Return from Nowhere

by bitochondria

Summary

Napoleon and Illya alternately puzzle over their conflicted feelings after Napoleon's amnesiac seduction by THRUSH scientist Mara, and fail miserably at reading each other's cues. (Same situation written from two different perspectives; implied long-term N/I casual relationship.)

Notes

I wrote this so you could theoretically read each perspective first and then fill in the blanks with the other; to that end, it's presented in columns. If you're reading it on mobile, you may want to turn off the work skin that makes it columns, although it might turn off by itself!

Anyway. These boys are dumb and lovestruck and have no idea why they have FEELINGS or what to do with them.

Napoleon

Illya hadn't said anything, but there was no way he hadn't noticed.

The way she looked, her chilly demeanor, her academic leanings, her accent— hell, even her
glasses—if Illya had an estranged sibling, it would be Mara.

He had expected some teasing—"you missed me that much?" or "I guess this means THRUSH knows we're sleeping together"—but it never came. Illya was cold and prickly on the return trip, and distant for the days that followed. He was touchy even after the Capsule B had fully worn off and Napoleon had realized that, no, of course he wasn't actually in love with a woman who had kidnapped and manipulated him and whom he had known for a whopping seventy two hours. Even after Mara was well into reeducation (and the massive overdose of Capsule B had not, in fact, proven fatal—a shock to every UNCLE doctor on staff) and Napoleon had very clearly established that he had no further designs on her.

Even after Napoleon had realized that his abnormally strong affection for her was the very clear result of him, in drug-induced confusion, overlaying her lies onto his memories of Illya. Napoleon chose not to think too particularly deeply on what that might mean.

Illya’s silence was beyond puzzling. He had never seemed jealous of any of the other people Napoleon slept with—that wasn’t really the nature of their relationship. But Napoleon couldn’t help but feel like Illya was behaving like he was actually jealous. He wasn’t snappish or even all that standoffish, merely quieter and more unsmiling than usual.

Napoleon found himself wishing Illya would just yell at him, or something; the banality of his anger (if that was, in fact, what it was) was somehow more upsetting than getting chewed out.

So out of some misguided impulse—masochism, self-loathing, plain old stupidity—Napoleon decided to bring it up himself.

A week or two after they got back from Nevada, they sat down to eat lunch together in the UNCLE cafeteria. That was perhaps the strangest part—Illya seemed perfectly content to continue spending the majority of his free time with Napoleon, he just…wasn’t really holding up his end of the conversation.

Napoleon affected a light, casual tone over his bowl of tomato soup, asking between bites, "You know, I was thinking. Did you notice how much you and Mara looked alike?"

Illya paused, in the middle of bringing his sandwich to his mouth, and put it back on his plate. He leaned back in his seat, hands moving to his lap. "Back on that topic, are we? You'll forgive me if I don't share your level of investment in the orphaned THRUSH cur we've taken it upon ourselves to rehome." He smiled, void of sentiment, with a little blink that seemed to punctuate the end of the conversation.

Napoleon sighed. It wasn't really Mara he was invested in.

"I'm merely trying to—"

Illya rolled his eyes. "What? Imply you have a predilection for blondes? THRUSH's observational acumen has been overstated if they needed a computer program to figure that out." He picked his sandwich back up.

"No, I—"

"You should talk to Sheffield in R&D if you're having difficulties processing what happened under the influence of Capsule B. He ought to be aware of those side effects." He bit into his sandwich.

Napoleon came to the belated realization that, for Illya, the matter was closed for discussion.
On the one hand, Napoleon was a little hurt by his partner’s dismissiveness, but on the other hand… if he was actually jealous…

That part made him feel kind of happy.

Another thing he maybe shouldn’t think too deeply on.

He half expected that after their abortive lunchtime conversation, Illya would be even more aloof, or that he would shy away from spending time together, but he had no time to find out. That evening they were put on a plane to England to deal with some kind of nonsense about tinned pies. With Mara weeks out and an ocean away, Illya’s Arctic chilliness thawed naturally to its more standard Russian temperature.

But it had been so easy, Napoleon mused, dressing himself up like a pompous Hollywood mogul, to be convinced that he had long loved this supposed fellow agent. She had whispered to him of long simmering affection, kisses stolen behind file cabinets, a mutual respect and friendship that had blossomed under duress in the field, of tenderness and sweet words and fingers intertwined on long drives and gentleness and passion in equal parts. And Napoleon had bought every word of it.

Which was strange, because he had never really had that with anyone.

His affairs had always burned luminous bright, wild tawdry things that snuffed themselves out before setting anything else ablaze. He loved, he made love, he left, and he moved on.

He couldn’t even imagine what it was like to have someone who was just there, always, when you needed them.

However, he spoke no more of his feelings, instead inundating Illya with physical affection. As they tooled around London, he dismissed the notion of personal space from his vocabulary, sitting very nearly in his lap as they drove, putting his arm around him at every possible opportunity, touching his face and elbows and knees. Illya was never particularly receptive to public displays of affection, so it was hard to say how pleased he was with these ministrations, but at least he wasn’t pulling away or telling him to stop.

He even endeavored not to flirt too much with Delgado, even though he had seen the man’s picture and suspected that could be a highly productive outlet, he so wanted to get back in Illya’s good graces.

Looking in the mirror, he affixed a gaudy pair of sunglasses to his nose and turned to Illya.

Illya sighed deeply. “I believe those are women’s.”

Napoleon splayed his fingers out and shook his hands in the manner of a jazz musician, grinning sidelong at the mirror. “It’s Hollywood, Illya, what do you want?”

Blinking, Illya suggested, “I’m just not sure camp is the right tactic for recruiting a hardened criminal.”

As it turned out, they may as well have gone with their UNCLE badges glued to their foreheads, because Delgado pegged them instantaneously as lawmen. Napoleon still counted the visit as a victory, however, as he kept his hands and lascivious looks (mostly) to himself.

He had barely given Ms. Pogue a second look, either, until they were trapped in a box together. He forgave himself for that one; a man could hardly be made of steel when a beautiful woman was stripping her clothes off in an enclosed space together— and besides, they might have died. He
wasn’t going to go to his grave regretting that kind of missed opportunity.

Where he actually tripped up was on the beach in Rio; Victoria batted her eyelashes and touched his leg with her foot under the table, and he returned her affection openly and easily, Illya sitting three inches away. He was actually relieved when Waverley appeared to take Victoria off his hands, as it left him with no opportunity to foul up again, as well as no reason to have to recuse himself from the pudding mogul’s covetous cuddles.

As they left, arm in arm, he shrugged at Illya, who blinked in rapid response. Waverley had a strange effect on some young ladies.

“How does he do that?”

Coldly smiling, Illya peered at Napoleon from the corners of his eyes. “You don’t think that’ll be you in thirty years?”

"Forty,” Napoleon overenunciated, shooting Illya a look of disgust.

Illya snorted, quietly, fingering the stem of his glass.

“I can see you now,” he mused, turning to touch the bit of hair that rested in the middle of Napoleon’s forehead, “all of this gone, of course—”

“Hey!” Napoleon snatched his hand away from his hair. “I will thank you to know all of my forefathers died with their hair intact.”

