songs the equations sing

by AlchemyAlice

Summary

“Watch his eyes,” Oleg had said to Illya, before Illya flew to Berlin. “It’s only hearsay at this point, but we know this much: it’ll be almost impossible to tell, but if you watch the eyes, you’ll know it isn’t a he at all.”

He knows far before he ever gets a glimpse of Napoleon Solo’s eyes, however, that what he is up against—what has beaten him across the Berlin Wall with prize physicist and roboticist Udo Teller’s daughter in tow—isn’t human.

Notes

This story began with the following exchange:

Alice: Good evening
I had a damaging thought today
and it was Cyborg!Napoleon

Nat: Oh NO

Things spun rather out of control from there. Infinite thanks to Nat for being the sounding
board for the vast majority of this thing's development, and for enduring my ambushing her with robot feelings and plot conundrums day and night.

Title is from "Thinking" by The Lisps, who write quite a lot about robots, as it happens.
“Watch his eyes,” Oleg had said to Illya, before Illya flew to Berlin. His cigarette had hung like a
crooked fang from his mouth, the smoke of it cloying in the briefing room, making strange tremulous
shadows in the light of the projector. On the screen across from them, the arresting image of a man in
an immaculate double-breasted suit, half in shadow, had flickered. “It’s only hearsay at this point, but
we know this much: it’ll be almost impossible to tell, but if you watch the eyes, you’ll know it isn’t a
he at all.”

Illya had stored that information away, just as he was expected to.

He knows far before he ever gets a glimpse of Napoleon Solo’s eyes, however, that what he is up
against—what has beaten him across the Berlin Wall with prize physicist and roboticist Udo Teller’s
daughter in tow—isn’t human.

Not at all.

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The next time he sees it, in a dilapidated public toilet in West Berlin, he does notice the eyes—the
way the light hits at just the right angle such that blue and brown suddenly give way, in a startling
moment of refraction, to translucent, mirror-like gold.

It freezes him for half a second, struck by the unexpected, restive beauty of it, but then—

Illya has been afraid of a lot of things in his life, but this thing isn’t going to be one of them.

He’s half a second from lunging when Oleg clucks his tongue from the doorway. “Not a good idea,
Agent,” he says, “You’ll break your hand, if the rumours are true.”

“Among other things,” the American handler says from his other side, with a curl of his lip. “And
they are.”

Illya looks back at Solo, who smiles blandly at him, and raises his hand in a mocking, fingers-only
wave. Beneath the delicacy of the gesture, Illya thinks he can just barely hear the whir of servos, the
whisper of well-oiled steel.

Illya stays his hand. But only because he was ordered to.

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The Vinciguerras are building bots, that much is certain.

“They want their master race, when it ascends, to be indestructible and everlasting,” Sanders says, in
an outdoor cafe nearby. He has a cup of coffee by his hand, but it's untouched. The same goes for
Oleg's cup of tea. Neither Solo nor Illya have anything in front of them. “Thousand Year Reich and
all that. Obviously, neither the US nor Russia much want that to happen.”

Teller’s father, it seems, is the key to such indestructibility.

“We’re going in with Teller, then?” Solo asks, eyes blank, face unreadable.

“Yes. You’ll get in contact with her uncle, Rudi. He works for the Vinciguerras--if they have Teller,
he’ll know.”
“What do they need him for?” Illya asks.

“The power source,” Oleg says, flipping through the dossier and handing it to Illya. “According to our American friends, Teller has been coming close to miniaturizing a tokamak. If he succeeds, it could power a bot for several lifetimes without a charge.”

“And don’t get any ideas about that, Solo,” Sanders growls.

Illya flicks a glance at the android, and then has to look again. Its face remains an impassive mask, but its hand…

There’s a small dent in the metal table they’re all ranged around. Two of them, actually. Could have already been there, except for how they perfectly sit beneath Solo’s first and third fingers.

Solo meets his eyes for a split second, and then turns to Sanders. “What ideas?” it says blandly.

Sanders grunts. They continue with the debrief, and then Oleg stands to leave. Sanders does the same.

“We’ll leave you two get acquainted,” he says, with a last warning look at Solo. “Your flight is the day after tomorrow, so you have about thirty-six hours to prepare Miss Teller.”

“Take care,” Oleg murmurs to Illya, in the way that always means do not fail, and then he is gone. So are the other cafe-goers.

Solo leans back in its seat to regard Illya. Illya lifts his chin. After a tense silence in which Solo continues to wait him out, he breaks and says, “So. They think that you’re a good spy for human society? Even when you came out of a box?”

Solo blinks slowly, and then replies, “I was impressed with the way you chased after Miss Teller and I, you know. Almost good enough to be like me. Are you sure you weren’t grown in a lab, too, Kuryakin?”

Illya overturns the table and leaves without looking back.

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Solo is the best the Americans have, Illya had been told. “A pure learning machine,” Oleg had said, with no small amount of irony. “Or so they claim.”

Illya interprets that to mean that the Americans are in bad shape, to have resorted to this appliance.

The appliance in question, however, is admittedly charming, given the latitude for it. Admittedly…impressive, insofar as American engineering can be. All flash, very little substance beneath.

Gaby Teller treats it like a human, though. Illya doesn’t quite know what to do with that.

In the boutique where they agreed to meet the next day, Illya finds it sifting through racks of women’s clothing with apparent interest, though not, in Illya’s opinion, with sound judgement.

“Kuryakin,” it greets, a picture of neutrality.

“Solo.” Illya tries hard to match its tone. He doesn’t quite succeed.

They end up arguing over a Rabanne, and it ripostes with easy persistence, but there’s a quality of
genuine ennui to its manner that Illya sees no practical use for. He chalks it up to a quirk in programming, but he admits that he doesn't quite see the point of an android that presents predominantly as bored.

Teller emerges from the dressing room resplendent in orange, and looks to Solo first for an opinion. Solo smiles at her, saying nothing, but she nods anyway, like somehow, it is capable of feeling and expressing approval. Then she notices Illya, freezes, and looks back at Solo. “What is he doing here?”

“I am to be your fiancé,” Illya replies.

“What.”

“Your cover,” Solo supplies.

Teller’s eyes narrow, and she looks back at Solo. “Are you serious?” she hisses, pointing at Illya.

“We’re trying teamwork for this operation,” Solo says smoothly. “All part of the plan.”

“The plan is to get the K—” She stops, noticing the saleswomen in the corner of the shop. Amends, “Them involved? To get him involved?”

“He has strict orders not to kill us this time, right Kuryakin?” Solo casts a glance at him. Illya bristles, but stands his ground.

“Our agencies are in agreement that this is an important matter,” he says stiffly. “I am here to help.”

Teller walks up to him, looking down her nose from the height of the boutique’s small walkway. Something about the way she holds herself, about the sharp jut of her chin and the steadiness of her gaze, makes Illya want to look at the floor, but he doesn’t. “I don’t trust you,” she says.

He swallows inadvertently.

“You don’t have to,” Solo cuts in, looking between them intently. “Just cooperate with him. Us. We know what we’re doing.”

Teller looks back over to it. Solo meets her gaze steadily, eyes crinkling at the corners, a masterwork of friendliness.

It seems to have the desired effect—Teller works her jaw once, and then says, “Fine.” She turns away, and pastes on a smile for the saleswomen. “These as well, please. And the Dior sandals from earlier.” She turns the smile back on Illya, but it’s sour at the edges. “Thank you, dear.”

“Oh, of course,” Illya says, through gritted teeth.

“I guess I’ll leave you two to it,” Solo says, bone-dry. “I’ll be in the car.”

When it turns away, Illya is left with the matter of the shopping bags until Teller reemerges from the changing room. When she comes to join him by the door, he asks, “You trust that with your clothes?” jerking his chin in the direction of where it stands outside.

“I’m not wearing what he picked out, am I?” she shoots back, but there’s something more than just a personal challenge in the tilt of her chin—something he is almost tempted to read as chastisement.

He doesn’t know what for.
He wonders what she and Solo talked about in the chop shop where she'd been hiding, before his pursuit made them flee for the wall. What could have made her so amenable to its presence, its assurances.

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They head to Rome, cover stories and IDs in place. Solo sits at complete ease on the plane, the clean angles and slopes of it a study in boredom. Illya watches it until it blinks at him, slowly, like a lion in the afternoon sun.

“What exactly are you looking for, Peril?” it asks, in a clean, manufactured drawl. “Because if you want answers, you’re going to have to ask the right questions first.”

Peril. Illya doesn’t know what to do with that, either. “How old are you?” he asks, mostly because it’s the first thing that comes into his head.

Solo quirks a smile at him. “I was activated ten years ago,” it answers readily. “Though if you’re to convert the number of developmental stages I’ve gone through into an approximation of human ones over time, then I’m roughly eighty-seven.”

Illya narrows his eyes. “So you are an old man.”

Solo tilts its head, the gesture birdlike—not natural. “Depends on how you think about it,” it says, slowly, like it’s thinking about it for the first time, which clearly isn’t the case. “In terms of processing power, yes, I’ve comprehended the equivalent of eighty-seven years of experience. But time hasn’t moved that fast, events haven’t moved that fast. An eighty-seven-year-old human has experienced eighty-seven years of events, things changing, people coming and going. I have a far narrower band of experience to work with, albeit a richer one.” It smiles, close-lipped, attractive and perfunctory, the way stewardesses do when delivering drinks. “It’s no better or worse. Just different.”

It’s the neutrality that sets Illya off, causes him to blurt, “If you really worked the way the Americans wanted you to, there would be hundreds of you.”

