“Don’t blame yourself,” Waverly says, almost kindly. “No one saw it coming.”

Illya looks down at him, surprised and perhaps a little condescending, because he knows better than to blame himself, and he doesn’t understand why Waverly thinks he would. Solo is good at what he does, one of the best, and Illya has always been more than aware that Solo could trick him if he really set his mind to it.

No, Illya does not blame himself for not seeing the signs. If there is anything he should blame himself for, it is that he let himself assume that he wouldn’t have to look for them in the first place. But socialism is a future-oriented ideology, and there is no point in dwelling on the past. Illya has made a mistake, is all. He is not going to make it again.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

“Don’t be a traitor or a crank or a sentimentalist. Just save lives … save lives …”

(Johann Marion Simmel, It Can’t Always be Caviar)

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“What now?” he asks steadily, and pretends not to notice the concerned looks Waverly and Gaby exchange at his words. “You want me to eliminate him?”

“What? No!” Waverly says hastily, sputters even, and Illya is beginning to have some doubts about Waverly’s professionalism. His face must show his apprehension, because Waverly pulls himself together quickly.

“No, agent,” he continues more smoothly, “the information he has makes him too valuable for that. No, we don’t want to eliminate him. We are going to follow him, observe him, find out who he’s making contact with. We need to find out who he’s cooperating with.”

Gaby nods earnestly, as if her boss is making absolute sense, and Illya thinks that they are both far too soft for the secret agent business. If the positions were reversed, he is certain Solo would not have thought about it twice.

“I do not think this is good idea,” he says.

“With all due respect,” Waverly says dryly. “What you think doesn’t really matter.”

Illya forces himself not to flinch. “I can follow orders,” he says snidely, and Waverly nods, satisfied.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he says. “A MI6 contact took pictures of him boarding a plane in Munich yesterday. He’s on his way to Japan as we speak. So get ready, Kuryakin. You and Teller are on the 1’o’clock train to Frankfurt.”

He leaves without another word, spine straight and shoulders tight underneath his suit jacket. Gaby lingers behind, eyes worried, arms crossed in front of her chest.

“Illya,” she says carefully, “You know I understand –“

“Excuse me,” he says, and ignores the way her face falls at the cold edge in his voice. “You heard Mr. Waverly. I need to pack.”

She opens her mouth, as if to protest, but he turns away before she can say anything, and in the end, she remains silent. He waits for the sound of the door as it clicks shut behind her quietly, and only then does he pull open the connecting door to the bedroom of his suite. He starts moving clothes from the closet to his suitcase in practiced motions, careful not to leave any incriminating traces behind, and pointedly ignores the luxurious bed with its rumpled sheets.

Napoleon thinks he is in Tokyo, in fact he is almost certain of it, but the hotel rooms have been blurring together, one like the other, and he is beginning to find it hard to remember. He used to enjoy this part of his work, the chase, the thrill of danger, but he feels mostly tired these days, exhausted and worn-out.
He had to shake a CIA tail in Busan, after barely escaping the Chinese in Shanghai, but U.N.C.L.E. has not caught up with him yet, as far as he can tell. He is certain that it won’t be long, now, though, and can’t quite decide if he feels dread or relief at the thought.

The first meeting with his contact is tomorrow morning, and he should be sleeping, but he feels restless with the surreal kind of alertness only sleep deprivation brings. He’s had two glasses of sake already, the most he can allow himself under the circumstances – he cannot afford to be drunk with no one around to watch his back – but the alcohol has done nothing to help him relax.

He groans, resigned, reaches a hand down into his pajama pants. His cock is slow to stir, but he starts stroking himself nonetheless, hoping that an orgasm will calm him enough to let him fall asleep. For a moment, he closes his eyes to let himself get lost in the feeling, but when his mind drifts to the image of broad hands, the arch of a strong back, he quickly opens them again.

Two strokes, three, and he already knows it’s not going to be enough. He shifts his other hand down, reaches for the spot behind his balls, presses in with one finger, hisses at the intrusion, pleasure tinged with a hint of nausea, because this is so far from what he wants. The climax he wrings from his body is almost painful, and he turns his head as he comes so he can bury his moans in the offensive softness of the pillow.