“—fine, you can keep your hair. But it’s gone white,” Illya smirked, canines exposed on one side, “and the jowls…” He mimed an over-large jaw and cheeks with his hands, shaking them slightly to emphasize the enormity of Napoleon’s future flesh. “And of course you’ll be wrinkled and liver spotted—”

“Do I need to find a picture of my late grandfather for you? The Solo men have always aged well, Illya.”

“—and yet you’ll still be chasing pretty young things around, like an old pervert—”

“Tell me what you really think!”

“—and for some bizarre reason, the pretty young things will go along with it.” Illya’s mouth twisted just slightly to the side, mischief sparkling in his eyes.

Napoleon glared, arms crossed in false peevishness. “And where will you be in all this?” He roughly palmed the top of Illya’s head, and Illya slapped him away as he answered his own question. “I mean, you’ll be just as bald and dessicated in forty years.”

“Well assuming your libidinous bungling hasn’t caused my untimely demise,” Illya grumbled, fixing his hair, “I hope to be retired at that point, with ample time to brush up on my reading.”

“Aww,” Napoleon clucked, pouting at his partner, “Well, Grandpa, when I visit you in the home I’ll make sure they’re only letting the handsome nurses push you around.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Napoleon.” Illya narrowed his eyes lasciviously. “They’ll already be wrapped around my finger. And when you visit, they’ll all gossip about us and ask to see pictures from when we were young and handsome.”
Napoleon found himself vaguely turned on by the idea of septuagenarian Illya beguiling a devoted cadre of nubile young male nurses. That he featured in Illya’s strange little fantasy of the future made him feel a great rush of tenderness for his fellow man. He thought, semi-seriously, about kissing Illya’s shoulder, right here on the veranda in front of a bunch of strangers.

“I think we’ll still be very handsome, by elderly standards.”

“I will be.” Illya shrugged. He lifted his cocktail halfway to his lips. “Clean living and all that.”

They thus proceeded to get raucously drunk over daiquiris and fog cutters and headhunters, to the point that Illya kept walking into things and apologizing to them on the way back to the hotel room, and Napoleon had to try their key in five doors before realizing they weren’t even on the right floor. When they did finally find a lock the key fit into, they immediately collapsed onto the bed together, laughing and clumsy and very handsy. They threw their jackets onto the floor as they tumbled, desperate to get close, but too clumsy for buttons.

Illya’s mouth was on his neck and Napoleon’s hands were roaming down towards the zipper on his slacks. He nuzzled into Illya’s hair, salt-scented from the beach, now fumbling past the elastic of his underwear. Illya made the smallest of unf noises into his neck as he grasped the smooth hot flesh of his erection, and then they were twinned, lying side by side, touching each other hungrily.

They had been doing the recreational sex thing for quite a while now, but Napoleon still felt like a lit up Christmas tree every time Illya touched his cock. He thrust into the warmth of his friend’s hand, knowing already they were significantly too drunk for this to end any way but messily. He was just happy Illya seemed to have forgiven him.

They rocked against each other, still mostly clothed. Illya kept chuckling drunkenly, laughter catching in his throat as he would try to stifle a gasp or a noise of pleasure. He was not a vocally demonstrative lover unless he was a little tipsy or otherwise impaired. Napoleon had become quite fond of finding a way to get libations into him after he figured that out.

Mind a damp haze of spirits and ocean spray and soon-to-follow bodily fluids, Napoleon didn’t notice right away that Illya’s eyes, blurry and half-lidded, were on his mouth. When he did, he leaned in to kiss him. Their noses nearly brushed before the veil of drunkenness parted just enough that Napoleon remembered that they did not kiss each other. He cupped the back of Illya’s blonde head and, as smoothly as possible, transformed the motion into something else, brushing his lips against the space just in front of his ear instead.

Illya thrust harder against him in response, and in very short order they were sliding against each other in Napoleon’s hand, Illya’s fingers gracelessly cupping Napoleon’s. Illya’s breath grew rapid and shallow, and Napoleon muttered his name into his neck. They came together, and immediately a wave of infectious laughter washed over the both of them.

Illya sat halfway up, his eyes blinking open at slightly different rates.

“Welcome to boarding school, 1949,” he muttered, smiling with tipsy weariness.

Napoleon rolled onto his back, holding one hand up to avoid further soiling the bedspread. “We need to start…” He groped for a solution, his mind a blank. “Aiming?”

Illya snorted, eyes scrunching shut with what could have been, equally likely, amusement or disgust. “Or carrying Borax with us.”

Napoleon kicked his legs off the bed and went into the bathroom to get a towel. He may as well
have been crossing the Sinai desert. Washing his hands felt like dismantling an atomic bomb, and trying to get a towel off the rack seemed akin to breaking out of handcuffs. He was going to have a very bad headache in the morning.

“I never have this problem with anyone else,” he complained, walking over to the bed with the towel.

Illya watched him dabbing at the sheets. He was slumped against the headboard, shirt rumpled, pants still unzipped. He seemed to be having a rather hard time focusing.

Napoleon sighed. “You think Waverly ever notices there’s often an extra laundry bill when you and I stay together?” They were careful some of the time, but they also had a bad habit of fucking first and thinking second.

“Only if he puts two and two together that those are often also the times he absconds with the girl,” Illya yawned. “You know, I think we have some peroxide in the first aid kid.” He gestured to Napoleon with his forehead. “Most of it got on you this time, though.”

Napoleon looked down at his clothes and groaned. So that’s why the bed had come away mostly unscathed, this time.

“At least you can do that laundry at home,” Illya shrugged, his eyes closed at this point.

“Or I can just buy a new shirt,” Napoleon grumbled.

“How capitalist of you,” Illya accused, entirely without intonation.

Napoleon wiped at his shirt, then gave up and took it off. He folded it and placed it in a bag with his other dirty clothes, and then went looking for the peroxide.

Digging through Illya’s luggage, he knocked his glasses case on the floor, and his mind went back to Mara. Or not Mara, exactly. Mara as a cipher for Illya.

UNCLE field agents rarely had satisfying long term romantic prospects, which was fine for Napoleon. He rarely had long-term romances.

But if Illya were a woman—

Would they…?

Well.

Napoleon shook the thought from his head. He had exactly as many successful long-term relationships with women as he did with men, which was to say none. That he and Illya were friends who happened to get each other off occasionally was probably the best possible outcome.

He wasn’t in love with him, so it was extremely silly to think about whether they would be in love if Illya were a girl.

But it was reassuring that Illya didn’t seem to be harboring any lingering resentment over Mara.

Still wildly impaired, Napoleon failed completely to find the first aid kit.

Spiraling around the drain of drunkenness, he very nearly asked Illya if he had legitimately been angry at him, about Mara, before stopping himself mid-sentence.
“You weren’t actually—”

Nothing good lay in that line of questioning.

He cleared his throat.

“—actually doing things like this in boarding school, were you? Getting drunk and… you know.”

Illya opened one eye.

“What, are you jealous of poor Aleksei?”

“No, just surprised. I wouldn’t have been that bold in ‘49.” Same-sex intercourse was distinctly illegal everywhere in the United States at the time— even in Illinois— but the idea of getting it on under Stalin seemed like a different kind of danger altogether. Since finding out about Illya’s proclivities, Napoleon had kind of wondered if that might be part of his reluctance to return home for long.