Solo loses its smile.

“You’re not wrong,” it says, and then looks away, out the window. It’s such a natural, expressive gesture that Illya is rendered silent.

Gaby, from the other side of the plane, glares at him, and doesn’t speak to him for the rest of the flight.

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When they arrive they immediately begin playing at their cover stories—Illya and Teller, the happy engaged couple, Solo the...well. It is unclear precisely the role it plays, only that Solo appears as familiar to it as breathing.

Illya watches Solo—he can’t help it. People don’t seem to notice that he’s anything other than ordinary (well, as ordinary as something that...aesthetically well-constructed can be). Solo moves smoothly, a parody of a man, its footfalls perfectly even, the swing of one arm modulated while the other is stilled by its hand resting in its trouser pocket. Its head, alert and upright, moves only slightly with its gait. It catches the eyes of several women, and when it notices, it smiles, as if appreciative of the attention.
Its chest rises and falls, as if it has lungs.

“It’s a cooling mechanism, actually,” Teller says, when Illya makes a passing comment, as they walk by the Spanish Steps. “All that machinery generates heat. Circulation of air helps keep him at a safe temperature.” She flicks a glance at him, and smirks. Her hand at his elbow feels a bit like talons. “He’s very warm anyway. Going across the wall was like hugging a very hard hot water bottle.”

“‘Him’,” Illya repeats, because he is not going to rise to the bait of that last statement.

“Yes,” Gaby says, a little testily. “He walks like a man, he talks and thinks like a man. So.”

“Thinks like a man?” Illya says, incredulous. “He— it’s —a computer. Ones and zeroes.”

“And we’re just a collection of nerve endings, what’s the difference?” Gaby replies, her jaw jutting out. “If you’d just talk to him like a normal person, you’d understand.” She looks him up and down. “Or are you afraid you might find out that he’s better at being a person than you are, darling?”

Illya grits his teeth through the flare of anger that bursts like an ink bottle inside him, painting his stomach black. He reins it back, swallows it down, too aware of her delicate grip on his elbow, how easily he could knock her down. They walk several more paces.

He says, when he can manage it, “You know a lot about it. How it works.”

“My father had been working on artificial intelligence even before the war,” Gaby replies, pursing her lips. “Always trying to apply his theories in the real world. I remember when I was younger, he would alternate between designing punch cards and tokamaks. Sometimes he would get them mixed up, and end up with a complete mess of binary and physics equations.” Her lips curl on one side, a rueful half-smile. “He’d leave the scraps for me to play with. He’d hoped to make something that could help us be better people.”

Illya exhales, and nods. The moment of peace is broken, however, when Solo drives up on its ridiculous vespa with warnings of oncoming robbers with agendas. It makes Illya snappish, which Solo immediately seems to pick up on and, perversely, react to by needling him further.

“They’re looking for a spy. Thankfully, you’re not a spy right now. But since you aren’t a spy right now...take it like a pussy,” it advises, all teasing, smug condescension, and Illya wants to knock it off the scooter right up until—

“I think you should do as he says,” Gaby says, arms crossed. “It makes sense, does it not?”

Illya wants her to be wrong.

She isn’t, and neither is Solo.

After his father’s watch is in the pocket of some Vinciguerra thug and his ego is thoroughly bruised, they stand among the ruins of the Forum and Solo looks at him with something like understanding, something like sympathy, which Illya finds far worse than his condescension. Gaby is looking up at him in consternation, her hands hard and warm around his wrist, against his chest.

His blood is pounding in his ears. He needs air. He needs to not be here.

He takes care to extract himself gently from Gaby’s grip, and she allows it even as she watches him, clearly waiting for him to make a break for the thugs who’ve disappeared into the dark. He won’t, he knows he’s been proven wrong here, he just.
Breathing is like straining against a metal band around his chest.

He goes on a walk after dropping Gaby off at the hotel, hoping to clear his head. When he returns, it’s to find her gone, and he has an idea of where she might be.

He pulls his suitcase out from beneath his bed and retrieves the receiver from it. Bugging Solo’s room had been more a gesture of habit than anything else—he hadn’t expected Solo to do or say much when it wasn’t working.

For the second time that night, he finds himself mistaken.

“—spoke of you, when I was younger. The idea, at least.”

“They got past ideas pretty quickly, all told.”

“So I see.”

Slowly, Illya lowers himself onto his bed, receiver cradled in his hands. There is a sound of shifting fabric, making the speaker crackle, and then—

“Do you really have eighty-seven years...?”

Solo snorts. “Not stored. I haven’t the space. And even if I did...well.”

“They monitor you.” Teller’s voice is matter-of-fact, but there’s a point of tension somewhere in the way she says it, clipped and flat, that puts Illya on edge.

“I don’t keep things I don’t want other people seeing,” Solo says, calm and a little wry.

“But you’re still you.”

“Miss Tel—Gaby.”

It’s the first time anyone has addressed Teller by her first name. That it should be Solo is...Illya doesn’t know what it is.

(It sounds like a correction, too—like Teller had asked him to call her Gaby.)

“Let it alone,” Solo advises.

“How can I trust you if I do?” Teller counters. “Not everything’s just for you, you know. I want to know I’m not just going to be snatched up and handed over to the CIA when all of this is over. I want to live.”

“I wouldn’t—” Solo stops. There’s a moment of silence, and then, “I see.”

“It seems we have something in common,” Teller says, almost too soft for Illya to hear under the static.

“But in you, it’s natural,” Solo says, and his voice is so strange. “In me, it’s a mistake.”

“It’s what makes me believe you’re real,” Teller says, firm and steady.

Illya switches off the receiver.

He can’t hear this.
Three hours after he's turned the receiver off, however, and halfway through his walkthrough of Petrov's Immortal game, there's a knock at the hotel room door. When he goes to answer, it's to find Solo standing in the doorway, Teller curled half-asleep in its arms.

"I believe I have something of yours," Solo says with a smile.

Illya scowls. "She's not a thing."

Solo's expression flattens a bit. "Not what I...never mind," it says. "Look, it wouldn't look good for her to come out of my room in the morning, would it?"

"'Mfine," Teller mumbles, her face buried in Solo's shoulder. Then she wrinkles her nose. "You're too hard."

Solo looks at the ceiling. "Apologies," it says dryly, before looking back at Illya. "You'd better take her. I'd hardly call you soft, but I'd imagine you're an improvement."

Wordlessly, Illya does, as gently as he can, and she transfers the loop of her arms onto his shoulders without much protest. She positively reeks of vodka.

"What did you do?" Illya asks, a little bewildered.

"Danced, mostly," Solo replies, shrugging. "Solomon Burke first, then we moved on to The Beatles."

Illya blinks. "You dance?"

"Rather well, if I do say so myself," Solo smiles. It looks down at Gaby and its whole face changes. "She, on the other hand, dances like there’s no one in the room with her. It’s...charming."

Even with the hall light turning its pupils iridescent gold, it’s never looked so human.

"Did you...want to come in?" Illya asks, unsure of why he’s doing so. Manners, perhaps, instilled in him by his mother far before he was given training elsewhere.

Solo’s eyebrows go up; it glances first at Illya’s face and then at the room behind him, eyes finally landing on the abandoned chess game. “I play,” it offers.

"Of course you do,” Illya grunts, and steps aside. Gaby snuffles against his chest, her breathing slowly evening out. She’s so light in his arms, he feels as if he’s handling glass. When he tips his head down, her cheek is flush-warm against his chin.

Solo steps in around him, movements whisper-quiet.

“Going to try your luck against a machine?” it asks, dry and curious, eyes fixed on the way Gaby is tucked in against Illya’s chest.

“I guess we’ll see,” Illya replies.

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What follows is the most bizarre chess match Illya has ever played in his life. It isn’t that Solo is bad at chess—in fact, it is as proficient as anyone who can consider every possible sequence of moves in a fraction of a second can be, which is to say extremely. But the way in which Solo plays is, for lack
of a better word, *capricious*.

“Why would you do that,” Illya says at one point, flat, staring at the knight Solo has just moved to E10. His voice is low only for the sake of Gaby, who is passed out in her bed, deposited by Illya and tucked solicitously in by Napoleon.

“Honestly? I just wondered what you would do.”

“It’s not to your advantage.”

“Could be.”

“No.”

“ Might be.”

“No.”

“Still interested,” Solo says, chin propped on its hand.

“You’re not playing to win,” Illya complains.

“No,” Solo agrees. “I’m playing to learn.”

Illya exhales. Remembers Oleg’s words. “Ah.”

Solo flicks a glance up at him. “Gonna hold that against me, Peril?”

“Why do you call me that?” Illya asks.

Solo shrugs. “I like it. Has a ring to it.”

“So you wouldn’t mind if I called you something absurd. Like ‘Cowboy’.”

“Not particularly. Call me what you like.”

Illya studies it. “Who named you?”

Solo stills. “My maker.”

“Your maker is the US government.”

“No,” Solo says sharply. “My maker was a programmer. The physical part of me, that’s been developed by committee, but the person who made *me*, he was a man, and he…” It pauses. Then more quietly, “He was a person.” A small smile, full of humor, but small, secretive. “He decided on what to call me. Said it was within the parameters of other famous spy names. Giacomo Casanova. James Bond. Napoleon Solo. Icon and concept. It fit.”

“James Bond is a fictional character,” Illya points out. He ignores the pounding of his heart in his chest, heavy and cold.

“And I’m a fictional person,” Solo responds easily. Its gaze is empty, though, when it tips it in Illya’s direction. “Isn’t that right?”

Illya swallows. Doesn’t say anything. After a moment, he moves his rook.