“Goddamn, fuck, Jesus Christ,” he curses helplessly, and wipes his hand on the sheets in disgust. Sleep, when it finally comes, feels like mercy.

They fly first class from Frankfurt to New Delhi, and by the time they are in the air, Gaby is starting to look worn around the edges, probably because Illya has not spoken more than five words since they checked out of their hotel in Cologne. Illya knows that none of this is her fault and that he should not take his frustration out on her, but he has a difficult time bringing himself to care.

“What would your wife like to drink?” the stewardess asks with a smile that could seem flirtatious if it wasn’t so professionally smooth, looming over him in a way that moves her cleavage to eye level. Illya clenches his fingers around the armrest so that he doesn’t accidentally punch her in the throat, and lets her think that he is afraid of flying.

“Martinis for both of us,” he says with a tight smile, and only breathes freely once the woman has moved down the aisle.

Gaby raises her brows. “You could have asked me,” she complains, but the admonishment is mild. Perhaps because she does like martinis, as he very well knows; perhaps because she understands him well enough to realize how much he craves the familiar bite of vodka right now.

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“Do you have a book I can borrow?” he asks, and her brows climb higher.

“I have never seen you read before,” she says surprised, but she is already rummaging through her purse.

“I can read,” he says indignantly. She rolls her eyes as she comes back up with a hardcover novel and a fashion magazine.

“I know,” she says, and hands him the book. “It’s in German,” she warns unnecessarily, which he refuses to deign with a response. He can read German perfectly fine.

“Es muss nicht immer Kaviar sein,” he reads from the cover, blinking in confusion. “It Can’t Always be Caviar? What is this book?”
“It’s about a secret agent,” she replies absent-mindedly, turning a page in her magazine.

He scowls. “You must be joking.”

She looks up and shakes her head with a smile. “It came out a couple of years ago. It’s really popular, from what I’ve heard.” She smirks. “I figured I could read it and write to the publisher about all the things the author got wrong. You can help me compile the list, if you want.”

Illya grunts noncommittally and buries his nose in the book, but after the first two chapters, he is beginning to think that Gaby’s cruel streak reaches much further than he thought.

“You gave me this book on purpose,” he hisses, and is rewarded with a slow tilt of Gaby’s head, bent over a step-by-step instruction of how to apply eye make-up.

“Why would you think that?” she asks mildly. “I’d been meaning to read it for a while, that’s all.”

He snorts. “It is about a triple agent who betrays every government he works for, but he only does it to save innocent lives.”

Gaby smiles beatifically and graciously accepts the drink the stewardess hands her over Illya’s head. “And this upsets you because …”

“It is a ridiculous notion,” he says, and reaches for his martini glass with a shaking hand. “Life doesn’t work like that. Socialist realism would never produce a work like this. It is dangerous and naïve.”

“I don’t know,” Gaby says, and pops the olive into her mouth. “It sounds kind of romantic to me.”

“Romance is for children,” Illya replies icily, and they sit in silence for the rest of the flight.

Hiro Hashimoto’s considerate investments in pornography and erotica are actually the most legitimate part of his business. Not surprisingly, he has ties to the Yakuza; that he did business with the Nazis is to be expected, considering Japan’s role in World War II. More worrisome are the recent rumors as to his involvement with unknown actors in North Korea, whom he appears to provide with objects far more dangerous than jade phalli and drawings of women copulating with squids. Even more alarming, at least to the Allied Forces, is the anonymous source claiming that a high-ranking Russian official is also benefiting from this deal. The only known variable in the equation, Hashimoto is the obvious hook to latch onto; unfortunately, he is far from being a weak link. Anyone wanting to get close to him would need to prove the value of their information and their loyalty to his cause. Hashimoto would not trust an outsider unless he had burned all bridges behind him and no way to go back.

They have a 36-hour layover in New Delhi, so they check into a British-style hotel near the airport as husband and wife. They have been traveling for almost twenty hours, and Gaby looks like she can barely hold herself upright by the time the bellhop leads them to their room. She disappears into the bathroom and shows up minutes later in her pajamas, hair tied into a high pony tail, face clear of make-up.