Illya dismissed this with a wave. “Well, my countrymen still love Tchaichovsky, don’t they?” He shrugged. “Besides, we were minors. And we didn’t get caught.”

It seemed like kind of a non-answer, but Napoleon had finally managed to locate the first aid kit.

“Good thing neither of us are bleeding,” he muttered.

“I’m very quick at making a tourniquet,” Illya mumbled, words slurring together slightly.

Napoleon made a weak attempt at cleaning the bed and flopped down across its surface lengthwise, his head on Illya’s legs. Illya neither touched him nor acknowledged his presence. “It’s too early to go to sleep.”

“Yes, but I’m a bit unsteady to go…” He paused, apparently not entirely capable of his usual quick comebacks, before less than enthusiastically suggesting, “hiking up Sugar Loaf right now.”

“I don’t think they let you do that even if you’re sober.”

“Pity.” Illya’s eyes stayed closed as he spoke.

Napoleon reached up and very softly cupped the side of his face. Something about Illya inspired a genuine tenderness in him that he rarely mustered with other men, and often enough feigned with women. Probably the same kind of something that had made it so easily for Mara to convince him of— well. Another line of thought that didn’t bear an in depth study.

Illya’s eyes fluttered open and he looked at Napoleon with what he interpreted as, and hoped was, an exhausted sort of fondness.

“Maybe we should go take a short walk or something. Try to burn of some off this alcohol poisoning we’re clearly succumbing to.” Napoleon let his fingertips trace their way down Illya’s jaw and neck.

Illya nodded, a plodding, sodden motion. He started to speak, but it turned into a yawn before any words could come out. “Fine,” he swallowed, “But you’ll need to be prepared to deposit me somewhere and come back with a gurney if your definition of short is longer than mine.”

“I had a dog like that once,” Napoleon yawned, moved by Illya’s inhalation.
“Drunk?” With one eye mostly closed and the other widened in confusion, Illya looked more than a little stupid.

Napoleon couldn’t quite tie the threads of his logic together. “Why would my dog be drunk?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who said you had a dog that needed a gurney.”

“What— no.” Napoleon shook his head, his brain significantly too pickled for this. “The dog was — when you took him on walks, he’d….” He spun his hands around, conducting the air as he looked for the words. “He wouldn’t walk the whole walk.”

“Very clear.” Illya still looked like he was stuck on the idea of bringing a dog to the drunk tank on a gurney.

“You know, you’d walk to the bakery, and the dog would just lay down—”

“Well if you’re feeding him at the bakery then—”

Their inanity was interrupted by a loud but cheerful knock on the door.

Napoleon sprang up, alcohol overridden by adrenaline. Wide-eyed, he pointed at himself and then the bathroom. Illya nodded, and scrambled to zip his fly as Napoleon ducked behind the bathroom door. He realized as soon as the latch clicked that his plan lacked a valuable component: a shirt. He scrambled to throw the rest of his clothes off and turn the shower on while keeping his ear pressed to the door.

He couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, but he thought he heard Mr. Waverley’s low mumble, and a woman’s voice. Presumably Ms. Pogue. They went on talking for a moment, and then a knock on the bathroom door nearly sent him straight out of his skin.

“Napoleon!” Illya yelled, right up next to the door. “Are you done in there yet?”

Panicked, Napoleon stepped into the shower for the express purpose of having pretended to be in the shower. He doused his head and turned the water off.

“What!” He yelled back, pretending he had no idea they had guests.

“Are you done, or are you still getting the curlers out of your hair?”

“Give me a minute,” Napoleon barked, drying himself off just enough to preserve the illusion of having just showered. He threw the towel around his waist and stepped outside.

“Mr. Solo!” Waverley admonished.

Ms. Pogue muttered a less-than-upset ‘oh my,’ and averted her eyes.

“You didn’t tell me we had guests, Illya!” Napoleon feigned a shame he wouldn’t have had even if he had actually been surprised. “I thought it was an emergency!” He slammed the bathroom door theatrically and then a moment later came back out in one of the scratchy hotel bathrobes. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Waverley, Ms. Pogue.”

Waverley looked at him with disdain, but it was hardly the first time he had come into Napoleon’s private lodgings only to find him doing something private. Once, due to an accident of Illya and Waverley’s hotel keys being switched, the old man had straight up walked in on him with a topless girl on his lap. Fresh from the shower could hardly compare to that.
Illya shot him a withering glance. “Mr. Waverley would like to know if we’d be interested in joining the lovely Ms. Pogue and himself for a **bossa nova** show tonight.”

“Well of course,” Napoleon crooned, trying and failing to sound a little less sloshed. “We would love to. After all, the most beautiful woman here already has plans,” he glanced meaningfully at Ms. Pogue, “So we certainly have nowhere better to be.”

Illya muttered something faintly damning about the merits of being asleep, instead, under his breath, and Napoleon ignored him.

Waverley grumbled, “Excellent. We’ll meet you in the lobby in ten minutes.” He raised his eyebrows and shook his head slightly. “And put on some pants before you join us, won’t you, Mr. Solo?”

He left with an only slightly scandalized Ms. Pogue, and Napoleon and Illya were left… somewhere. After a moment of furrowed brows and glaring, they both started laughing, and couldn’t stop.

Illya pushed him slightly, palm to shoulder, and sighed.

“Is there anyone on the planet with less shame than you?”

“Oh come on,” Napoleon pleaded, pretending to brush dust from where he had been pushed, “I think you’re discounting the contributions of a whole lot of very shameless people if you think I’m the most shameless. What of nudists? Cruisers?” He reached out and pushed Illya’s hair back behind his ears. “Long-haired counterculture radicalists?”

Illya roughly grabbed one of his hands away from his head, but then very softly kissed the inside of his wrist. Napoleon’s stomach bloomed with butterflies, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“Napoleon, you can hardly claim the moral high ground over cruisers.” He looked at him with weary reproach. “Come on, Shameless. Let’s go try to convince Waverley we haven't been thoroughly soaked.”

"I'll go get those pants."

"But you're so charming without them," Illya grinned. Lazily plunking himself down on the corner of the bed, he watched Napoleon search for appropriate vestments.

"Well, we wouldn't want me to charm Ms. Pogue right out from Waverley's nose, would we?" He pulled a largely unwrinkled shirt and pants set from his suitcase and tried to locate underwear.

Illya snorted. "I suppose not." He could hear the bed creak slightly as he shifted.

He slid on new underwear and pants, pulling an undershirt and button down over his head before he zipped them up. He looked at Illya, quietly watching him dress. He really had no desire to go mime sobriety at a musical performance with his boss, but going out when Waverley asked was more of a compunction than a choice. He wanted to get back into the bed with Illya and wrap himself around him, instead. He wanted to speak honestly, and laugh at shared jokes, and fall asleep with Illya’s head on his shoulder.

“What’s that face for?” Illya asked, brows furrowing.

Napoleon shook his head, smoothing things over with a smile. “Nothing. Just thinking that if this
bossa fella isn’t good, I’m going to fall asleep. And if Waverley expects us to drink, I might throw up.”

“I’ll hold your hair,” Illya offered, salt dry, with a little toss of one shoulder.

“I’d call you a prince, but you ran all of those out of your country.” Napoleon squinted one eye. “I think. Unless that was the French.” He suddenly couldn’t remember the specific events of the Russian Revolution. “I think I’m drunker than I think I am.”