They play the rest of the game in silence. Illya wins.

It feels like a hollow victory.

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They go to the race track the next day to meet Rudi, but not before Solo knocks on Illya’s door again and proceeds to throw his set of listening devices at him. “I was having a perfectly pleasant morning until I found these,” it remarks, aiming the last at Illya’s head.

Illya catches it, makes no sign of having overheard anything last night. He retreats to his room for a brief moment, and then reemerges to toss Solo’s CIA-issue bugs right back at it.

They stand in stasis for a moment, out in the hallway, and then Illya says, abruptly, “You’re a learning machine. That’s why you play chess...irrationally.”

"That’s right,” Solo replies, after a pause. There’s a note of caution in its voice. “I’m obviously capable of playing to win, it’s just more informative not to, sometimes.”

"Do you do anything else?"

Solo watches him. It feels like being dissected. "Once you’ve learned something, what do you do?” it asks, after a pause.

"Use it,” Illya replies. And then, without meaning to, adds, “What good is learning if you aren’t going to use it to make something of yourself?”

Solo sucks in a breath. "What indeed,” it says. It tilts his head at Illya, as if it sees him differently now than it did before. “And what sort of ‘something’, I wonder,” it murmurs, almost to itself, even as it continues to stare.

Illya can’t meet its eyes. Those hadn't been his words. He hadn't meant...though really, he had. He believes them now. Or believes that he does.

"I suppose you have your answer then," Solo says, straightening.

Illya doesn't know if he does, but he nods all the same.

Solo exhales, or at least makes a show of doing so. “That tie doesn’t go with that suit,” it comments, turning away, and Illya finds his hand jerking up towards the knot at his throat before he forcibly puts it back at his side.

He changes the tie before he leaves the hotel. Androids, he rationalises, are likely programmed to have conventional taste protocols.

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The racetrack is too warm and the people in it too rich, and Illya dislikes it intensely. It doesn’t help that Gaby, despite having lived the last seven years of her life under the hoods of leaky Trabi, looks utterly at home, small and beautiful and charming in a solemn sort of way that make the single men look at Illya with ill-concealed jealousy and consternation. Illya does not like being looked at, being noticed.

“Where is Solo?” he says, in an undertone, while he and Gaby are making the rounds, looking for dear Uncle Rudi.
“Making contact with Victoria Vinciguerra, I’m sure,” Gaby replies, not looking at him. “He seems
to prefer the direct approach. Has a flair for it, even.”

Illya takes a deep breath. “I see.”

Gaby finally turns to him and looks over the tops of her enormous sunglasses. “How long do you
intend to sulk about him?” she says. “Because it’s getting tiresome.”

“I’m not—,” He stops. Gathers himself. “I am not sulking.”

“Uh huh. Of course not. Ah, Tag, Onkel, wie geht’s? Es ist zu lange hat.” She kisses Uncle Rudi’s
cheeks, as he looks fondly at her, and then dubiously at Illya.

“Tag, Tag, delighted to see you at long last, my dear. And is this your…?”

“My fiancé, Illya. Finally settling down, Uncle, aren’t you proud?”

Illya smiles tightly through the interaction, and tries to hide behind his camera as much as he possibly
can. He can’t help but have the thought that Solo—charming, smoothly accommodating Solo—
would have been better suited to the role of doting husband-to-be.

He tries not to think of it any further. He can feel Rudi’s skepticism like radiation, receives his barbs
like so many small puncture wounds, and tries to smile. It turns his back tight, pulling his shoulders
up. He can feel old drills fighting against it, which makes it worse; old words from distant officers
barking, You turn to stone when you lie, Kuryakin, are you a statue or a man?

He can't think of this, not now. He does his job, getting as much surveillance footage as he can.

After an uncomfortable lull in the conversation that not even Gaby can recover from, he excuses
himself, and his last smile feels wooden, slapped on with plaster paste and masking tape.

Breaking the three irritating men in the washroom is a welcome distraction, albeit one he eventually
regrets.

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"Peril was...productive," Solo comments, afterwards, loud enough that Illya can hear him through the
bathroom door.

"'Productive' is one way of putting it, I suppose," Gaby says testily, rustling her newspaper for
emphasis. Her disappointment grates on Illya, and he tries not to resent how her opinion is slowly
beginning to matter to him. She is proving to be far more than simply a passive asset, and he doesn't
quite know how to reconcile her acquired delicacy, the way she's slipped so easily into the role of
ingenue, with the sharp-eyed impatience with which she's now more than once cut him open.

It isn’t safe to think of. He busies himself beneath the red light of the makeshift darkroom, even as he
listens carefully to the conversation beyond the door.

"I have a business meeting with Victoria tomorrow afternoon," Solo is saying. "She seems
adequately interested in what I can offer."

"Offer?" Gaby echoes.

"Indeed."

A pointed silence, whose meaning Illya suspects but can't verify.
"I have Alexander covered, then," Gaby says.

That's a step too far. "He's a Nazi!" Illya calls through the door, even as he continues to count off the seconds of development time on his current print.

"True," Gaby calls back, infuriatingly calm. "He's also filthy rich and wants to take me for rides in very expensive cars."

"Still a Nazi!"

"So principled, our Peril," Solo laments, and Illya wonders where it learned to sound so tired. Where it learned to find principles tiresome.

While Gaby and Solo continue to murmur unintelligibly on the other side of the door, Illya finishes developing the photographs. When they're dry and their intelligence definitive, Illya is almost regretful he can't stay in the darkness, separate, any longer. When he slips into the room, however, it's to see both Solo and Gaby by the door to the hallway.

"Now? But the things we—"

"If I'm going to last the night, it's now or not at all," Solo replies quietly. "And you'll remember."

Gaby makes a noise in her throat. "Of course I will. You'll be able to…?"

It smiles at her crookedly. "I've been doing it for years, you know."

Illya clears his throat, inexplicably embarrassed at having to do so. "It's stellarators," he says, and then huffs. Tries again. "That is, the Vinciguerras. Intel posited that they were using tokamaks to power the bots, but this is pointing to them using stellarators to contain the fusion based generators for their new android chassis. Experimentation with such things is dangerous—plasma radiation that escapes from the magnetic fields of the stellarators will cause burns beneath the skin if you are not careful." He holds up one photograph. "Alexander has most certainly been in contact with a stellarator recently."

Solo steps forward to study the prints. "Nicely done," it says. It flicks a glance up at Illya. "Specially treated film?"

Illya nods. "Formulated it myself."

"I don't doubt it," Solo murmurs. "And these marks, they're subdermal burns?"

"It only happens with specific types of radiation," Illya nods. "We can be nearly certain."

"Fusion-based cyborgs, so they can kill everyone except for each other," Solo says with apparent distaste. "Charming."

"Nazis," Illya reminds, with a pointed look at Gaby, who rolls her eyes.

"You think they've really managed to miniaturize a stellarator?" Solo asks, a strange note in his voice. "They'd have to have done, if they want anything smaller than a house-sized chassis."

"If they have, then it is definitely my father's work," Gaby says. They turn to look at her. She bites her lip. "He worked on tokamaks for a long time, but they were unstable, needed regular maintenance. In the end, I remember, what he wanted to avoid most was...well." She looks at Solo, which opens its mouth, as if to speak, and then snaps it tightly shut. It nods at her in a quick, small
jerk of its head.

After a moment, it glances back at Illya, purses its lips, and hands the photos back. "I guess we'd best sleep on this," it says, with a strange irony in his voice that causes Gaby to snort, her eyes serious. "Good evening to you both."

It heads back towards the door, and after a deliberate pause in which Illya can almost see the gears turning in its head, leans down and presses a very gentle, very chaste kiss to the crest of Gaby's cheek.

Gaby closes her eyes when it touches her.

Then it slips out the door, closing it silently.

Illya swallows, trying to blink the image away. He looks at the space Solo had vacated. "Does it actually sleep?" He asks, almost rhetorically.

Gaby exhales noisily. "That would be kinder," she says.

Illya frowns at her. "What do you mean?"

"He needs energy," Gaby says. "He only runs a few days at a time without a charge. It's why he only ever works cities."

"So it plugs into a wall," Illya shrugs. It only makes sense. There is a reason everyone is so alarmed about the Vinciguerra bots. "I suspected as much."

Gaby blinks at him, a slow and catlike open and shut.

"He also reports in during that time," she says.

"To his handler?"

"To everyone," Gaby corrects. There are barbs just under the surface of her tone. "The minute he begins a charge, it triggers a broadcast protocol directly to the Pentagon. He's the only model of his exact type ever made. Everything he thinks is dissected for later research."

"Our interactions?" Illya asks, immediately alarmed. That could be very bad, from a security perspective.

"Yes," Gaby nods, "If he wasn't already taking measures to edit those memories as much as possible."

Illya stops. Crosses his arms. "Why would he...how would he do that?"

"With difficulty, and he's not doing it for us," Gaby says. She smiles, a quick and then gone pull of her lips, humorless. "Would you want your entire government to know your every thought?"

"No," Illya draws out, "But—"

"And when has Napoleon ever," Gaby interrupts, sharp and deliberate, "Seemed like he enjoyed being here, on this mission? Or better yet, seemed to even be neutral about it?"

When he's with you, Illya doesn't say. That is a grave he doesn't quite feel ready to dig for himself yet.
"It seems neutral about most things," he says, even though he doesn’t really think so. Looking back, more than anything else Solo just seems tired. And Illya supposes, really, that that is not exactly neutral.