“I’m turning in,” she says and yawns, not bothering to cover her mouth. “Are you coming?” She rubs her eyes with a small fist and blinks at him, blearily. She looks young and vulnerable, and Illya suddenly finds that the thought of sharing a bed with her is impossible.
“Not yet,” he says, and in his desperation reaches for the novel sitting on top of his suitcase. “I am going to read for a while.”

“Suit yourself,” she says and wanders off to bed. The box-spring creaks as she lets herself fall onto the mattress like a stone, and not two minutes later, she starts snoring softly.

Illya retreats to the narrow balcony with the book. The room faces the inner yard, away from the noise and the smells of the city, and the only sounds rising up from the ground are the gentle cooing of pigeons and the occasional laughter from one of the other rooms. He picks the novel up with some hesitance – he does not actually want to keep reading, the plot reminding him too much of things he would rather forget, but it also keeps his mind occupied, keeps his thoughts from going in circles, keeps him awake as the prospect of dreaming fills him with dread.

Gaby finds him there hours later, after the sun has long passed the zenith, looking sleep-rumpled and pale, a glass of water in one hand, in the other a scaly green fruit from the complimentary basket in the room. She lowers herself into the second chair on the opposite side of the small tea table, folding one leg under her, the other dangling loosely over the side of the chair.

“You should sleep,” she says conversationally, curiously poking the mysterious fruit with a pointed index finger.

“I am not tired,” he replies without looking up from the page. She doesn’t respond right away, and for a long moment, they are silent, he keeping his eyes trained on the book while watching her stealthily over the top of the page, she prodding the hard skin of the fruit with increasing levels of frustration.

“Why are you taking this so hard?” she suddenly asks, almost aggressively, and sets the fruit down on the table with a small sound of annoyance.

He doesn’t pretend not to know what she is talking about. “I’m not,” he simply says, and turns another page in his book. He knows better after their vodka-infused wrestling match in Italy, but against reason he still hopes that if he keeps ignoring her, she might simply get bored.

“Were you really that surprised?” she asks thoughtfully, as if he hasn’t even spoken. “You have read Solo’s file, you know about his past.”

Illya looks up at that, sharply, not even bothered by the knowledge that she is goading him. “Where I come from,” he says emphatically, “we do not care about a person’s past. What we care about is their loyalty to the cause.” He sets the book down in his lap. “Solo betrayed the cause he was meant to fight for. That’s all that matters. You should know this,” he says, and watches her flinch. “You and I, we were taught the same ideals.”

She closes her eyes, and when she opens them again, her gaze is sad. “You must despise me then,” she states quietly. “Since I betrayed the socialist cause long before Solo betrayed ours.”

She is hurting, Illya knows, but he does not have it in him to comfort her.

“Capitalism corrupts, Gaby,” he says softly. “Napoleon Solo is only one of many who couldn’t resist the temptation of material wealth.” He sets the novel down on the table, next to the impenetrable scaly fruit. He does not think he will finish the book, after all.

“I think I will sleep now,” he says, and gets to his feet.
The last time Napoleon was in Kabukichō, this part of the city had still borne the horrifying traces of its destruction by bomb raids during the war – now the neighborhood is on its best way to become Tokyo’s red-light district, bustling with energy at night time, new buildings popping up at every corner. Not drawing attention to himself is impossible in an area frequented mostly by Chinese businessmen and locals; instead he plays the ignorant, scandalized traveler, doing his best to stand out in the way that makes his behavior memorable, but not his face.

The store next to the meeting location carries knick-knack, small wood carvings of Tokyo’s sights, daruma dolls and fortune cats, cheap shawls and silken slippers. He pauses as if to study the display of objects, scanning his surroundings in the reflection of the window to make sure that no one is following him. For a fleeting moment, he wonders if he should buy a souvenir for Gaby, maybe even one for Illya as well, then he grimaces at his reflection and turns away. There is no point in buying gifts for people he may never see again.

Assured that he hasn’t acquired a tail on his way, he slinks into the adult store next door, hands in his pockets, shoulders pulled high, every inch the prude American he’s pretending to be. If he makes it back out in one piece, he’ll buy Gaby something nice, he decides, and doesn’t let himself think about the face Illya would make if he brought him one of those little fortune cats.