“Stellar sentence construction. And we didn’t run them out, we merely abolished the nobility. We gave them the option to join the rest of us…” He paused, scratching slightly at his ear. “Крестьянский. Uh.” He blinked rapidly.

“The proletariat?”

“I was trying to be more glib than that but.” He shook his head and propped himself up a little more. “We should probably go before Waverley starts questioning why you apparently walk around half naked in front of me in our shared hotel room.”

“Almost ready.” Napoleon finished buttoning his shirt, and then quickly ducked back into the bathroom to brush his hair, which was distressingly still moist. He could see the tiniest sliver of Illya’s face reflected in the mirror. He was watching him, drowsy, abnormally patient.

He thought about the sweetness with which Illya had kissed his wrist. He thought about his affection for him—not love, of course—but something solid and reliable; of lascivious comments whispered beside the UNCLE file cabinets, lips so close he could feel the words on his ears; of their mutual respect and friendship that had blossomed into something unshakeable over the years of their partnership; of a kind of tenderness found in sharp words and soft touches; of an arm around his shoulders and a sidelong glance that silently spoke something inutterable.

He thought about how happy he was when he woke up next to Illya, and realized he had to stop thinking about it.

What Illya was to him—friend, partner, part-time lover—it was something. Where they were, together—it was somewhere. But it wasn’t—couldn’t be—love.

If there was a version of their lives where Waverley shrugged and threw out the law and the employee handbook and gave them his blessing, Napoleon couldn’t see it. That version was a fairytale. Real people didn’t paint targets on their back like that. There would be no sweeping love story for a pair of spies, least of all two men. They were as likely to cohabitate monogamously as they were to join THRUSH.

“Distracted by your own reflection?” Illya tipped to one side to better peer into the bathroom. “I know you’re handsome, but I want to get downstairs before I start making the transition from drunk to hungover.”

Napoleon turned and looked at him through the doorway.

“Be there in a moment, Tipsy.” He winked at him. “I have to make myself pretty for our double date with our boss.”

He caught himself in the mirror, smirking.

He could live with this version, though.
Mara was hardly the first blonde Eastern European scientist Napoleon had slept with—Illya had noticed Napoleon’s predilection for that type well before he had realized Napoleon was also interested in him—but she was certainly the first one he claimed to be in love with.

His declaration in the Nowhere saloon had rendered Illya quite inarticulate; rather than teasing him about his preference for blondes or poking fun at how easily he had been hoodwinked, he had cruelly, smilingly offered Mara a glass of water to assist in her death of personality.

The woman might have been a THRUSH scientist, but she was repentant. There was no reason to gloat.

But he was strangely upset, for many days after. Thinking about Mara—thinking about the way Napoleon had looked at her—thinking about the apparent ease with which THRUSH convinced Napoleon he had a long-standing love affair with this woman—his stomach rolled. He felt a tightness in his sternum and his shoulders, and he could feel his pulse in the vein in his neck. He grew hot and restless, and baselessly angry.

He was terrified that he might be jealous.

That’s what he assumed, initially. He hadn’t been—wasn’t ever—jealous of Napoleon’s other lovers. They were friends, of course, but their physical relationship was purely one of convenience—they happened to be attracted to one another and happened to spend a lot of time in one another’s company. Not that he liked the endless parade of women (and occasional men) who followed dotingly behind his partner, but…jealousy wasn’t supposed to factor in to it.

If he was jealous, then it was probably time to stop sleeping together. There was no place in their friendship—or their partnership—for those kind of emotions. But on the other hand, he couldn’t think of a sensible way to break things off without explaining why, and without creating fallout when Napoleon’s feelings were inevitably hurt.

And also, he just didn’t want to.

Their arrangement was comfortable, and he would miss it.

So he spent the next week or so quietly attempting to puzzle through these thoughts, Napoleon growing increasingly jittery and annoying as he ruminated quietly. He avoided Napoleon’s roaming hands and responded sparingly to his innuendo, and thought about what the discomfort he was experiencing really meant.

One day not long after their return from Nevada, while Illya was still pondering the possible consequences of maintaining the status quo or not, some kind of levee broke in Napoleon’s brain-to-mouth connection.

With a spoonful of soup hovering before his lips, he suddenly blurted, nervous and awkward, "You know, I was thinking. Did you notice how much you and Mara looked alike?"

Illya’s innards shifted uncomfortably. Napoleon had tried to talk to him about the situation on the way home from Nowhere, but he hadn’t had anything to say on the topic, and had more or less told Napoleon to drop it. He would never have brought it back up, even if technically he now had an abundance of words on the topic.

He put his sandwich down and affected the most curt tone he could afford without sounding angry.
"Back on that topic, are we?" He didn’t give Napoleon a chance to answer his question. “You'll forgive me if I don't share your level of investment in the orphaned THRUSH cur we've taken it upon ourselves to rehome." He gave Napoleon a ten-mile stare that he hoped said ‘drop it.’

Napoleon sighed, his eyes closing and his hands coming up to punctuate his speech. He stumbled a little over his words, abortively attempting to explain himself. "I'm merely trying to—"

Illya stopped him before he could say what he was merely trying to do. "What? Imply you have a predilection for blondes? THRUSH's observational acumen has been overstated if they needed a computer program to figure that out." He attempted, unsuccessfully, to continue eating his lunch.

As soon as Illya picked his sandwich back up, Napoleon chimed in with, "No, I—"

Suddenly cold, he practically spit, "You should talk to Sheffield in R&D if you're having difficulties processing what happened under the influence of Capsule B. He ought to be aware of those side effects."

That Napoleon seemed so desperate to speak on the issue made Illya’s stomach cold jelly. He bit into his sandwich and swallowed a lump of fear, and suddenly everything was very clear. He wasn’t jealous. He was afraid.

Napoleon had, very easily, been convinced he was in love with a woman who was basically a long-lost Kuryakin. Napoleon, who had once drunkenly, off-handedly, admitted to him that he wasn’t sure he had ever actually been in love. Napoleon, who now wanted to discuss Illya’s resemblance to this woman he had been convinced he loved.

His breath came in short and shallow, as the same question repeated over again in his mind: what if Napoleon thinks he’s in love with me?

He needed time to think this through. His own feelings about Napoleon— they mattered very little, in the grand scheme of things. He had not and would not pin his hopes on some kind of happy ending for the two of them, even if those were the sort of feelings he inspired— which they weren’t. Assuming both of them lived to retirement age, someday Napoleon would marry, and if they stayed friends, he might be Uncle Illya. Or he might return to Russia, or hell, take that position they kept offering him at the Sorbonne. He would not fall prey to the erroneous belief that he might be able to eke out a life with a man like Napoleon Solo. And if Napoleon was harbouring some kind of soppy crush, he needed to figure out how to disabuse him of it.

However, he had no time to figure any of it out. That evening Waverley sent them off to England to investigate a company that dealt in canned pie. Illya was usually fairly keen on dessert, but somehow canning an entire pie seemed more like the kind of things Americans made fun of Soviets for than a British delicacy.

He decided that while he was determining the correct course of action, he would try to behave as normally as possible around Napoleon.

Napoleon, for his part, behaved somewhat less normally.

