, Illya took her hand in his, holding it up to the light from his bedside lamp. He scraped his thumb over the tan line left behind by her fake wedding band. She took his other hand and set hers on it, comparing them. Matching the rings of pale skin.

"It may take a very long time to get there," he murmured against her temple.

"I can wait for trappings, meine Liebe," she assured him. "All I really need is you."

Morning came far too soon and Gaby reluctantly slipped from Illya’s bed. She needed to go home, get a change of clothes, put herself back together. She would need all her armor to get through this day.

With one backward glance, however, she demolished her own noble intentions. Illya’s head was resting on his pillow, his face solemn, regarding her. Dawn’s thieving light, pale and insistent, crept in through the utilitarian curtains that hung from his windows, highlighting his lashes and making his eyes look impossibly blue.

Gaby groaned and threw herself at him, plundering his mouth in a needy, desperate kiss.

One more, she thought, cupping his face and sucking his lip into her mouth. One more time to tide me over.

Sliding her body against his, still deliciously naked beneath the covers, she dragged a hand down his side, over his thigh to cup him in her palm. He moaned into the press of her mouth, lifting his hips as she caressed him with greedy fingers.

She kissed her way down the center of his chest, skirting his navel with her tongue before drawing a line to his waiting cock. His body tensed as she drew near her prize. She knew he struggled with accepting this gift but he didn't stop her, instead, his hand slipped gently into her hair, drawing it away so he could see her face. She grinned up at him, then drew the first pass of her tongue over his tip and he hissed, biting his lip but not taking his eyes off her.
A stroke of her tongue, a soft, teasing suck that made him whimper, then Gaby took him in deeper, setting a rhythm that had broken, wanton sounds falling from his lips. She lost herself to it, her own body responding to the pleasure she was giving, until he was groaning her name, seizing her by the arms to haul her up to rest on his chest.

Her smile dimpled her cheeks and she examined the wreck she'd made of him. She brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"Mmm, I really do like you like this."

His chuckle was breathless but deep, resonating through her aroused body. "I know."

She plucked a condom from the nightstand and tore it open while he watched. His hands gripped her hips, thumbs making little circles there. When she'd rolled the condom onto him, he brought her down into a warm, soft kiss, his palms gliding over her ass and between her thighs, fingers stroking where she was already wet with wanting him. He teased her there, caressed her folds until she whined into his mouth and tried to inch her way down to take him inside her.

Using his other hand to hold her in place, he gave her his fingers instead, sliding them deep. She cried out, a hoarse, carnal sound that had his erection jumping against her thigh. She reached down to stroke him and he hummed, withdrawing his fingers only to thrust them in again. His ring finger pressed over her clitoris with each stroke and soon she was coming, calling his name, burying her face in his neck, her fingers scrabbling at his too short hair.

Graceless with need, Illya lifted her up and fitted his cock to her entrance. Aftershocks still trembled through her and he pushed into one of them, dragging out its hold on her and making her gasp. His thick shaft opened her up, filled her, completing her in a way only he ever could. She cried out, pushing into his advance, sinking her hips to his and taking him all the way to the hilt. Her head fell back at the onslaught of gratification, her body hardly knowing how to process the pleasure of having him inside her. She looked down at him, her eyes stinging as she absorbed the wholeness of being joined to him again.

Did the universe realize what it had done by bringing them together? Had it always known she would never give him back? Despite all the lies she had tried to tell herself, all the hiding she had tried to do, she realized now she never would have let him go. Maybe the universe never intended them to keep each other, but to hell with that. To hell with countries and politics and borders. To hell with walls and dissensions and rivalries. All her loyalty was placed in him. He was her country, her family, her home, and going forward, she would fight with every ounce of her being to hold onto him. Illya Kuryakin was hers.

And she was his.

He cupped her face and brought her closer, looking into her eyes as he thrust up into the sweet grasp of her core. Gaby pressed her hands to his chest, avoiding his injuries as best she could, and pulsed down onto him, meeting him thrust for thrust. She gasped into the slide, the rush, and watched his eyelids fall to half mast, his lips parting in pleasure. When she came this time, he came with her, and she swallowed his cries with her mouth.
*whew* our girl finally said the words.
Solo knocked on Peril's door around mid-morning and was greeted by the man himself. Tall and stern as ever, Illya was dressed in a cocoa brown turtleneck sweater and black slacks. He regarded Solo with something not quite like his usual hauteur. There was a steadiness to him that the American had never witnessed before, for all that he had seen what Illya could hold up under.

"You are too late to do your cock blocking," his partner said, crossing his arms over his chest and standing in the doorway like a club bouncer.