Gaby has been in a strange mood since the plane touched down in Tokyo four days ago, hyper-energetic and far too cheerful, considering the circumstances that have brought them here. It makes Illya’s neck itch with something like foreboding, and he would worry more about her behavior if not something else was occupying his attention.

“This is wrong,” he says, standing in the hotel room Solo must have vacated only hours ago. Illya thinks that when he focuses, he can still smell the man’s cologne in the air. “He is making it too easy for us,” he says, shaking his head, trying to get rid of the scent that now seems impossible to ignore. “It should be more difficult to find him.”

“Well, we haven’t found him yet,” Gaby points out, and idly turns over the couch pillows one after another, as if she thinks Solo might actually be hiding under one of them.

“But we don’t have difficulties retracing his steps,” Illya says stubbornly, running the bug detector along the window frames and coming up empty. “It is only matter of time until we catch up with him. It is as if he wants us to find him.”

Gaby puts the last cushion back in its place and pats it gently for good measure.

“Maybe you are simply overestimating him,” she says, in a patient, benevolent tone that puts Illya on edge.

“No,” he says firmly. If there is one thing he has learned from working with Napoleon Solo, it is that it’s impossible to overestimate him, and that underestimating him is usually fatal.

Gaby sighs and puts her hands against her hips. “So what are you thinking?” she asks, finally giving him her full attention.

“I think,” he says slowly, “I think that he leaves traces for us on purpose. I think he wants us to feel safe.” He exhales. “I think he is setting a trap.”

“A trap,” Gaby repeats, frowning.

Illya forces himself to stay calm. “I will go down to Kabukichō tonight,” he says. “You will stay at
the hotel, and you will be careful.”

“Of course,” she says indignantly. “I’m not stupid.”

“You do not need to be stupid for Solo to kill you if he wants you dead,” Illya says harshly, and watches her eyes widen.

“Illya,” she says hesitantly. “You don’t really think he would …”

“I mean it,” he says, because he doesn’t want to hear her question, does not want think about the answer he’d have to give. “Don’t go out. Don’t let anyone into your room. Promise you will be careful.”

“I promise,” she says. “Will you do the same for me?”

“I will do what is necessary,” he says and turns away before she can point out that he hasn’t really given her an answer.

“Far be it from me to question your talents,” Mr. Hashimoto says and leans back in his chair. “But are you sure that no one knows your whereabouts? My people ran into two of your friends yesterday,” he says and waves one of his men closer to the table. “I do enjoy our conversations so much,” he smiles softly, the smile of the cat before it pounces. “It would be a shame if they were to be interrupted prematurely.”

He takes the stack of photographs the man hands to him and lines them up on the table. Napoleon knows what he is going to see before he even leans in, but he still has to force himself to school his expression into something indifferent and bored.

“Yes,” he says smoothly, running his finger along the row of pictures without actually touching either of them. “My former partners with U.N.C.L.E.,” he shrugs. “They are not entirely incompetent. It was to be expected that they’d figure out what flights I was on eventually. That doesn’t mean they have any proof of my presence in the city, or that they are any closer to figuring us out,” he says lightly. “She’s young and naïve, and he is a brute, and quite frankly, insane. They are also very much in love,” he continues, and flashes a salacious smile to hide the way the words taste bitter on his tongue. “They are distracted and easily mislead.”

“What are you saying?” Hashimoto asks, folding his hands in his lap and studying him carefully. “That we should not pay them any attention?”

Napoleon shrugs and bends his head in something like submission. “This is your turf, your operation. You call the shots. But if you are willing to consider my advice, I believe it will do you less harm to let them wander around Tokyo until they get bored, than to attempt a more – permanent solution. Eliminating two secret agents of their significance would draw a lot of attention we cannot afford.”

“Hm,” Hashimoto makes, and reaches for the teapot. “I will take your advice into consideration, Mr. Solo,” he says, and refills their cups with green tea. “Now why don’t you tell me a little more about your country’s position regarding North Korea? It’s so fascinating to talk politics with someone from abroad.”