Gaby looks at him like she can read his thoughts as easily as Solo's are downloaded. "You're government property, too," she says eventually. "I'd have thought you'd have some sympathy."

"It's different," Illya says.

"Yes," Gaby says. "You had a choice in the matter. He didn’t."

Illya looks away. "That might have been easier," he says, very quietly.

Gaby cocks her head, and then steps up to him, close enough for him to smell her hair, a vague impression of vanilla and freesias that is, for a moment, all he can concentrate on.

He's unprepared for the slap. He's less surprised that she has an arm on her.

The crack of it still ringing in his ears, he turns back and glares at her.

"That is not—"

"I am trying very hard to like you, Kuryakin," she hisses, cutting him off. "But you are making it very, very difficult."

It stings, more than he'd like. "You don't need to like me," he says, throat tight, "In order for me to do my job."

She lets out a breath, her shoulders dropping. "See?" she murmurs. "Then you just...I don’t understand you."

"There's nothing to understand," Illya says.

She shakes her head. "You really believe that, don't you." She raises her hand again, and he can't help it—he flinches just slightly. She notices, and it makes her mouth go soft for a moment.

She doesn't hit him again; just lays her palm on his cheek, where it's still hot from impact.

He looks down at her, caught and flushed, hands nerveless at his sides.

"I know he played chess with you the other night," Gaby says, studying his face. "I remember seeing that before I fell asleep."

Illya waits.

"What do you see in him that makes you so angry?"

Illya doesn’t even know how to begin to answer that. He is angry about so many larger things than Solo. Solo is just a vessel, a cipher, he is nothing at all to do with Illya, he is nothing, period —

"He’s what I was supposed to be."

He hears himself say it as if from a great distance. Blood roars in his ears, and he’s not sure of the cause—shame, perhaps.

Gaby is looking at him in frowning confusion. “What do you—” she starts.
He brushes past her. “I’m going for a walk.”

He doesn’t wait for her answer.
Chapter 2

He walks until the sun sets and the tourists begin to gather in the outdoor cafes that line the piazzas, and the heat abates enough for sport coats to be gallantly thrown around the shoulders of ladies in sleeveless dresses. It uncoils him, the shadows lengthening and the lamp lights turning on, the world quieting just slightly.

His own words jangle in his head, a discordant tri-tone blare, less a catharsis than a return of the unwanted, things he’d kept locked away. This is the wrong mission for him. He shouldn’t be here.

Solo had kissed her. Feather light, barely a brush, clearly not for show. Illya can’t even read it as a spiteful gesture towards himself; it had been, it had been—

It had been tender and private.

Personal.

He keeps walking, but this time quickly, back towards the hotel because he has a job to do, that’s one thing that’s certain, one thing he knows that he’s built for.

When he arrives back, Gaby is asleep or is pretending to be; he doesn’t care which. He unpacks what equipment he needs, and goes back out in as little time as possible.

Puts away everything the night has offered him in small, discreet packages, not to be opened.

***

He’s not at all surprised when Solo joins him in investigating the power station later that night.

“I expected you sooner,” he says, as Solo jogs along towards him, outside the fence.

“Finish charging. Reporting. Right. Illya just nods curtly. He wonders if what Gaby said is true—that between their conversation this afternoon and now, Solo has excised memories from itself, to keep itself safe. To keep them all safe.

He puts it out of his mind. Solo seems no different.

"Power's cut?" Solo asks, crouching next to Illya.

"Diverted. We have a limited window," Illya grunts. He flicks the CO2 laser on and begins to cut the fence from the bottom up.

Solo makes an irritated sound.

"What?" Illya asks, prepared for a snide comment.

Instead, however, Solo pulls a set of highly sharp and highly inefficient wire-cutters out of its vest. "The CIA can make me, and yet they can't manage a proper laser," it says mournfully. "If I didn't know myself, I would seriously question their dedication to the technological cutting edge."

Illya pauses. "Are you trying to be funny?"
Solo sniffs. "If you had a sense of humor, you would know."

Illya rolls his eyes and finishes the cut, pulling aside the two sheets of fencing. "Hurry up, then."

Eyes flashing mirth, Solo ducks in under the fence without another word.

Once inside the building, what is surprising is that they aren't...that is, they really do work well, as a team. When Illya's not thinking too hard about it.

"You take the top level and I'll take ground, we'll meet in the middle," Solo says, and something in its tone already has Illya on the move, his body moving before he bids it. "Try not to get lost," he hears behind him, and chooses to ignore it.

The upper floors are quiet and filled to the brim with shadows, making the sweep easy to coordinate and execute, perhaps too easy—when room after room proves clear of potential incriminating production equipment, Illya begins to wonder whether they've jumped the gun on the investigation.

He meets up with Solo again, which shakes its head as it slips in against the wall next to him. A worker strolls past, and they press into the shadows, shoulder to shoulder.

It really is disconcerting, how warm Solo is.

They watch the man go to his locker, raise a hand and—

The watch face is similar enough to be striking in the dim band of light from the window, band the same width and color. It could be his.

A stillness descends on Illya's mind, familiar as breathing, an echo of old instruction and sharp mixed remembrance, bone deep urge. He steps forward and doesn't hear Solo's incredulous words of protest.

The man with the watch crumples beautifully to one side, unconsciousness complete, and it feels like the first thing Illya's done right in a century. The watch isn't his, but it was worth checking. A clean act of reconnaissance.

"What...are you doing?" Solo asks as he steps forward, all slow, deliberate caution.

"Thought he had my watch," Illya replies, and he thinks he sounds off-hand, but he clearly doesn't—Solo blinks and then purses his lips together.

"But he didn't," he says. There's something gentle in the way he says it, a velvet softness to his statement of fact.

"No," Illya says shortly, but his eye is caught on a strange lever inside the man's locker. A quick pull reveals what they may well be working for, the floor opening beneath their feet.

"But we wouldn't have found that without my father's watch," he finishes, a little petulant, perhaps.

"After you," he says.

***

Things go quite wrong after that, but Illya can't precisely blame Solo for it, though on the surface it's entirely his doing. A robot programmed to learn cannot necessarily predict human foibles outside its factual parameters, after all. Retrofitting an alarm on a safe already that complex is perhaps too
perverse for a data-based mind to consider.

The only bright spot is that Solo manages to grab a scrap of helical coil that could well belong to a tokamak or stellarator, but after that, it's a mess of running and trying not to be identified or shot by the guards.

In fairness, Solo comports itself fairly impressively—an excellent shot, and quick to react, covering Illya’s six with consistency and a fluid, odd sort of grace. It’s the sort of programming Illya would have expected from the very beginning, and yet here, when the pressure is on and they’re on the same side, it’s still a welcome, reassuring surprise.

Illya manages to extract himself and find an exit, and Solo follows him out the shattered window onto the dock. As Illya’s preparing the speedboat to leave, however, Solo suddenly balks.

They don’t have time for this.

"What is the problem, come on!" Illya demands, revving the motor, “They’re closing the gate!"

Solo lifts its chin, feet still solidly on the dock, and says, "How deep?"

"What?"

"How deep is the bay?"

“Ten feet, half a mile, how do I know? Come on!”

Solo grimaces, and gets in the boat. Illya peels away, the engine screaming protest.

It doesn't take long for the guards to follow, and the gate to the harbor are closing fast.

“Careful,” Solo says, ridiculously, as Illya takes a tight, evasive turn.

Illya shoots an incredulous look at him, but then has to turn back, the percussion of gunfire rising behind them.

A sharp crack of ricochet barks over the noise of the engine; another.

Solo says, “Oh, sh—” and then Illya has a split second to wonder about the cursing capabilities of an android before he is airborne and catastrophically deafened. Pain lurches across his back and arms as light and heat burst around him and oh—

A bullet must have hit the engine, he thinks as he hits the water with an icy slap, and then the impact dashes away his consciousness entirely.

***

He awakens to rushing, muffled silence, stinging cold on his right side, and hard, radiant warmth on his left. The contrast of it is so jarring that he flinches into wakefulness only to find saltwater in his eyes and his body rendered immobile—two hard bands under his knees and upper arms, tightening when he tries to move.

He forces his eyes open again against the sting of salt but can’t stand it for long. It’s useless anyway—darkness surrounds him, penetrating enough for him to be absolutely certain of one thing: he’s deep underwater, deep enough for the pressure to begin to feel stifling.

Through the haze of confusion, he adds to that: he’s deep underwater, and he’s still breathing.
There’s a mouth sealed over his own, pressing air into his lungs, stale and hot, metallic in taste.

Solo.

They’re on the move; Illya can feel his clothes dragging against the water, but Solo is unflagging, radiating unnatural heat through his suit fabric, holding Illya steady as he cuts through the water. How he’s navigating, Illya doesn’t know; radar, perhaps. There are any number of possibilities.

Illya realizes suddenly that he knows very little about how Solo works, and under any other circumstances that would deeply disquiet him. But here, in the smothering cold of seawater, he can’t help but tuck himself into the one small chance of safety and survival he has, clinging to its warmth and to the strength of its grip.

After three shared breaths, then five, he slowly uncurls one hand from where it’s folded against his chest, and clasps it around Solo’s lapel.

Solo’s grip on him tightens fractionally, and his steps falter for just a moment. But then he resumes his quick, long strides across the seabed.

Illya’s mind remains blurry—the dwindling amount of oxygen in the lungfuls of air to which Solo is giving him access, most likely, though there’s the ringing in his ears from the explosion to contend with, too. The water is getting lighter though, the weight of it less crushing, until after interminable minutes Illya thinks he can see the moon overhead, and then they’re breaking the surface in a wash of sound and sensation.