Solo couldn't stop the laugh that fell out of his mouth, the joke was so completely unexpected.

"If this is how you are after getting laid, I will never cock block you again." He dutifully held up the three fingers in promise.

That damned Russian smirk appeared and then Illya was shaking his head as he stood to the side to let Solo in.

"I come bearing clothing for the lady," Solo explained, holding up a garment bag as Gaby walked out of Illya's bedroom in the dress she'd been wearing the day before. She lifted up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "Shoes, jewelry, and your makeup, Schatz."

"Thank you."

Solo kissed her back. "I thought you might need the whole kit for today."

Her smile was a somber one and her gaze shifted to Illya.
"I will make tea while you dress," Illya told her, touching her elbow gently before leaving to do so. Solo handed her his offering and waited for her to disappear into the bedroom before following Illya into the kitchen.

Standing in the doorway, Solo watched his partner move about the space with practiced ease.

"You two have a plan?" he found himself asking. "Because I'm in. Whatever you need."

Illya turned to look at him, blue eyes revealing his surprise first, sobering as he straightened. "We do," he said. "But is a long game."

Solo let that sink in, nodding. "So, no need to bring the cavalry today, is what you're saying?"

Illya's laugh was subtle as always, but genuine. "No," he returned. "But thank you… brother."

Solo took a seat at the little kitchen table, absorbing that sentiment. It settled rather nicely. He crossed an ankle over his knee. "I'm only offering because of Gaby," he lied. "You know how I dote on that woman."

"Of course," Illya remarked with a casual nod, playing along and going back to his work.

Solo smiled. "As long as we're clear."

Illya set the kettle on, then turned around again, leaning back against the counter and gripping the edge with his hands. "Perhaps there is one more thing you would do?" he asked, and though his bearing was stoic, it carried a humbleness Solo found he couldn't ignore. "For Gaby."

…

The hum of machines and the bustle of people scurrying to and fro filled the private hangar at the newly designated JFK International Airport. The sounds of chaos provided the perfect cover for a quiet conversation as Waverly took Illya's arm and pulled him aside.

"I have been on and off the phone with Semichastny, this week," Waverly said, settling into his usual stance — a relaxed, nonchalant pose that made people overlook him when their eyes swept the room. "I have the feeling there is some business going on over there that they are more focused on than world peace." He tossed Illya a quirk of a smile that crinkled the side of his face.

"I cannot imagine," Illya returned with a dusting of sarcasm. His people were less concerned with the wellbeing of the world these days, than with how it might creep inside and try to change things, give people ideas.

"I told him I was expecting you back, reminded him of the work, you've done here. The trust you've established with us." There was something about Waverly’s air that Illya recognized. An awareness of when your enemy thought they saw a weakness but you knew it was, in fact, a strength.

"Thank you, sir."

"Not at all, Kuryakin. You are a valuable member of this organization." He patted Illya's shoulder firmly then held on. "As you know, UNCLE is made up of many different agents, from many different places, but…” Waverly’s keen eyes zeroed in on Illya’s with intent. “They are all, well,
"mine." He gave him a smile, one Illya had seen before, the one that hid the iron of the man behind a mask of charm, even after he had said something so blatantly bold. “You understand.”

It took Illya a moment to fully grasp the implication in those words, accept the meaning behind them. Once more realizing that he was no longer on his own in any of this. He nodded to the man, humbled. "Yes, sir."

"So," Waverly announced, releasing Illya’s shoulder and sliding his hands into his pockets. "When the time comes…"

"I understand the importance of the work we do here," Illya inserted. "For my people, as well as all people. I—we…” He looked to Gaby, who was standing several feet away with Waverly’s receptionist, Jun, trying to pretend like she wasn't more focused on this conversation than her own. "We will not jeopardize that… unless there is no other choice."

The look his superior gave him was solemn, solid but, perhaps, also touched. "To keeping the team together then," he said. "While we can."

"Yes," Illya agreed with a nod. “To keeping the team together.”

"And the other bridge, well, we’ll cross that when we come to it," Waverly added, then leaned in. "But not without a plan."

Illya's smile was brief, but relieved. "A plan is always good."

With a nod of his own, Waverly moved away to speak with the technicians and Illya hurried back to Gaby's side. Jun smiled at them, coy, before walking away and he supposed that was one more person who knew their secret.

Gaby peered up into his face, her eyes scanning him in a way he recognized. She was taking his likeness with her mind. He did the same.

"What did—" she started to ask, but a call from the open hangar doors drew their attention.

Solo hurried toward them on light feet, his casual smile not quite hiding the mischief in his eyes. Illya hurried forward and took his arm in a firm grip, shuffling him aside. "Did you get it?"