“I’d be happy to,” Napoleon smiles and leans forward to accept the tea Hashimoto is offering him. His gaze falls on one of the photographs, still spread out on the table, and for a moment he finds himself distracted by Illya scowling up at him in black-and-white. He looks tired, Napoleon
catches himself thinking, and then has to fake a cough in order to cover the fact that his fingers are shaking slightly as he reaches for his cup.

The more time Illya spends tracing Solo’s steps in Kabukichō, the more unsettled he feels. It appears that Solo is collaborating with a group with ties to North Korea, but for all that most men can be bought with sex or money, there is something about this information that does not make any sense.

He also has been followed for the last two days by men who might be Yakuza, but they have never made an attempt to take him out, shadowing him from a safe distance every time. Still, he makes an effort to shake them off before returning to the hotel, because he may be prepared to face them, but he is not going to bet Gaby’s safety on it.

The receptionist tells him that his wife has been in all day, and he makes his way up the stairs, desperate for a shower and some quiet. But when he turns onto the hallway leading up to their hotel room, he pauses, stills. There are voices coming from their room, and Illya is pressing his back against the wall outside the door even as he is trying to get a sense of what’s happening inside. There is Gaby’s voice, laughing softly, and Illya is torn between relief that she is evidently fine, and frustration that she’d be reckless enough to go against rules and let someone into their room, against his explicit request.

Then someone else speaks up, and every other feeling battling for dominance is drowned out by the chilling shiver of cold rage. He pushes the door open without hesitation, gun drawn, and hears Gaby gasp in surprise as the door hits the wall with a crunch before slamming shut behind him. She is lounging on the bed, sunglasses pushed up into her hair, holding a sake cup that is tilting dangerously to one side as she stares at Illya with wide eyes. In the chair at the foot of the bed sits Napoleon Solo, legs stretched out comfortably in front of him. Far too smooth to spill his drink at the intrusion, he smirks and raises his cup at Illya in the mockery of a toast.

The grin is the last thing Illya remembers before he finds himself pressing the muzzle of his handgun against Solo’s temple, free hand tight around his throat. The wall is a comforting barrier against his back, Solo a heavy weight against his chest.

“Illya,” Gaby warns urgently, almost shocked. “Illya, what are you doing?”

He blinks, looks down at the side of Solo’s face, strong jaw, smooth skin, and tries not to think of the last time they were this close. Against his expectations, Solo is not struggling against his grip, in fact, he is completely still, the pulse jumping rapidly against Illya’s palm the only obvious sign of life.

“Illya, stop,” Gaby pleads, and Illya lifts the gun away from Solo’s temple to point it at her forehead instead, the fingers of his other hand tightening slightly around the vulnerable curve of Solo’s throat.

“Explain,” he growls, and Gaby makes a noise, desperate and strangled, and he thinks that for the first time, she looks actually afraid of him.

“Don’t hurt him, Illya, he’s on our side,” she says hastily, and he stares at her uncomprehendingly.

“He is doing business with Hiro Hashimoto,” he snaps, and under his hand, Solo’s Adam’s apple jumps as he swallows. “He is not on my side.”
“Don’t you understand?” she almost shouts, “he was undercover. Waverly orchestrated the whole thing. Did you really think he’d betray U.N.C.L.E.?”

From the way her words make his heart seize, she might as well have stabbed him in the chest.

He loosens his grip abruptly, but instead of scrambling away, Solo falls back against him as he gulps for air. Once his breath has steadied, he steps away from Illya’s body, turning around and facing him, and the loss of proximity makes Illya feel cold.

“How do you not tell me?” Illya asks, and he doesn’t even recognize his own voice. He forces down the telltale tremble of his fingers by curling his left hand into a fist. His right index finger twitches against the trigger of his gun, hanging uselessly, dangerously by his side.

“You didn’t tell him?” Solo blurs out, and when Illya looks at him, he looks surprised, perhaps even upset, his gaze shifting quickly between Gaby and him.

“We couldn’t,” Gaby says firmly. “We first needed to confirm that the rumor of Russian involvement was a red herring. Of course, now we know that it was just a diversion, an attempt by the North Korean actors to play Russia and the US against each other, but we weren’t sure about that at the time. We couldn’t make Illya lie to his superiors and risk them noticing that something was wrong. No offense, Illya,” she says, directing her apologetic gaze at him, “but you are not a very good liar.”