He was almost indecently affectionate throughout their time in London, all inappropriate jokes and arms slung around his back. To an outside observer it probably seemed very locker room— except that under the table his hand would be on his knee, or alone in the car he’d practically be on Illya’s lap. Illya tried to react as neutrally as possible to all this, wanting neither to alarm nor encourage.

Then, in order to meet with a convicted jewel thief, he insisted on going undercover as a
flamboyant Hollywood director who wanted to ‘tell his story.’ Illya insisted that no one in their right mind was going to buy that, but Napoleon gleefully minced around in a purple smoking jacket like he was trying to understudy Liberace.

When Illya saw the picture of the man they were supposed to go meet, he thought maybe the camp act was intended as a way for Napoleon to be able to flirt with the man with impunity, and he felt a little better. He had the kind of face and build Illya knew Napoleon was attracted to; in fact he looked rather like how Napoleon had described the THRUSH agent he had once fucked in a train bathroom.

Illya leaned against the wall as Napoleon made himself into a walking stereotype. He wasn’t sure whether he thought it was funny or a little bit offensive— Napoleon playing gay somewhat uncomfortably straddled the line between mockery and honesty. With a little flourish, Napoleon looked in the mirror, affixed an unbelievably tacky pair of sunglasses to his nose, and turned to Illya.

The sunglasses physically pained him. “I believe those are women’s,” he sighed.

Napoleon posed like some kind of foolish vaudeville performer, with his hands outspread on either side of his face. “It’s Hollywood, Illya, what do you want?”

Illya suppressed a groan, and instead just blinked. “I’m just not sure camp is the right tactic for recruiting a hardened criminal.”

Napoleon insisted it would work fine, but as it turned out, he was wrong. Delgado played them completely— and Napoleon barely even flirted with him.

He seemed entirely unmoved by Ms. Pogue, as well, which left Illya feeling like someone was causing his heart to beat by repeatedly squeezing it. Napoleon hadn’t brought up Mara since the cafeteria, but his prior insistence that they speak on the topic, coupled with his current out-of-character chastity, compounded by his rather mushy behavior since leaving the states— it all seemed to point to the same thing. Napoleon must have thought about how easy it was to convince him he was in love with Mara, and come to the spurious conclusion that he was actually in love with Illya.

As he rowed for UNCLE’s Brazilian operatives, having chased Delgado to Rio, all he could think about was how the hell he was going to fix this. If Napoleon really thought he was in love, he could hardly tell him their affair needed to end without serious consequences; their partnership would likely end up having to be dissolved. On the other hand, if he persisted in behaving as if nothing were amiss, Napoleon might come to the conclusion that the feeling was mutual.

Which, of course, it wasn’t.

The endless drumming as they coursed down the river made him feel like he was marching to war.

But then, when Napoleon and Ms. Pogue were liberated from their shipping crate, the tenor between them had changed. She spent the return trip hanging off him, and he reciprocated. At the beach bar, in the late afternoon sun, Napoleon’s brown eyes traced the contours of her face and body, and it was clear that the man was back to his usual self.

Relief felt a little like disappointment, but at least that meant they could keep sleeping together. Of course, he also wasn’t entirely sorry when Waverley took Ms. Pogue off their hands.

As their surprisingly suave elderly boss left, arm in arm with the charming young pie heiress,
Napoleon watched, dumbfounded, mouth open.

He turned to Illya and shrugged.

Illya blinked, still unsure of why Waverley seemed so irresistible to a certain class of woman.

“How does he do that?”

Illya couldn't help himself. And besides, Napoleon seemed legitimately distraught by the woman’s absence, so he had either misread the situation, or Napoleon had gotten over his crush as soon as he always did.

He cast Napoleon a sidelong glance and insinuated, “You don’t think that’ll be you in thirty years?”


Illya snorted. Napoleon liked to pretend he lacked vanity, but he could be surprisingly touchy about certain things. And a man with no vanity wouldn't insist on wearing a finely tailored suit for wall-scaling and espionage.

He wondered just how much a young Waverley might have shared in common with Napoleon— it wasn't hard to picture him with the same kind of casual self-consciousness, a dozen flappers hanging off his arms. If the similarities ran as deep as Illya was suddenly suspecting, maybe Napoleon wouldn't ever marry. He'd just chase skirts until they buried him.

“I can see you now,” he teased, picturing an aged Napoleon stealing comely lasses from under the nose of some handsome new field agent. He reached across the table and very gently displaced the lock of hair that liked to fall in the middle of Napoleon’s forehead. “All of this gone, of course—”

“Hey!” Napoleon grabbed his hand and placed it on the tabletop like it was an offending object. “I will thank you to know all of my forefathers died with their hair intact.”

Illya talked over him, unable to stop smirking. “Fine, you can keep your hair. But it’s gone white. And the jowls…” He grinned, mimicking an enormous, wobbly jaw with his hands. “And of course you’ll be and wrinkled and liver spotted—”

“Do I need to find a picture of my late grandfather for you? The Solo men have always aged well, Illya.” Napoleon was literally pouting, and Illya’s appetite for teasing him grew by what it fed on.

“—and yet you’ll still be chasing pretty young things around, like an old pervert—”

“Tell me what you really think!”

“—and for some bizarre reason, the pretty young things will go along with it.” Illya drummed his fingertips on the back of Napoleon’s hand and raised his eyebrows saucily.

Napoleon crossed his arms and continued pouting. “And where will you be in all this?” Before Illya could answer, he uncrossed them again, and petulantly ruffled Illya’s hair. “I mean, you’ll be just as bald and dessicated in forty years.”

Illya smacked his hand away and tried to fix what he had done. “Well, assuming your libidinous bungling hasn’t caused my untimely demise,” he sighed, smoothing his bangs, “I hope to be retired at that point, with ample time to brush up on my reading.”
Napoleon tilted his head to the side, cooing, “Aww. Well, Grandpa, when I visit you in the home I’ll make sure they’re only letting the handsome nurses push you around.” He pouted, not his usual pursed-lipped annoyance, but a full on jutted-out bottom lip pout.

Illya found Napoleon’s tendency to casually and publicly remark on his same-sex attraction alarming, but no one was listening, and most of the people around them were speaking Portuguese, anyway.

So he narrowed his eyes and softened his jaw a little, giving Napoleon the kind of look he usually reserved for when they were alone. “Oh, don’t be silly, Napoleon,” he whispered, low and sultry, “They’ll already be wrapped around my finger. And when you visit, they’ll all gossip about us and ask to see pictures from when we were young and handsome.”

Napoleon’s adam’s apple bobbed, and his eyes were on Illya’s lips.

He wet his lip with a nervous flick of his tongue and chuckled, “I think we’ll still be very handsome, by elderly standards.”

Unable to resist the bait, Illya shrugged with cool self-aggrandizement. “I will be.” He raised his glass, half full of something tropical and dangerous. “Clean living and all that.”

Napoleon stared at him with challenge in his eyes. Illya downed the rest of his drink, and Napoleon did the same.