The American scoffed, taking his arm back and smoothing his ruffled suit. "Of course I got it." He looked at Illya beneath his brows as he held out a black velvet box. "But not without a plan."

Illya snatched it away and opened it, relief easing him as he checked this one item off his list. He pulled the prize from its resting place and turned it in his fingers.

Solo’s eyes fell to the familiar ring, sparkling clean with a new black pearl at its center. “You got that done fast,” he commented.

"Time is not my friend," Illya replied, then added with sincerity. “And thank you… for getting it back to me.”

“You’re welcome.” His grin slid to the side. “It’s not like I could fence a ring with a broken transmitter in any case.” Illya peered down at him with stern disbelief but Solo pretended his con was successful. “But I do have to ask: does this imply what I think it does? Because it might be a tad soon.”

Illya snapped the box closed and flipped it to Solo with a smirk. "Yes, and no." It was all the
information he would give before he returned to the woman he loved.

The roar of engines already loomed in the background as he approached her. She had her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at him for having a secret and he couldn't hide his smile as he closed his hands into fists behind his back.

"What is going on?" she demanded when he was near enough to hear her.

"You are angry with me? When I am about to leave?"

Gaby scowled. "You are keeping secrets. We made a deal—"

Illya held out his hands to her, both closed. "Maybe I get you present?"

Her eyes widened, gaze flying from his hands to his face and back again. "Illya don't tease me!" she hissed, slapping both fists at once and he chuckled as he opened them for her.

The ring wobbled in his left palm, the circle of diamonds catching the light and sending it back in a cascade of sparkles over her face.

"You fixed it," she whispered, looking from the ring to him with soft surprise. He took her hand, purposefully sliding the ring onto her finger to rest over that stripe of pale skin.

She stared down at it, running a fingertip over the pearl. "Will you have to memorize a new frequency, or is it the same?"

"There is no bug," he said, voice deep and achingly tender. "This pearl is real."

Her eyes lifted to his and he wondered if he would ever stop feeling that moment of weightlessness whenever she looked at him so openly. The world fell away, the noise, the people, his impending departure... for one small moment in time, it was only them.

It passed too quickly. His plane was pulling up to the hangar and Gaby glanced toward it, breaking the spell. "What no trackers?" she asked, a valiant attempt at teasing as she brought her attention back to him.

Illya shrugged. "Not in the ring."

She huffed, crossing her arms again.

"Only your shoes, most of your earrings and necklaces, your sunglasses, all of your purses..."

Gaby laughed, her hand falling onto his arm to squeeze lightly. "Good to know I will always have one with me." Then she peered up at him from beneath her lashes. She played with his sleeve before letting her hand fall away. "I may have put a few on you as well."

He blinked. "Where?"

Her grin was all dimples. "I'm sure you will find them... eventually."

He wanted to pull her into his arms, kiss her, hold her, tell her again that he loved her, but the time for that had passed. Instead, he took a step back as the stairs on the plane descended, moving to stand a respectable distance from her, his hands at his sides. She did the same.

"Just remember," she said, without looking at him. "If you don't come back, Solo and I are coming to get you."
Solo came to stand on his other side. “What she said.”

Illya’s heart swelled until it seemed to press hard against his ribcage. "I am counting on it."

The plane's door opened then and Illya stepped forward, only to halt when his handler, Oleg Kuznetsov, ducked out of the interior and scanned the area with beady eyes before straightening his jacket and starting down the metal steps. Recovering quickly, Illya continued forward to meet him.

"Kuryakin, there has been a change of plans," Oleg explained, in succinct Russian. "I will be speaking with Mr. Waverly." He strode passed Illya and approached the head of UNCLE, leaving him to watch as the two men shook hands.

"Certainly," he heard Waverly say, after a quick exchange of words, his Russian distinctively accented. "We can head back to my office and discuss things in comfort." He led Oleg forward, tossing a quick look over his shoulder at the group gathered there. "I think we can all fit in the car."

…

Little was said as the trio waited outside Waverly's office. Illya's fingers tapped rhythmically at his knee as he sat across from her and Gaby knew it was taking much of his willpower to sit still, to not stand up and pace, to behave as though this was just one more, inconvenient bout of red tape in his KGB career. She wanted to go to him, take his hand, steady his tapping. He lifted his eyes to hers and she realized he was thinking the same thing.

Gaby set the back of her hand on her knee and his gaze shifted to her open palm. He took a deep breath and settled back in his chair, relaxing his shoulders as he set a hand on his own knee, palm down. Gaby smiled and let her fingers curl inward, imagining the cool weight of his hand resting there. They shared a long, sacred look.