You are not a very good spy, he hears a familiar voice in his head, mocking and cruel. You are not a very good lover. You need to learn how to control yourself. You need to learn how to let go. He barely manages to flip the safety back on and push the gun back into his holster with shaking fingers. There are white spots dancing in front of his eyes, the edges of his vision blurring red. He needs to get out before he does something he regrets, he knows, and doesn’t let himself look at Solo as he walks past him to the door.

“Peril,” Solo says, the word hanging in the room like a soap bubble, fragile, about to burst.

He pauses with his hand on the doorknob, his back to the room.

“Do not call me that,” he says, and leaves.

Illya is on the phone with the KGB, judging from his terse-sounding Russian, and the call has already lasted far too long to indicate anything good. Still, Napoleon makes himself wait until the one-sided conversation inside the room gives way to silence. He can wait a few more minutes – it took him half the day to hunt Illya down, even though the man clearly wasn’t trying to hide, his exit a desperate scramble rather than a calculated escape.

As it turns out, Illya has simply checked into a tiny, non-descript hotel in a shabby neighborhood of the city, whether to get away from the decadence of the five-star hotel or whether he thought they wouldn’t look for him here, Napoleon doesn’t know. He does know that he is worried, a fear that runs deeper than merely the professional concern about an agent’s erratic behavior, and he knows, with the conviction of the doomed, that he is already in far too deep.

He is not surprised when there is no answer forthcoming from inside the room in response to his knock, simply counts to five before pushing the door open a few inches. He carefully peeks around the corner, not discounting the possibility that Illya might decide to greet him with a gunshot to the face.
Instead, he finds the man sitting motionlessly in the tiny chair by the phone, one of the few pieces
of furniture still upright. He has his chin propped onto his fists, giving Napoleon a good look at his
scraped knuckles, potentially from where he was successful in taking some plaster out of the
connecting wall. Illya’s choice of a cheap hotel suddenly makes a lot more sense.

The Russian barely looks up when Napoleon steps fully into the room, displaying the exhausted
calmness that tends to befall him after his episodes.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” Napoleon says, in a feeble attempt to lighten the mood,
and runs his hand over the edge of the upturned desk.

Illya glares tiredly, and doesn’t respond.

“Look,” Napoleon says, pushing his hands in the pockets of his pants to keep from fidgeting too
much. “I’m sorry they didn’t tell you. But you heard Gaby – they weren’t sure the Russians
weren’t involved, and making you lie to your superiors seemed like an unnecessary complication.
Surely you understand –“

He breaks off when Illya straightens in his chair, raising his head.

“You tricked me,” he says, and his voice is so cold, Napoleon thinks he can see his exhales
condensating from all the way across the room.

“Well, yeah?” he says, a little puzzled, because while, yes, that’s technically what they had been
doing, there seems to be something else at stake.

Illya actually growls at that. “You made me drink,” he says sharply. “You took advantage of my –
weakness to distract me. You let me – You did –“ He pauses, clearly struggling for words, but he
does not need to continue for Napoleon to understand.

“Oh,” he makes, and has to laugh a little, because that is a possibility he hadn’t even considered.
“Oh, wait, you thought I let you fuck me to distract you from the fact that I was about to fake-
defect?”

Under other circumstances, he would take pleasure in the way Illya flushes at his crude language,
but the violent flinch that accompanies the blush makes him feel uneasy rather than amused.

“Didn’t you?” Illya asks flatly, challenge in his voice.

“No!” Napoleon protests. “Lord, no, why would I – come on, even you have to admit that would be
a rather unnecessary ruse. I didn’t even realize they would keep you in the dark.” He pauses, looks
at the tense line of Illya’s mouth, the defeated slump of his shoulders. “Is it really so hard to
believe that I just was looking to have some fun?”

His words are an attempt to make things better, but the way Illya darkens at his words tells him
that somehow, he’s missed his mark by a mile. He’s actually made it worse.

“Fun,” Illya repeats tonelessly, and Napoleon wonders whether he would be able to watch icicles
form on the ceiling if he turned his gaze upwards now. He keeps his eyes trained on Illya, though,
and after a long moment, Illya shakes his head, a gesture of resignation.