Solo pulls his head back and Illya gasps for air, coughing up the last dregs of water from his lungs.

“Quiet,” Solo says, darting a glance behind him, where the distant glow of fire shimmers in the dark. “They’re probably not still looking, but better safe than sorry.”

Illya endeavours to cough more quietly.

“Can you stand?” Solo asks.

Another few hacking coughs, and Illya nods.

Solo sets him down slowly, and it takes Illya a moment to find his feet in the shifting silt, a moment more to adjust to being taller than Solo again. Solo’s arm is still bracing his shoulder, feather-light now just beneath the surface of the water, but present, attentive.

And Illya is still holding Solo’s lapel.

They’re very close.

Without the water circulating between them, it’s apparent that Solo is throwing off massive amounts of heat, far more than is usual.

“You okay?” Illya asks, pressing slightly against Solo’s chest with his knuckles. The warmth feels good with the water this cold, the night air not much better.

“No air circulation means overheating,” Solo replies, giving him an odd glance. “I’ll be fine in a minute. The water helped keep it under control, actually.” He pauses. “You?”

“I’ll be fine,” Illya nods. He can’t stop looking at Solo’s face. His dark hair is beginning to curl as it rapidly dries with his radiant heat, thick locks of it furling over his forehead. Water is still clinging to
his eyelashes, the lobes of his ears, his lips.

Illya can still taste him.

He swallows.

Solo’s eyes dart down to his throat for a moment, pupils huge in the dark, gold lens limned silvery with the moon’s reflection. “We need to go,” he says. “Victoria’s probably heard about this already.”

Illya nods.

It takes more effort than it should to pull away, and head to the shore.

***

They get back to the hotel with speed but little dignity, just in time for Solo to...well, distract Victoria.

Illya gets through about five seconds of having the receiver for the bugs he’d replanted on Solo on in his and Gaby's room before shutting it off with prejudice.

“I had rather wondered about that,” Gaby says casually, even as her gaze is keen. “I knew he was equipped, but whether he learned how to do that, let alone enjoy it...”

“She’s a Nazi,” Illya says, because he can’t really think of anything better. He doesn’t want to know how Gaby knows he’s, well, anatomically correct. (He especially doesn’t want to think about whether or not Solo is even capable of enjoying that, and whether any sort of enjoyment, or even desire on Solo’s part, would make what is now happening in his hotel room better or worse.)

“She’s also tall and blonde,” Gaby shrugs, watching him.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She blinks slowly. “Nothing,” she says eventually. “Nothing at all.” She looks him over. “You’re very...damp. And singed.”

“Boat blew up. Fell in the water.”

“Ah.” She doesn’t change her expression, just keeps watching him. He clenches and unclenches his hands. The receiver bites into his palm, bringing his attention back.

“Solo...” He puts the receiver down on the table and slowly peels off his sodden, blackened jacket. “That night, in Berlin,” he says, hesitantly. “You’d never seen him before. But you knew what he was, and then you still...”

“Went with him?” Gaby finishes. She settles back into her bed, smoothing the covers over her knees. Her gaze flickers across him, a quick down and up. “Yes, I did.”

“You trusted him.” He doesn’t mean it to sound like an accusation.

Well, perhaps he does.

“Well, no,” she draws out. “He’s CIA, what’s to trust? But you were coming after us, and I knew what would happen if I went with you, so.” She looks him over, and then tilts her head to one side. “What do you really want to know?”
Illya swallows, looking anywhere but at her. “What did he say to you?”

Gaby narrows her eyes, and then her expression goes carefully neutral, her chin tipping up slightly. “He was very straightforward,” she says. “He told me he could get me across the wall. I didn’t believe him. Then he said he knew who my father was, and what he was building, if he’d been captured by the Vinciguerras. I asked him how the hell he knew that. He said he was CIA.” She pauses. “That was when the light hit his eyes.”

“The gold,” Illya nods. “How did you know that was…?”

“The indicator? I didn’t. But between my father’s work and how strange it was, I made a guess.”

“What did he say?”

Gaby flattens her lips. “Do you mean, was he ashamed? Embarrassed?”

Illya looks down and to one side. “That’s not what I said.”

A pause, and then she says, “He said he was the first success. He said he wished my father had been there for when he’d woken up. For his own sake.”

Illya huffs. She keeps watching him, her gaze pinning him.

“That wasn’t entirely what I meant, though,” she says. “About the eyes.”

Finally, he looks at her. “No?”

She draws her knees up to her chest, resting her elbows on them. “I noticed the gold, yes. That was the first thing. I noticed the bit of brown as well.”

Illya stills. He’d noticed that too; the dark copper shard in Solo’s right eye, like a disguise left half-undone. It’s the one thing that he really couldn’t, can’t make sense of, can’t reason away as a strange but logical android anomaly. No designer would put such a memorable feature on a spy. No maker would allow such a noticeable flaw.

Gaby says, “That was what made me trust him.”

“A mistake?” Illya asks in confusion.

She snorts. “Hardly the sort of mistake that would pass inspection, don’t you think? I asked him about it. All he would say is that he did it himself.” She raises an eyebrow at him. “He wanted to do something, and he did it, for himself. Made sure that no one could take it away from him, either. A selfish android is a rare thing. One that’s smart—that’s even rarer.”

“And that makes him trustworthy?” Illya asks, because it’s the only thing he can think of that isn’t spinning, unraveling doubt, questions multiplying in his head and getting no answers.

“It makes him a person,” Gaby answers, laying her head on her folded knees, eyes still dark and steady on him. “And people aren’t governments.”

Illya’s fingers have begun to tap a fevered, arrhythmic pattern on his thigh. He fights to still them.

“He saved my life,” he admits.

“...He did, did he?” Gaby says, ever so slightly emphasizing the pronoun. She exhales, and then adds, “Well. I’m sure he was just doing his job.”
He shoots her a wary look, and after an awkward pause in which she seems to be waiting for him to catch up, he retreats to the bathroom to shuck off the rest of his damp clothes.

On paper, it certainly seems like Solo was doing just that. With a metal chassis, the walk across the seabed was the most expeditious way of getting them both to shore, especially with Illya unconscious for at least part of the time.

But the way he’d handled Illya, looked at him, that…

No.

Illya steps into the shower and lets the warmth of the spray divert his thoughts.

***

The following day, things start normally enough.

That is to say, Illya wakes to find Gaby gone, and after dressing, he enters Solo’s room to find her standing on the coffee table, the hem of her dress hiked up, Solo’s hands deftly working on the microphone secured to her garter belt.

“It just wasn’t turned on yet,” Solo says, and shares a smirk with her.

Illya clears his throat. “We’re ready?”

Gaby looks up at him and nods, and there’s a flicker of something in her expression that Illya will find himself picking at like a scab later on, but which he only passingly notes in that moment. She hops down from the table, Solo’s hand guiding her to the floor, and then she straightens her skirt primly.

“Shall we?” she says.

“We shall,” Solo rejoins.

She looks at Illya. “Try not to get caught,” she says, in a general sort of way. As she passes him to exit the room, she touches his wrist—a fleeting, but decisive gesture, as if trying obliquely to make a point.

Illya will pick at that later, too.

The moment she starts talking at the Vinciguerra estate, he knows something’s wrong—there’s a color to her voice he’s not heard before, and it’s as if every suspicion he’d been holding tight to himself, cloaking himself with, is now hardening and taking root, but facing in the wrong direction, wildly trying to correct a breach he hadn’t known was there.

“I want to see my father,” she says to Rudi and Alexander Vinciguerra. Illya can hear her biting delicately into a grape. “You’re going to take me to him.”

Vinciguerra replies, “You know what he is building? They are beautiful.”

“I look forward to seeing them,” Gaby says, steady as a rock, and Illya’s stomach slowly turns to ice.

He runs from the dogs, runs from the estate, and is a quarter of the way back to Rome when he has a sudden, all-encompassing thought.

Rudi worked with Gaby’s father for nearly a decade on artificial intelligence and its mechanical
trappings, before the war pulled them in separate directions.

Rudi is an ally of the Vinciguerras.

Solo.

Illya curses in every language he knows, and turns the car around.

***

When he finds him, there’s metal where skin used to be.

Illya first registers it when he's standing on the outside of the double doors that connect to the basement lab, two guards lying dead in a heap at his feet. Solo is a semi-distorted wash through the reinforced glass of the door, but the position he's in, the wrong angle of his neck...Illya peers through the window and sucks in a harsh breath.

Solo is strapped to a chair, and the side of his neck and top portion of his chest are just...open, neat panels of synthetic skin and steel pulled up and out like doors, a mess of wires and circuits trailing out and over to a control panel that Rudi is intently manipulating. Small points of red light wink on and off in Solo’s chest, blinking warnings. The edges of Solo’s unbuttoned shirt are damp with something white and viscous.

Solo’s face is rigid, his eyes unseeing, cast up at the ceiling. His hands are fists beneath the titanium restraints around his wrists.

Illya has seen interrogations of every kind, borne witness to the messes they leave behind. This, however, leaves him colder than ever, a tremble starting up in his hands, pressure building up behind his eyes. He enters the lab without making a sound.

Rudi is chattering, his voice light. “Your physiology is a masterwork, I must say, the responsiveness is unlike what my dear brother-in-law ever theorized, even though I can see some of his handiwork in you as well, in the hands, especially, he always liked the delicate work. I prefer the larger gestures, of course; I imagine you can tell.” He flips a switch on the control panel.

Solo’s mouth gapes in a harsh, silent spasm, the tendons in his neck going bowstring-tight, and Illya can see one of those tendons, a metallic cable that snaps taut, servos keening even as Solo himself doesn’t make a sound.