Between Napoleon leaving for Nowhere, their icy reunion, and everything that had happened in London and Brazil, around three weeks had passed since the last time they had been physically intimate. Even if Napoleon wasn’t convinced he was in love with Illya, the spectre of Mara still hung between them. Illya was okay with a little emotional lubrication helping them along tonight, just in order to return to normalcy. So he drank way too much, and so did Napoleon, and they generally had a very lovely time carousing and poking fun at one another and metaphorically measuring their dicks. By the time they were ready to make things a little less metaphorical, Illya was so tipsy he apologized to two chairs, a coat rack, and a large potted cactus he had knocked into on the way up to their room. Napoleon wasn’t doing much better; he couldn’t remember what their room number was, and they spent around twenty minutes just trying and failing to get the key to fit in a lock. It was only upon realizing they were on the fourth floor, not the fifth, that they were able to remedy the situation.

When they got into the room, Illya allowed himself to be tackled to the bed, tossing his jacket to the floor as they landed. He sort of wanted to get naked, but he also sort of wanted to just drunkenly rub himself up against Napoleon until whatever happened happened.

Napoleon’s hands made their way to his zipper, and Illya’s mouth found its way to Napoleon’s neck. He tasted like the ocean, with notes of rum and cologne. Lacking control over his faculties, when Napoleon’s fumbling reached Illya’s erection, Illya had to fight to suppress a groan. And then his hands were on Napoleon, and they were forehead to forehead, breathing heavy, stroking each other in drowsy, fumbling tandem.

Even though their trysts were hardly novel any longer, fucking Napoleon was just so damn satisfying. Of course, he refused to extend that satisfaction to Napoleon by telling him that was the case. It was bad enough that he was technically one of Napoleon Solo’s conquests; he wasn’t going to debase himself by fawning.

Napoleon mouthed obscenities and thrust with increasing drunken desperation into Illya’s hand. It dawned on him absurd this whole situation was— two grown men, too sloshed to get undressed,
jacking each other off like horny teenagers, in a hotel room paid for by their boss— and he couldn’t stop laughing, an embarrassingly high-pitched peal in syncopation with his breathing. While Napoleon swore and muttered and groaned through sex, Illya usually preferred to stay quiet. That rule was a bit harder to stick to when he could barely keep his eyes open or remember his middle name.

Fighting not to turn into a giggly puddle of sex putty, Illya forced himself to keep his eyes open and watch Napoleon. He couldn’t help but linger on his lips, so quick to smile, so expressive, right now just a little red, parted a tiny bit. The lips of someone no one should ever trust. And then for a brief second, Napoleon looked like he was going to kiss Illya. He leaned in towards him, eyes fluttering shut, and Illya felt his eyes close involuntarily in response. They didn’t kiss; an unspoken rule since they had first started sleeping together. He wasn’t sure if early on he had resisted, or if they had both just read a certain vibe that told them not to, or if Napoleon didn’t kiss men, or what, but… he would have let him, this time.

Instead, Napoleon nibbled at the base of his earlobe, sending a powerful jolt down Illya’s spine. Immediately he began thrusting harder, and Napoleon responded by sliding his own length up alongside Illya’s, his hand tight around both their cocks together. Illya interlaced his fingers with Napoleon’s and closed his eyes, feeling his brain reduce power to higher order thinking functions. Hand on the back of his neck, Napoleon muttered into Illya’s hair and ear, repeating ‘Illya,’ with a throaty lust.

As was often the case, Napoleon’s vocalizations pushed him over the edge and he came, splashing their fingers and probably the bed. Napoleon’s body clenched and he gasped, coming with him. The moment they stopped, they both started laughing and could not manage to return to seriousness. The whole situation was comically juvenile.

Illya sat himself up, looking at Napoleon’s red-cheeked, blinky-eyed face. He looked very pleased with himself, and deliriously drunk.

Illy muttered, with no lack of affection, “Welcome to boarding school, 1949.”

Napoleon rolled over, looking up at the ceiling. “We need to start…” He glanced at his soiled hand. “Aiming?”

Illya snorted, “Or carrying Borax with us.” They had a bad habit of forgetting themselves when sex was involved. Neither of them were excellent decision makers on their own, but together they seemed even dumber, somehow.

Napoleon shimmied off the bed and into the bathroom. Illya half-watched him. He crossed his legs, yawning, and tried to blink away the blurry feeling in his eyes. He was glad things seemed to be back to normal. He felt reasonably secure that Napoleon was not laboring over the belief he was in love, and he hadn’t tried for anything particularly tender or precious in bed.

Napoleon came back with a towel. “I never have this problem with anyone else.”

Without moving or helping, Illya watched him dabbing at the sheets. He couldn’t quite keep his eyes open.

“You think Waverly ever notices there’s always a laundry bill when you and I stay together?” Napoleon asked as if it were a joke, but Illya had worried about how obvious they were being from the very beginning. Napoleon’s reputation as a womanizer mostly protected them from any suspicion, but Waverley wasn’t an idiot.
Nonetheless, he joked in response. “Only if he puts two and two together that those are the times he absconds with the girl.” He yawned, still unmoving. The sheets were mostly unscathed this time, but Napoleon had a tendency to solve easy problems with difficult solutions. He suggested, tilting his head first at the suitcase and then at Napoleon, “You know, I think we have some peroxide in the first aid kit. Most of it got on you this time, though.”

Napoleon glanced down at the front of his shirt. He groaned.

Illya let his eyes close, and shrugged. “At least you can do that laundry at home.”

“Or I can just buy a new shirt.”

Easy problem, difficult solution. Illya muttered, quietly, “How capitalist of you.”

He could hear Napoleon digging around for antiseptic in the suitcase, but his mind strayed back to that moment where it seemed like Napoleon was going to kiss him.

If he was so scared of the idea of Napoleon thinking he was in love with him, then why did he want so badly for him to act like it?

Why, when being caught could mean jailtime or worse, was he always secretly a little thrilled when Napoleon talked about their affair in public?

Why was he so happy that Napoleon wanted to be a part of his stupid old-age fantasy?

Why had he been so willing to destroy the life of a woman who had been brainwashed and mistreated and used like a tool her entire life?

He felt a little sick to his stomach, but he couldn’t tell if it was his current line of thinking or the gallon of rum soaking his innards.

If Napoleon Solo could earnestly fall in love— _be_ in love, long term— something Illya wasn’t actually certain he could do— it would be with a woman. Mara had proven that.

Napoleon interrupted him from going any further down that rabbit hole.

“You weren’t actually—”

His voice was thin, and his words rushed. He cleared his throat.

“—actually doing things like this in boarding school, were you? Getting drunk and… you know.”

The second part of his question was asked in an entirely different tone than the first three words. Illya opened one eye to look at Napoleon’s face. He also looked a little ill.

Even though it was more than obvious he had changed his mind about what he was going to ask, Illya played along. “What, are you jealous of poor Aleksei?”

“No, just surprised.” Napoleon’s tone was light, jaunty. But he kept looking at the suitcase. “I wouldn’t have been that bold in ‘49.”

Illya dismissed him. People all over the world fucked when it was dangerous or ill-advised. Why should he have been immune to that kind of stupidity? He waved it off with a series of excuses. “Well, my countrymen still love Tchaichovsky, don’t they? Besides, we were minors. And we didn’t get caught.”
He conveniently left out the part where mutual masturbation was more or less the norm in a single sex boarding school, except that the straight students didn't feel guilty and nauseated afterwards. Giving into teenage hormones and had hardly been a queer rebellion, particularly when they all vocally supported the party line regarding 'homosexuals, pederasts, and other subversives' outside their dorm rooms. Options were... limited for a gay sixteen year old under the Stalinist government, and Illya had the wrong disposition for martyrdom.