When Waverly stuck his head out of his office door, the three of them turned as one to look at him. His eyes landed on Gaby's, pointedly, before scanning over the others, and she swore he gave her half a wink. "Kuryakin, would you step in here for a few moments?" Illya pushed to his feet, running the palms of his hands over his thighs before nodding, and stepping forward.

Gaby watched him disappear, her face neutral even as her heart sank.

"I have to admit," Solo said. "I am more than curious. It makes no sense for Oleg to be here if the KGB is planning to pull Illya permanently."

She folded her arms over her chest and glanced at the closed door. It was a valid point but she had spent the night coming to terms with losing him (only for a while, her heart insisted,) and she wasn't ready to let her guard down just yet.

It felt like an eternity of waiting.

When the doors finally opened, it was all she could do not to jump out of her seat and demand information. She focused on her breathing, checked her nails to appear unconcerned, then looked up as the men exited. They were speaking Russian and it was too fast for her to pick out any more than a few words, none of which were useful without context. Solo's attention shifted to her as he cocked an eyebrow.
Waverly was leading the way as they walked by and Gaby couldn’t stop her gaze from following Illya as he and Oleg strolled side by side. She caught a flash of his blue eyes but they were unreadable. The group disappeared down the hallway and she pulled in a shaky breath. The realization that that might be the last time she ever saw him, jolted through her like an electric shock. She sprang to her feet.

"Gaby?" There was worry in Solo’s tone but she found she couldn’t acknowledge it. Her gaze bounced between the plush carpet, the vase of flowers on the coffee table, a painting on the wall — looking anywhere but at him.

"I am going to use the restroom," she stated with surprising calm. *I just need a moment,* she told herself, *time to catch my breath. I’m fine.*

She hurried across the waiting area toward the hall, already fighting the sting of tears. Panic was pulsing in her blood as she rounded the corner—

And ran straight into Illya’s broad chest.

She stumbled backward and he caught her, his big, cool hands closing over her upper arms. Her eyes flew up to find him smiling at her.

"Illya!"

"I am not going back," he spilled out in a rush. "Or rather, I am not going back alone." He made sure she was steady before letting her go and taking a step back.

"What do you mean?" Solo demanded from right behind her. "I heard something about Belarus."

"Yes." Illya nodded and she could see he was trying to stay professional. He kept staring at her face, then forcing his attention back to Solo. "There has been a outbreak of sickness they believe is THRUSH related. The incident has Politburo reconsidering its stance on how it has been working with UNCLE, how it will continue going forward."

Solo was grinning but Gaby's thoughts were completely disassembled. They weren't taking him? Her eyes were lost as she studied his face. "What does it mean, Illya?"

His gaze fell to hers, open and tender. The little smile lifting the corner of his lips broke open the shell she had put around her heart and hope started leaking out, warm and golden, lighting up her insides.

"Oleg asked me — taking into account my work here and the trust I have established — if I would consider staying on as their representative to this organization on a more long-term basis."

"You're not leaving," Gaby breathed. She felt like she might collapse in on herself. Losing all thought of propriety, she threw herself into his chest, twisting her hands in the fabric at the back of his sweater as she hugged him close. His arms came up to hold her, cool and heavy against her spine as he pressed a cheek to her crown. Perfect, solid and unwavering.

"Well—" Waverly's voice broke the bubble and they jumped apart. His knowing look shifted between them with a raised eyebrow, but Gaby caught the humor there. "It appears as though you two will not have as long to recover as I would have preferred," he said. "We have a mission. It will take at least two weeks to prepare though. Not going to take any unnecessary chances." He passed a quick inspection over each of them. "Solo and I will see to the initial prep and fact checking," he continued. "You two are back on medical leave, effective immediately."
"Yes, sir," Illya said, still maintaining his professional distance.

Gaby took his hand in hers and squeezed. When he looked at her, surprised then soft, she smiled up at him.

“Let’s go home.”

Ignoring Waverly, and anyone else who might see them, Illya lifted her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

“Yes,” he said when they parted, looking into her eyes with the full weight of his sincerity. “Home.”

Chapter End Notes

*crying* Okay guys, did I keep my promise? Is it Happy? Come and keep me company here at the end! *hugs all of you* *whew* Okay...

Special Thanks: oceans_and_lovers! ♥ for entering the exchange and inspiring this behemoth that, in all honesty, has changed my life.

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Please let me know what you think now that it's all said and done. If you haven't commented yet, I would love to hear from you. If you are reading this for the first time five years from now, I would love to hear from you too. 😊

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!