"Fascinating," Rudi purrs, and flips the switch again. Solo collapses back into the chair even as his jaw continues to clench and unclench in horrible, barely noticeable spasms.

"Now I know we've had quite a thorough look at your nervous system, but what I'm truly interested in, you see, is your capacity for the input processing, and for that I really think we ought to..." He adjusts a dial and hits a sequence on a small keypad.

This time, Solo makes a sound.

Illya can't watch this any longer.

He steps forward and draws his knife, placing the tip of it perfectly under Rudi’s jaw, where a slight push will send it straight into his jugular, where the weight of it alone is an unmistakable sting.

Rudi stills.
“Turn it off,” Illya says. He almost doesn't recognize his own voice.

Rudi obeys. Solo slumps in the chair, strings cut, breathing harshly, and Illya can see now, the way his lungs aren’t lungs at all, more like a bellows system, circulating air in constant, small jets across circuit boards and shifting pistons, a dense honeycomb of servos, gyros, and cables. It labours now, heaving and trying desperately to compensate for the dissipation of air that the open chassis permits, unprepared for a scenario in which whole sections of Solo’s skin are gone.

Illya wants to say that it all seems so mundane, this collection of parts that somehow wears Solo’s face.

It isn’t.

“Solo?” he says, feeling half-strangled himself, his throat tight.

Solo stirs, fingers twitching, servos whirring. He cranes his head towards the sound, his eyes only managing to focus on Illya after a long search. “Oh,” he says, distantly, “I’m rather glad to see you.”

"Okay for now?"

Solo licks his lips. "Sure," he decides.

Illya nods, and looks back down at Rudi.

“Tell us where Victoria and Alexander are going,” he says, tipping the knife up just slightly. A line of blood wells up.

Rudi babbles his answer. Babbles much more than that.

When he’s done, Illya looks over at Solo.

“Shall I?” Illya asks, because he’s always made a point to ask, in situations like these.

Solo casts his eyes down, pupils dilating, then narrowing. Illya thinks maybe he can see the shifting planes around the aperture of his eyes, the expansion and contraction of blue, and brown. Rudi, despite himself, seems enthralled by the dynamic movement of Solo's face.

“Please,” Solo says, and there’s a note of vengeful desperation so palpable in his voice that Illya doesn’t hesitate.

Rudi gurgles quietly as he bleeds out across the floor.

Illya steps around the twitching body and over to Solo. “Solo. We need to,” he starts, then stops. “I mean, are you—”

“I need to fix some things,” Solo supplies, unsteadily, “If you want me to be able to move.”

“Yes,” Illya agrees, because he doesn’t need to be an expert to see the mess that Rudi has made. “I...I can help?”

Solo looks at him for a long moment, and it is as penetrating as Gaby’s scrutiny has ever been. Illya wants suddenly to know, badly, what Solo thinks of him, what he could possibly think, after what Illya has said to him, the ways in which he’s treated him.

“That would be much easier, I think,” Solo says at last. “Much less uncomfortable.”
Illya breathes out, and nods. He manages to unlatch the manacles from around Solo’s wrists and ankles with minimal fumbling. When they’re open, however, Solo doesn’t move except to carefully draw his arms to his sides, and then flatten his palms over his thighs. His legs don’t move at all. He cranes his head forward to look down at his chest and almost immediately flinches and tips back to look at the ceiling again.

“Okay,” he says. “On second thought, you may have to do quite a bit of the work here.” Illya can see his voice box shudder and click underneath the metal tendons strung along his neck.

Illya swallows. Straightens up, and after a second, reaches out and puts his hand very carefully on one of the unmarred portions of Solo’s shoulder, where his shirt is still starched and normal. Solo feels overwarm again, and small vibrations are shivering under his skin, aftershocks of overloaded circuitry, of trauma. Illya presses slightly, almost with an urge to soothe him.

Solo finally turns, head tipping up to face him.

“Just tell me exactly what to do,” Illya says, trying to sound confident. He doesn’t feel it, but.

Solo blinks slowly, and then manages a tight nod.

“You’ll need to start with the wires on the control panel,” he says, pointing. “Half of them go to my neck, so when that’s done, you can close it up first.”

Illya nods, and gets to work.

He moves methodically, following Solo’s instructions exactly, too fearful of what might happen if he doesn’t. In the end, it isn’t terribly complicated, which is somehow worse—Solo is too easy to take apart, too easy to parse into wires and motors and gauges, and it’s dangerous, that he should be this way, that one wrong connection could erase the whole of him, every languid gesture and dry comment, all of it.

The neck panel slides back into place with little difficulty, though there’s now a visible seam where the skin splits, like a strange, old scar. The damage in Solo’s chest is more extensive though, and each time Illya reaches in to fix something (into Solo’s chest, into the heart of him) he can feel Solo’s breath catch, stutters of circulating air puffing against the back of his hand, small gears and valves twitching like exposed nerves. It makes his hands shake, his head spin, and he tries to just block it out, because that is not his job to see Solo with new eyes right now, his job is to get them both out alive, and Illya is the best at what he does, whatever that might be.

“Lastly, the spinal microcontroller,” Solo says, after ten long minutes that have Illya sweating, the smell of blood slowly growing cloying in the small room, “You’re going to have to reach past the central power source cluster to get at it and reattach the connections he pulled out.”

Illya stills. There is something off in Solo’s voice. “He just...pulled?” he asks slowly.

Solo’s hands flex and close. “That’s generally how you incapacitate me.”

“Before then, how did they…?”

“Stun gun. Thirty-thousand volts. I’m afraid I wasn’t expecting it. She seemed so civilized at first.”

Even with the apparent lightness of Solo’s tone, Illya stops breathing for a moment.

“Did it hurt?” he asks, when he can manage it.
Solo meets his eyes. “It wasn’t pleasant,” he replies, expression too blank.

Illya can feel his pulse hammering in his temples. “And what I’m doing now?” he asks, low. “What I have been doing?”

Solo doesn’t look away this time. “Not pleasant either,” he allows, “But much better than that.”

Illya rather wishes he’d taken more time killing Rudi.

Solo hums, as if sensing the thought. He tips his head forward to regard Illya.

“Humans are fragile, too,” he points out, and Illya grits his teeth. He takes a deep breath in and out.

“Go on,” Solo says. “I’ll tell you if things go wrong.”

Carefully, so carefully, Illya fits his hand behind the power source, a thrumming lithium unit that throws off heat to the point of discomfort, the requisite wires and chip pinched between his fingers. His hands feel clumsy and too large in the tight space, and he has to bring Rudi’s medical light down in order to see. As he does so, he glances up at Solo’s face and finds him watching, lips pressed tight together.

“What now?” Illya asks, hushed. He covers Solo’s forearm with his unoccupied hand. Solo exhales.

“The chip connects to the center row of tines in the spinal column,” he says. “You’ll need to line it up properly, but it should be simple fitting it in after that. Just make sure it’s firm—I don’t want it falling out when I’m knocked around.”

Illya nods, and withdraws his hand just enough to see clearly how best to align the chip. There are rows of tines, most of them occupied with chips already, and it’s fairly clear where Solo needs this last one to go.

“Gaby would have been better,” he says, without meaning to. “Smaller hands.”

They both pause to consider that.

“I think I’d prefer her hands nowhere near me, actually,” Solo says finally.

Illya nods. “Agreed,” he says. He aligns the chip, relying solely on feel when he can’t see into the small space any longer, and fits it in place along with the rest of the spinal connections, pressing it firmly onto its requisite teeth.

Solo gasps and his legs spasm before they go limp again. The hand Illya has covered beneath his grip twists and then opens, curling around the edge of Illya’s wrist.

“Solo?” Illya asks, urgent, pulling his hand quickly out of Solo’s chest. “Is it okay? Are you—”

“It’s good, it’s fine, I’m fine,” Solo replies, low and still breathing hard, and for a moment their arms shift and his fingers tangle with Illya’s, gripping white-knuckled, hard enough to make the bones in Illya’s hand creak. Illya doesn’t try to pull away, just waits, watching Solo’s face for signs of pain.

Solo’s eyes are trained on the ceiling again, but Illya takes comfort in how present his gaze is, nothing like the unseeing stare of before.

A few moments, and then Solo’s grip on Illya’s hand loosens slightly. His foot twitches. He squares his shoulders.
“Well,” he says, clearly aiming for lightness and, for the first time since Illya’s known him, misses the mark. “I think we can get going now.” He sits forward, unwinding from the seat, and carefully presses shut the large panel across his chest. When it’s closed, he keeps his hand flattened across it for a long moment, as if giving it a chance to settle.

(He breathes evenly now, but Illya can still see it in his mind’s eye, the air circulating in fitful, labouring gusts across titanium ribs and silicon shell, protecting the layers upon layers of circuitry carefully sealed away from all of the pistons, minute valves, and ball bearings, which are in turn kept smoothly functioning by the virtue of the thin layers of white oil that coat much of Solo’s internal mechanics.

Illya knows these things now, can see how all these parts fit together and somehow sing, become.)

He notices, after moment of silence, that their hands are still entwined. Very carefully, he withdraws.

Solo doesn’t seem to notice. He blinks to attention, and then with quick, restive gestures, he buttons his sodden shirt and vest, and moves to stand. He doesn’t shrug off Illya’s hand at his shoulder, though, which Illya thinks perhaps is telling. He regards Rudi’s body on the floor, head tilted, and says, “I don’t think I’ve ever actively wanted someone to die before.”