Napoleon looked at him for a moment, eyes a little unfocused, and then went back to digging for the peroxide. He finally pulled the first aid kit from the suitcase, and muttered, “Good thing neither of us are bleeding.”

Illya shrugged. “I’m very quick at making a tourniquet.” His tongue was disobeying him, and tourniquet came out somewhere between turnkey and turn the cat. He should have stopped before the last daiquiri.

After a sloppy, pitiful attempt at cleaning the bed— Napoleon poured a capful of peroxide on the bed and stared at it— he shimmied onto the bed. He laid his head down in Illya’s lap, blinking up at him with red-rimmed eyes. Illya resisted the urge to kiss his forehead or pet his hair or trace the planes of his face.

Napoleon sighed, “It’s too early to go to sleep.”

It was, but it was too late for much other than dinner, and food did not sound particularly appealing. Eyes closed, he tried to explain, but found his words deserting him. “Yes, but I’m a bit unsteady to go…” He joked, weakly, “hiking up Sugar Loaf right now.”

“I don’t think they let you do that even if you’re sober.”

“Pity.” He couldn’t muster his eyes to open.

And then, Napoleon’s hand was on his face, very gentle, and very warm. Reflexively, he leaned just slightly into his touch as his eyes opened. Napoleon was looking at him with half-lidded eyes, head tilted just slightly. His hair was mussed and his brown eyes rested atop dark purple circles.

He wanted to tell this ridiculous man that he cared about him. That their relationship meant something to him he couldn’t quite put into words. And he hoped very much that none of that was even remotely readable on his face.

Napoleon’s thumb grazed his jaw. “Maybe we should go take a short walk or something. Try to burn off some of this alcohol poisoning we’re clearly succumbing to.” His fingertips landed softly on Illya’s neck, tracing some hidden line of desire.

He wanted to relax into Napoleon’s touch and sleep. To lie back here with Napoleon resting on his lap, to intertwine their fingers and drowse together. He suspected he might be able to convince Napoleon of the same, but when he opened his mouth to speak, what came out was a yawn. “Fine,” he swallowed, gumming his words, “But you’ll need to be prepared to deposit me somewhere and come back with a gurney if your definition of short is longer than mine.” If he made himself sound like a nuisance, maybe Napoleon would give up and succumb to drunkenness with him.

Napoleon yawned, too. And then, cryptically, muttered, “I had a dog like that once.”

The thread of the conversation unraveled entirely. What the hell was he talking about? Illya involuntarily made a face. “Drunk?”

Napoleon looked up at him, radiating puzzlement. “Why would my dog be drunk?”
Illya shook his head. Maybe what he had meant wasn’t the drunk part. He tried to explain, “I don’t know. You’re the one who said you had a dog that needed a gurney.”

“What—” Napoleon’s brows knit. He shook his head. “No. The dog was— when you took him on walks, he’d…” His eyes closed, stickily, and he windmilled his hands. “He wouldn’t walk the whole walk.”

Illya made a valiant attempt to uncover the logic behind not walking the whole walk. Did the dog insist on running? Was it afraid of part of the route? He gave up and shrugged. “Very clear.”

Napoleon continued trying to explain. “You know, you’d walk to the bakery, and the dog would just lay down—”

“Well if you’re feeding him at the bakery then—”

Before he could finish reprimanding Napoleon for feeding his dog pastry— was that what that conversation was actually about?— their discussion was cut short by a loud rapping on their hotel room door.

Napoleon practically leapt out of the bed, wild-eyed and panicky. He gestured to the bathroom, and bolted off, leaving Illya to adjust himself and answer the door. He zipped his fly, unrumpled his shirt as best he could, threw a pillow over the wet spot on the bed, and answered the door.

It was Waverley, carting Ms. Pogue by the arm.

“Mr. Kuryakin,” he greeted him, with a slight nod of his head.

“Mr. Waverley, Ms. Pogue.” Illya leaned a little too hard against the doorjamb. The other option was tipping over.

Waverley looked him over with an inscrutable expression. It might have been disdain, but sometimes that was just Waverley’s face.

“Do you or Mr. Solo have plans this evening?”

Illya tried to calculate what answer would prevent them from having to go on an awkward double date with Mr. Waverley. Unfortunately, what came out of his mouth was, “I don’t… think so?”

Waverley cleared his throat, perhaps cottoning on to Illya’s altered state. “Well, Ms. Pogue and I received four tickets to a **bissa nova** concert—”

Ms. Pogue chimed in, “All we had to do was listen to a man talk about rental properties for a while.” She laughed. “He seemed very disappointed when we told him we weren’t married.”

Cut from the same cloth, Napoleon and Waverley. Scamming a scammer out of free tickets. Illya nodded, trying to keep a neutral, sober expression on his face.

“We wanted to extend the invitation to the two of you,” Waverley suggested, an edge in his voice implying that it was less of an invitation than a mandate.

“Well,” Illya blinked, “Thank you. That sounds… quite lovely.” He turned his head to the bathroom, haltingly, and then back to Waverley. “Let me go make sure Napoleon doesn’t have any plans.”

He stumbled over to the bathroom and knocked on the door.
“Napoleon! Are you done in there yet?”

In response, Illya heard a series of bonking noises, and the water running. What the hell was he doing? He crossed his arms, waiting for a response. The shower ran for about thirty seconds more and then turned off. He was about to knock again when Napoleon finally answered.

“What!?”

Illya rolled his eyes. “Are you done, or are you still getting the curlers out of your hair?”

“Give me a minute,” Napoleon yelled through the door. There was another series of mysterious noises, and then Napoleon emerged from the bathroom, dripping wet, with just a towel around his waist.

Illya wanted to punch him.

Across the room, Waverley barked, “Mr. Solo!”

In response, Ms. Pogue feigned distress. Illya could see she was peeking between her fingers.

Clasping the towel in one hand, Napoleon brought his other hand to his heart. “You didn’t tell me we had guests, Illya!” He glared at Illya. “I thought it was an emergency!”

Illya was going to punch him.

Before he had the opportunity to assault his partner, Napoleon threw the bathroom door shut like some kind of Hollywood starlet. Illya looked at Waverley and Ms. Pogue with what he hoped read as contrition. He awkwardly jammed his hands in his pockets.

A moment later, Napoleon emerged in a hotel bathrobe, really no more decent than he was in the towel. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Waverley, Ms. Pogue.”

The disdain on Waverley’s face took up physical space in the room.

Instead of punching him, Illya gave Napoleon his iciest stare. “Mr. Waverley would like to know if we’d be interested in joining the lovely Ms. Pogue and himself for a bossa nova show tonight.”

Napoleon practically sang his response, sounding spectacularly drunk, “Well of course!” He grinned, looking more than a little like a flasher in his bathrobe, “We would love to. After all, the most beautiful woman here already has plans, so we certainly have nowhere better to be.”

Quietly enough that only Napoleon could hear, Illya muttered, “I have somewhere better to be. Asleep.”

Napoleon ignored him.

Waverley accepted their intentions, although he sounded less than sincere. “Excellent. We’ll meet you in the lobby in ten minutes.” He turned to leave, stopped, and then raised his eyebrows in Napoleon’s direction. “And put on some pants before you join us, won’t you, Mr. Solo?”