“It won’t matter now,” he says, and there is something odd to his tone that makes Napoleon
straighten in alarm.

“Why is that?” he asks, and Illya shrugs and gets to his feet.
“I asked the KGB to withdraw me from U.N.C.L.E.,” he says. “I requested to be sent to Nicaragua, to help build up the resistance.”

“Nicaragua,” Napoleon repeats, and shakes his head in dismay. “They are preparing the country for a revolution. That’s a completely different ballgame. Isn’t that a long-term suicide mission?”

“Maybe,” Illya says and smiles. It’s perhaps the widest smile he has directed at Napoleon since the day they met, and it makes something like horror churn in his guts.

He watches as Illya walks past him and out the door, as if he doesn’t realize that he is leaving Napoleon behind in his own hotel room. Or perhaps he simply doesn’t care.

“Fuck,” Napoleon curses as Illya disappears down the hallway, and looks around for any piece of furniture still intact.

The small chair by the phone breaks easily, and not very satisfyingly, under the sole of his foot.

They don’t let him go. Four days after Hashimoto dies in an unfortunate boating accident off the Korean coast, taking sensitive information and a considerable weapons delivery with him to the ground of the ocean, and two days after he and Gaby make it back to New York, on a seemingly endless flight full of uncomfortable silences, Oleg calls to give him the news. He offers some long-winded explanation about how Illya Kuryakin is too valuable to be used up in the jungles of Latin America for what is still a low-priority issue, and Illya does not believe a word of what he says.

During the next team meeting, Waverly smiles at him from across the table and says: “Well, I’m glad we got this dreadful misunderstanding with your higher-ups all cleared up.” Next to him, Napoleon’s mouth twitches minutely, and suddenly Illya knows exactly what has happened.

“You got Waverly to stop them from transferring me,” he says angrily, and to his credit, Napoleon makes no attempt to deny it. They are alone in the conference room at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, left behind by a reluctant Gaby and an indifferent Waverly, and it’s the first time they have talked since Napoleon came to find him in his Tokyo hotel room a week ago.

Napoleon looks tired, as if he hasn’t slept much since they parted ways in Japan, and he rubs an uncharacteristic hand over his eyes at Illya’s words.

“I was trying to keep you from doing something stupid,” he says, and Illya’s fingers itch with the urge to slap the self-righteousness from the man’s face.

“Stupid,” he repeats incredulously. “It is a good cause, an important cause. Just because you don’t believe in anything you fight for does not mean you have the right to keep me from doing the same only to annoy me.”

“I believe in keeping you alive, you asshole,” Napoleon snaps, and Illya frowns at the sudden rise of Napoleon’s temper. “I can’t keep you safe if you are off training rebels in Latin America.”

“I don’t need someone to protect me,” Illya hisses. “I don’t need you to sabotage my career.”

“Christ, you are one stubborn bastard,” Napoleon swears. “Only you could think that someone trying to keep you from getting killed after doing unspeakable things with you is doing it to rile you up.”

Illya feels heat rise mortifyingly in his neck at Napoleon’s words. “I think you are good at toying
with people,” he says harshly. “I think you enjoy doing it, too.”

Napoleon makes a strangled noise, a short laugh or perhaps a sob. His shoulders slump, like in defeat, and he takes two steps forward, closer to Illya.

“I slept with you because I wasn’t sure I’d survive this one,” he says, and there is a fatalistic tone to his voice, like a man who’s got nothing to lose. “I was going undercover into a dangerous situation with unknown variables, and I knew Hashimoto was smart enough to figure me out eventually. I knew I would have a short window of getting in and out with all the information I needed and all my limbs attached. And you were right there, and I figured if that was the only chance I’d get, I should take it. I thought if I died, you would probably find it in yourself to forgive me, sooner or later.”

Illya remembers the painful twinge in his heart at the message of Napoleon’s defection, imagines his reaction had the news been worse, and wonders how long it’s possible to resent a dead man for making him feel.

“And if you didn’t?” Illya asks, and Napoleon stares at him in honest confusion.

“If I didn’t what?”