Illya glances at him. “Is that even something you can—”

“No,” Solo replies. “At least, it wasn’t.” But then that familiar, knowing smile pulls at his mouth, and Illya is shocked at how relieved he is to see it.

Trying to match Solo’s regained lightness, he says dryly, “Don’t get any ideas.” Then he winces internally, remembering Sanders.

So doesn’t appear bothered by it, though. As he walks towards the exit of the lab, he only says, a little cryptically, “I would never.”
The Vinciguerras, as Rudi had (somewhat incoherently) explained, were at this very moment not only finalising power sources for their select android army, but also beginning preparations for the downloading of their fascist consciousnesses, which they have, for the past five years, skimmed from the thoughts of the richest and most successful Aryan families in Italy and Austria, and solidified into chip-and-datatape form.

“It won’t be the same, of course,” Rudi had babbled, waving his hands for emphasis, “We might be far along in creating thinking things, much farther along than I’d ever dreamed,” he had leered at Solo until Illya had reminded him of the knife at his throat, at which point he shrunk back a bit and continued, “But we’re hardly up to recreating whole humans yet, oh no. This first generation will be lovely, but condensed. Very destructive, very effective, of course, but condensed. But the old families don’t need to know that. All they care about is staying young and beautiful forever, it’s a brilliant scheme really, Victoria’s really quite good…”

Originally, Solo and Illya’s instructions from Oleg and Sanders had been merely to disable and destroy the plans for the bots and their power sources—now, it seems, the only solution to ensuring the continued safety of the rest of the world was to also destroy whatever bots had already been put into production, and to wipe the database of consciousnesses before they were uploaded.

They were short on time and on resources, and the task was infernally large.

Meanwhile, Teller has been summarily whisked right to the source. Illya wouldn’t mind if she stayed there indefinitely, at this point.

“I suppose we’d best report in,” Solo says, as they drive out, towards Rome. His hand lingers fitfully on his chest, tips of his fingers rubbing where Illya knows the seams are. “This is all beginning to get a bit above my pay-grade.”

“Radio is in the back,” Illya says, nodding at the seat behind them. Solo nods, and moves to retrieve it.

Illya listens as Solo checks in, more to his tone than the content of the report. Utterly flat, a steady recitation of events that skirts with exacting precision around the details Illya most viscerally remembers—Gaby’s sudden, effortless betrayal; Solo’s chest gaping open like a gutted fish.

After Solo finishes, he listens, nods and says “Yes sir” several times without inflection, and then turns off the radio.

“Your turn,” he says. “If you want to keep driving, just tell me the frequency.”

On any other day, Illya wouldn’t tell him anything so sensitive, but he’s tired, and he thinks Solo is too. He recites the frequency, and Solo adjusts it before leaning forward and fitting the headset around Illya’s head, careful not to impede his view of the road as he does so.

Oleg comes on the line within one hailing signal and says, “You have the same instructions as Solo. You’re to go to Viterbo airfield, where you’ll be answering to Commander Waverly, of British Naval Intelligence. It seems the English are willing to supply us with the cavalry this time, consider how dire this situation has just gotten.”
“I understand,” Illya says.

“And Kuryakin.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let that damned bot out of your sight. If it looks like it’s going off-book, or is taking any of Teller’s files for the US, kill it. I understand 30,000 volts ought to do it.”

Illya swallows. Wants to know where Oleg got that particular number. Where Victoria did. “Yes, sir.”

He signs off, and turns the van in the direction of Viterbo.

After a moment, he cuts a glance at Solo, and finds him looking back, expression unreadable.

“The British are coming, the British are coming,” Solo says, deadpan.

Illya rolls his eyes.

***

Waverly is apparently a man who’s been watching them since Solo stole across the wall with Teller, and shown his face at the races. Solo recognizes him instantly, though his reaction is only to tilt his mouth on one side while shaking his hand.

“Pleasure to meet you officially Solo, Kuryakin. Bit of a pickle, eh chaps?” Waverly says. “Come along, work to do.”

They load into a helicopter that takes them out over the Mediterranean.

“Your handlers have both agreed to loop me in, so to speak, because I happen to hold a card that neither of them had counted on,” Waverly says, over the roar of the engine. “Which is to say, I have an agent on the inside.”

“Someone on the island?” Illya asks.

Waverly tilts his head back and forth. “Soon to be. Should arrive there in about two hours, I should think, seeing as they’re going by boat.”

Illya and Solo look at each other. The lead that Illya has been carrying around in his stomach ever since Gaby had said, The KGB agent is watching from just inside the southern wall—you’ll need to go quickly, he’s very fast, churns suddenly. He thinks he can see the same overturn in Solo’s gilded eyes.

Waverly looks between them with the affable sort of amusement that has sharp edges behind it.

“Yes. You see, this has been a cockup from the start. I’m afraid, Mr. Solo, that by the time you’d gotten to her, Miss Teller had already thrown in her lot with us. Quite inconvenient, you stealing her out from under our noses. Ruined about three years worth of work, all told.” He looks at Solo consideringly, and not without some genuine interest. He adds, “Though perhaps, given your...unique assets, it was all meant to be. At least, let us hope so.”

Solo doesn’t look amused; if anything, he pulls tighter to himself, shoulders assuming a rigidity under his careful sprawl across the helicopter’s interior that is only visible if one is actively looking for it. Illya shoots him a questioning look, but Solo just blinks slowly, cutting his gaze away—a clear
dismissal.

“You two will be spearheading our move against the island,” Waverly continues, after a moment. “I hope you have some reserves left.”

“I might need a charge,” Solo says slowly.

“Hm,” Waverly responds, looking him over. “Well, I’m fairly certain we can arrange that.”

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They prepare for nightfall on the deck of the aircraft carrier. It’s strange being around military, after so much time mostly isolated in the field—Illya suddenly wonders if he’s been blowing Solo’s strangeness out of proportion, when all around him are men moving like machines. They are still different though, different from Solo, different from him. All of these various organisations, he learned from early on in his training, hold themselves differently, carry the weight of their countries in different fashions. Illya feels no closer to these British soldiers than he does to anyone else, Royal Marines or no.

“We’re in for a long night, it seems,” Solo says, standing beside him.

Illya nods, and looks at him sidelong. “You said you needed a charge?”

“No idea what got expended while I was...indisposed,” Solo replies. “Better safe than sorry. And frankly, I’d rather dull the edges of that experience as much as possible before moving on to the next bout.”

Illya lets out a hard breath through his nose. He rather wishes he could do the same. The fact that Solo can make that choice at all is...trying. But then again, Illya hadn’t been the one to end up in the chair.

He tries, not for the first time since they landed, to get his head around Gaby’s role in all of this. Her apparent status as an operative. He doubts Solo much wants to talk about it. “They’ll be able to...?”

he starts.

“I’ll hook myself up in one of the officers’ quarters,” Solo says, easily enough. His fingers tap on his thigh for a moment, however. After a pause, he adds, “Actually, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to ask a favour about that.”

Illya is so surprised that he just blinks and asks, “What?”

“Just...I usually try to do this where it’s safe. Secure. And, well.” He twirls a finger to indicate the constant din and movement of a ship preparing itself for action.

Illya thinks of Solo quietly slipping off to his own room, kissing Gaby on the cheek before he went. Of Gaby’s righteous indignation on Solo’s behalf, feigned or otherwise. He wonders if she ever guarded him during a charge. His hand clenches briefly, and then he shakes it open again.

“All right,” he says. “Now?”

“Sooner the better, I suppose.” With a last glance back at him, Solo leads the way down into the belly of the ship.

“Waverly knows where we are?” Their boots clank on the stairs as they descend, past the mess hall and along a narrow corridor lined with private quarters.
“He seems like a smart man, I’m sure he can make an educated guess.”

That would be a no, then.

“How long do you need?”

“How long can we afford?” Solo asks rhetorically, and then says, “I won’t go for more than a couple of hours. More than enough to get us through the next twenty-fours with room for unforeseeables.”

Illya nods. It’s only late afternoon, and they won’t begin the attack until past midnight. Solo has ample time to charge and make the briefing.

Solo turns a corner and twists open a door that reveals the cramped empty quarters of a petty officer either no longer on board or never there to begin with. There are dust motes in the air and several storage and equipment boxes on the bunk, and a stack of radar readings on the tiny desk. Illya wonders if they’ll even both be able to fit in the room.

Solo takes stock with a quick glance and then heads over to the outlet near the desk, currently taken up by a tiny non-regulation reading lamp. He unplugs that and disposes of it on what looks like a pile of receivers, and then places a chair carefully against the wall, its arm braced against the desk. When he sits, it’s with his back flush to the wall, arm carefully propped across the desk, knees square, shoulders stiff. A braced posture for someone about to experience turbulence.

Illya closes the door to the room behind them, and goes to sit on the edge of the bed, where there’s a sliver of room between boxes.

“How do you…?” Illya asks. He is suddenly curious, even if that curiosity leaves him queasy, wondering if it’s all because Rudi had opened his eyes to what Solo was made of.

(Though that isn’t true, really, he can’t help but think. Solo is much more than that. But perhaps that’s worse—now that Illya’s seen how Solo bursts from the seams of his own metal and silicon framework, perhaps his fascination has become even more perverse.)

“Oh, it’s all very convenient, really,” Solo answers, with an empty smile. Then he reaches back behind his head, and there’s a small pneumatic hiss as some small internal part of him gives way. When he draws his hand forward again, there’s a seam in the heel of his palm. He moves to press it to to the outlet, and then pauses. “If you have any other questions, now would be the time to ask them,” he says.