He and Ms. Pogue left. Illya continued glaring at Napoleon. Napoleon returned a look of derision, and for a moment it seemed like they might start arguing. And then just as suddenly they were both laughing, Napoleon dabbing at his eyes with the sleeve of the robe.

Illya brandished his fist at Napoleon, but then sighed and just pushed him by the shoulder.
“Is there anyone on the planet with less shame than you?”

Napoleon touched his shoulder, looking injured, and pouted. “Oh come on. I think you’re discounting the contributions of a whole lot of very shameless people if you think I’m the most shameless.” His expression grew soft, and immensely suggestive. “What of nudists? Cruisers?” He leaned in very closely and carefully stroked the strands of hair back from Illya’s temples. “Long-haired counterculture radicalists?”

Automatically, Illya grabbed Napoleon’s hand, wrenching it from his head. He hadn’t meant to be quite so rough, but his instincts were often less kind than his conscious thoughts. Without thinking, he overcompensated. He brought Napoleon’s wrist to his lips and kissed him there, just a breath too sweetly. Napoleon made a face like he was seeing a field full of fireflies or the first snow of winter, and an enormous knot took up residence in Illya’s stomach.

If he didn’t want Napoleon convincing himself he was in love, he needed to stop doing things that read like romance.

So he dressed him down a little bit. “Napoleon,” he sighed, affecting as much weariness as he could, “you can hardly claim the moral high ground over cruisers.”

Napoleon’s expression shifted from reverence to annoyance.

Illya tipped his head askew a little. “Come on, Shameless. Let’s go try to convince Waverley we haven’t been thoroughly soaked.”

"I'll go get those pants."

As Napoleon went looking for clothes, Illya plopped himself down on the bed. "But you're so charming without them."

Thoroughly tearing apart the suitcase and dumping a bunch of perfectly clean clothes on the floor, Napoleon laughed affectedly. "Well," he growled, “we wouldn't want me to charm Ms. Pogue right out from Waverley's nose, would we?” He put aside a button down shirt and a pair of pants and continued digging in the suitcase.

Illya snorted, shifting his legs under him on the bed. "I suppose not."

He watched, pruriently, as Napoleon denuded himself and pulled on a clean pair of underwear. He was the kind of man who looked appealing in any state of dress, but Illya found a particular sort of pleasure in seeing him as casual and unbuttoned as possible. The man was in a suit so much of the time that the sight of him in a cotton shirt or gym attire was enough to send one’s heart pitter-pattering. As he was zipping his pants over his undershirt, he looked at Illya, making direct, intense eye contact. His lips were pressed together, just slightly, and there was a tension around his eyes that made him look almost sad.

Illya felt his innards gel. He squinted. “What’s that face for?”

Napoleon shook his head, and the expression was gone. He smiled, not the way he did when he was happy, but the way he smiled at girls he needed something from. Illya found himself all at sea.

“Nothing,” he lied, still smiling. “Just thinking that if this bossa fella isn’t good, I’m going to fall asleep. And if Waverley expects us to drink, I might throw up.”

He was usually so good at parsing Napoleon’s (frequently wild and bizarre) facial expressions, but he was either too drunk or too deep in his own feelings to sort this one out. What had made him
look so strangely… wistful? Nostalgic? Regretful? And why had he been so inclined to pretend nothing had happened? Was he thinking of Mara? Or was he thinking about their partnership, what Illya meant to him?

Illya wasn’t sure whether the last part was wishful thinking or a source of interminable fear. Was there any possible way Napoleon Solo could be as lost in the labyrinth of his own feelings as he was?

Impossible. Napoleon perseverated over his lunch longer than his love affairs.

Dryly, Illya offered, “I’ll hold your hair.” He let breathe none of his thoughts.

“I’d call you a prince, but you ran all of those out of your country.” Napoleon blinked, too slowly, and then shut one bleary eye. “I think. Unless that was the French.” He opened his mouth and just stared at Illya for a moment, looking utterly dumbfounded. “I think I’m drunker than I think I am.”

God, they were both going to feel terrible in the morning.

“Stellar sentence construction. And we didn’t run them out, we merely abolished the nobility. We gave them the option to join the rest of us…” His attempt at banter died in the air. What the hell was the word he was looking for? Whatever. Napoleon spoke Russian. “Крестьянский. Uh.”

Napoleon switched which eye he had shut, his head tilted like a dog. “The proletariat?”

“I was trying to be more glib than that but.” But words were difficult. He sat up straight and uncrossed his legs. They needed to make their way to the lobby now if they were going to be on time. “We should probably go before Waverley starts questioning why you apparently walk around half naked in front of me in our shared hotel room.”

“Almost ready,” Napoleon affirmed, apologetically. He buttoned his last button and ducked into the bathroom.

Illya could see him fixing his hair in the mirror. Despite their drinking, his expression was coldly sober. He still looked slightly sad.

The tiniest part of Illya wanted to go into the bathroom, wrap his arms around Napoleon’s waist, lean his cheek on his back, and tell him he was sorry. Sorry about Mara. Sorry about his coldness the past weeks. Sorry about the circumstances that made them have to play elaborate games in order to be truly kind to one another.

Or hell, just ask him if he was okay. Tell him he was willing to listen.

But any of that would be too close to telling him—whatever you are to me—it means something. Napoleon was his friend. They were partners. Physically speaking, some of the time they were lovers. But for so many reasons, it could never be more than that.

From a legal and professional perspective, they had already committed their transgression. As spies—as men—what they did recreationally was totally outside the bounds of acceptable behavior. But they could technically stop at any time, so long as there were no strings attached. Go back to just being friends. Or coworkers.

Even if Napoleon had the capacity to honestly contemplate a serious, monogamous relationship, there was no place in their lives for such a thing. Feelings—affection greater than friendly—just couldn’t come into play.
Before he had joined UNCLE, before he had gotten an advanced degree, before he had even left for university— he had learned to live with the idea that he was unlikely to ever have long-term romantic companionship.

Illya shifted to his left to better peer into the bathroom. Napoleon was staring, dead-ahead, at the mirror, but his eyes were unfocused.

He coughed, and tried to snap Napoleon from his reverie. “Distracted by your own reflection?” Napoleon started slightly. “I know you’re handsome, but I want to get downstairs before I start making the transition from drunk to hungover.”

Napoleon turned and peered through the doorway. He looked at Illya— really looked at him— and his expression changed completely.

“Be there in a moment, Tipsy.” He winked at him, soft and sly. “I have to make myself pretty for our double date with our boss.”

When he turned back around, Illya could see him smiling to himself in the mirror. Whatever had troubled him had lifted as quickly as it had descended.

They would go out tonight, and make pleasant small talk with their boss. And then they would come in and collapse together, likely with one man’s arm around the other, or a head resting on a chest or shoulder. And they would wake up in the morning, hungover and headache, and they would joke and touch each other and try to sip espresso without vomiting. And they would pack for the plane home, and they would probably fall asleep together, side by side. And Waverley would make a comment, but it wouldn’t mean anything. And they’d do the same thing again, maybe minus the irresponsible drinking, in a day or a week or two weeks.

And looking at Napoleon smiling to himself, Illya suddenly felt the same way— happy. Like everything he had been fretting over was nothing at all.

Because maybe, when it really came down to it, he didn’t have to live without companionship, after all.

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