“If you didn’t die,” Illya says tightly. “What did you think would happen?”

Napoleon laughs harshly, and drags a hand through his hair. “I don’t know,” he says helplessly. “I don’t know. I never got that far in my planning. I just wanted to –” he breaks off, drops his hand. “Never mind. You said it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What if it did?” Illya asks slowly.

“What?” Napoleon asks, his head jerking up.

“What if it still mattered?”

Napoleon exhales. “I didn’t take you for a cruel man, Kuryakin,” he says.

Illya thinks about that for a moment. “I don’t think I am,” he says. “I simply want to know. I think you owe me that much.”

“Goddamnit,” Napoleon curses helplessly. “I would – I want – ” He pauses, searching for words, so unlike the smooth operative Illya knows, and he is hit by the sudden, brutal realization that he is the man who can make Napoleon Solo lose control. The feeling is unlike anything he knows, a terrifying comfort, a sweet kind of grief.

“I thought you had betrayed me,” he says, and it can’t be news to Napoleon, but it feels like the most dangerous confession nonetheless.

“I know,” Napoleon says, voice breaking. Suddenly he is in his space, and Illya can’t remember which one of them has moved, but perhaps is doesn’t matter, because Napoleon’s mouth is sliding against his, hand gripping Illya’s shoulder as if he’s afraid to be swept away by an unknown force if he doesn’t cling tight.

Illya lowers his head, licks along the curve of Napoleon’s neck, across the faint bruises left by his own fingers on Napoleon’s skin, smells that obnoxious, infuriating cologne. He remembers this, he thinks, the way Napoleon arches into him with a groan, baring his throat for him to take, and suddenly Illya can’t recall why he thought that Napoleon would be faking this, the uncontrolled
shudder wracking his body, the keening sound he makes when Illya uses his teeth to nip along the path of his jugular vein.

“I’m not going to betray you,” Napoleon whispers finally, and that, too, feels like a confession.

And Illya doesn’t believe in the god of the Catholics, does not believe in absolution, but he can’t help but feel like they are both forgiven when he presses a kiss against Napoleon’s jaw and says: “I know.”

The knock on the door of his tiny Queens apartment is light, almost timid, but Illya still checks the peephole before he opens the door.

Gaby looks almost surprised, as if she didn’t expect him to actually respond, or perhaps it is the fact that he is dressed in nothing but red pajama pants and a white undershirt.

“I woke you up,” she says, not quite a question, but he shakes his head nonetheless.

“You didn’t,” he says, and lets his gaze soften a little, taking pity on her.

“Still,” she says, “I’m sorry for bothering you. I just wanted to stop by to bring you your book.” Almost shyly, she holds out the familiar novel, the story of Thomas Lieven, the secret spy who betrayed governments to save lives. “I’ve read it, now,” she continues, when he doesn’t make any attempt to reach for the book. “I thought you might want to finish it, too.”

He looks at her, thoughtfully. “How does it end?” he asks.

She pauses. “Happily,” she answers eventually, and Illya nods.

“I will finish it then,” he says and gently takes the book from her hands.

She laughs a little, surprised. “I thought love was for children?” she asks, almost teasingly.

There is a sound in the apartment behind him, the door of a kitchen cabinet, the clanking noise of dishes, undeniable proof of another person’s presence, and Illya sees Gaby’s eyes widen at the realization that he is not alone.

“Romance is a capitalist fantasy,” he corrects softly, hand sliding over the book cover in an almost absent-minded caress. “Love,” he continues, and makes sure to smile, so that Gaby knows that she is forgiven, too.

“Love is a different story entirely.”

End Notes

The book mentioned in this story is Johann Mario Simmel's "It Can't Always Be Caviar", an Austrian 1960 WWII/Cold-War spy novel about a reluctant pacifist spy who ends up working for a number of governments in an attempt to prevent more deaths. He is also a womanizer who likes cooking, which reminded me of Napoleon.

The fruit Gaby plays with in New Delhi is a Cherimoya, which is not originally native to
India, but is grown throughout South Asia.

Daruma dolls and maneki-neko (fortune cats) are Japanese good luck symbols.

Did you spot the Avengers reference?

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