Illya blinks. “You would answer them?”

Solo raises an eyebrow. “When have I not?”

Illya shakes his head. “No, that is not—what I mean is, why would you now? After…” he drifts off.

Solo regards him for a moment, his expression strangely soft. “Maybe I’m looking for someone who will remember the answers for me,” he says.

Illya stares at him. Remembers what Gaby had said, before, about protection. “What do you report?” he asks, after a moment.

“Oh, it’s all very convenient, really,” Solo answers, with an empty smile. Then he reaches back behind his head, and there’s a small pneumatic hiss as some small internal part of him gives way. When he draws his hand forward again, there’s a seam in the heel of his palm. He moves to press it to the outlet, and then pauses. “If you have any other questions, now would be the time to ask them,” he says.

Illya tilts his head. “‘ Gets’ you there.”
Solo smiles again, but this time, there’s a light in it. “A to B.”

A straight line. So much room outside of that for other experiences and information, especially with the amount of input Solo claims to absorb on an hourly basis.

“They really don’t know what you are, do they?” Illya finds himself murmuring.

“Does anybody know what anyone else is?” Solo asks, his eyelids going heavy for the briefest moment. “Does anyone even know what they are themselves?” He tips his head from side to side. “Questions, questions.” He looks at Illya. “Do you?”

Illya blinks back at Solo, and wants to say yes, of course I know. But instead, he looks away for a moment, and says, because perhaps he owes it, “I used to think so.” He looks down at his hands, the scarring across his knuckles, the gun calluses. He breathes out. “But I’m thinking, maybe, that if you know for sure, then you aren’t really real at all.”

Solo makes an indeterminate noise, from somewhere deep in his throat. Illya can’t look at him.

“Complete self-knowledge as the enemy of personhood,” Solo muses. “An interesting interpretation.”

Illya closes his eyes for a moment.

“You’re not who I thought you were,” Solo adds, after a long pause. “I guess that means you’re real.”

Finally, Illya turns back to him, and finds his gaze owlish, unblinking, but not unkind. He hasn’t once, Illya realises, with perhaps the exception of their first meeting, been truly unkind.

It’s that which allows him to say, very quietly, “The first time I had an episode, I was fourteen. I broke a boy’s leg, and his nose. I was punished, but no one said anything. Then it happened a second time, a third. Then, a KGB officer came by our apartment. He said to me, ‘Russia is kind. It has a place for things like you, where you can be useful’.”

Solo’s mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

Illya looks into his face, and says, “He wanted me to know exactly what I was. When I turned sixteen, and I went with him, so did everyone else.”

Solo looks at him for a long, long moment, his body tipped forward, as if he is paying very close attention to what Illya has said, what he is doing, tucked into the bunk beside him. There is a strange expression on his face which Illya can’t parse, and he notices, after a moment, that Solo has raised his hand very slightly in Illya’s direction, as if to reach out.

Illya shrinks into himself slightly, appalled at his own admission.

Solo withdraws his hand. “Oh, Peril,” he says, odd expression giving way to a rueful smile that tilts his lips crooked, “I do believe we’ve been going about this all wrong.”

Illya frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Solo says, eyebrows pulling together in self-mockery, “That Miss Teller may have lied about some things, but in others, she was dead on.”

Illya flinches. Solo makes a small noise. “Sorry,” he says. “I know you’re fond—”
“No,” Illya interrupts, heart accelerating suddenly. “She nearly got you—us—killed. I’m not...there’s nothing.”

“Even though she’s still actually on our side?” Solo asks curiously. “Was all along?”

“You can ask that?” Illya counters, “After what happened?”

Solo purses his lips. “She’s a spy,” he says, after a pause. “Spies have to make sacrifices. And frankly, I know very well how expendable I am, in the grand scheme of things. She made the right call.”

Illya can’t speak. He doesn’t know why he’s so angry at Solo, at Gaby, at Solo’s handlers, everything. But Solo’s matter-of-factness now, even after Illya has seen him disemboweled and helpless, even after he’d said, strapped in the chair, that he never wanted Gaby’s hands near him again, is stunning and awful, and Illya wants to lash out, wants Solo to lash out against the institution that built him only to send him back into the ground.

Solo studies his silence in curiosity, eyes flicking from Illya’s face to his clenched hands and back. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, anyway,” he says eventually. “We’ve got work to do.”

Illya nods, slowly. Solo stretches out his arm, flexing it, glancing at the seam on the palm of his hand. “Two hours, yes?” he confirms. “That’s all right?”

“It is okay,” Illya says. Solo nods. He seems to consider something for a moment, and then says, “One last favour.”

Illya raises an eyebrow. “Very demanding.”

Solo smiles slightly, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’m very high maintenance. Or had you not noticed?”

“I noticed,” Illya confirms, but he doesn’t look away. “What is the favour?”

“Remember a word for me. Don’t use it until I ask you to. Don’t tell it to anyone else.”

Illya frowns. “Why?”

“It’s an access code. It lets me keep things safe until I need them.”

“Things not...A to B?” Illya hazards.

Solo smiles again in silent agreement.

Illya exhales. “Tell me the word.”

Solo does. Illya tucks it away in just the same way he had Oleg’s orders and warnings back in Moscow, what seems like centuries ago.

“Thank you,” Solo says. Then he presses his lips together.

“Please don’t let anyone in. And don’t…” he stops. “Never mind.”

Illya wants to ask, but doesn’t. “I won’t,” he promises.

Solo nods again, and then fits his hand against the electrical socket.
Immediately, his whole body jerks slightly and then goes utterly still, eyes blanking, the gold light behind them fading to black. There is very slight movement from his chest, where he continues to circulate air, but that is all. Illya suddenly understands why Solo doesn’t want anyone coming in.

He looks like a doll. To be played with, manipulated.

From where Illya is sitting in the cramped bunk, his knee almost touches Solo’s. He could reach out and touch him, trace the cut-glass crest of his cheekbone, press hard enough to feel the steel underneath the artificial flesh.

He jerks his hand back from where it’s suspended halfway between them. Makes it a fist and sets it back in his lap.

Draws his gun, and sits back to wait and stand guard.

***

The hours pass strangely, not unlike a stakeout. Illya feels pinned to his place next to Solo, unable to move at all, for fear of disturbing this idling assemblage of parts that is currently not so much Solo as it is the entire U.S. government rifling through a carefully curated copy of Solo. Illya finds himself warring with opposing urges—to rip Solo’s hand from the socket and cut the source of violation off, and to kill anyone attempting to come between Solo and his continued existence via his energy reserves. He doesn’t quite understand where these impulses are coming from, only that they seem to grow from the careful admissions they had begun to pass each other, like short, coded missives written on borrowed paper.

He tries his best to put them all away, in the same way he had been shoving thoughts of Gaby aside ever since she...well, followed orders from a different master. It proves difficult.

Suddenly, though, at the two hour mark, Solo gasps awake and blinks rapidly, the gold flaring in his eyes. He removes his hand from the wall socket, and tips his head forward. His chest rises and falls.

“Okay?” Illya asks quietly, his voice scratchy from disuse.

Solo tilts his head towards him. His shoulders hunch forward for a moment and he opens his mouth, but no sound comes out.

Illya studies him with more caution. “Solo?”

Solo shuts his mouth. Carefully straightens up, and begins to reach up as if to smooth his suit before realizing that he left most of it in tatters back at the Vinciguerra estate. That, more than anything else, seems to bring him back to attention. He casts an irritated glance at his wrinkled shirt, and plucks at it. “Right as rain,” he says, flat. “Shall we go and see how we’re to save the world this time?”

Illya nods, still worried, and they go.

***

Storming the compound is straightforward enough, right up until it inevitably isn’t.

The island is a spit of paradise put to wrong use, and while it is heavily fortified, it is not without vulnerabilities, not the least of which are rocky outcroppings allowing access to the outer walls. And just as before, Solo is an impeccable man-at-arms—precise, communicative, and efficient, showing no sign of the strains of the day. Illya feels battered but ready, on the familiar knife’s edge of battle-adrenaline as they land and gunfire begins to spit, his attention honed down to the essentials.
As Waverly’s team engages the island’s outposts, Illya and Solo head for the heart of the complex, navigating tight concrete corridors and taking down soldiers as they find them. Illya takes the lead, driving them up towards the top floors where they know the main labs are situated—recon flights over the island had recorded power flares and radiation spillover from the upper layers of the stone and concrete fortress. As they make their way higher, Illya begins to hear and feel it, too; a faint thrum of generators, at first, and then the slow rise in temperature. Plasma radiation, possibly, or transport losses from flaws in the stellarators. Illya almost hopes it is something of the sort; it would mean that Udo Teller hasn’t done the perfect job needed to permanently power the Vinciguerra bots. He doesn’t trust to hope, however.

Behind him, Solo makes a considering noise, but when Illya turns, he’s right where he’s meant to be, one hand withdrawing from his pocket. Illya raises his eyebrows in inquiry, but Solo shakes his head, and then jerks his chin at the door up ahead of them.

“That should be the main lab,” he says. “High levels of power use and we haven’t passed any bio-medical stations before this. I would imagine they’d want the finished stellarators in the same place as the chassis when the time came to load them.”

“The Vinciguerras might be there,” Illya notes.

“Gaby too,” Solo replies. “An indirect approach, perhaps?”

Illya tilted his head back and forth. “Only one entrance unless we go from the roof. More soldiers up there.”

“Think we can take them?” Solo quirks an eyebrow.

Illya answers with a flat look.

They make for the roof, sending guards crashing down the stairs in their wake. On the roof is a helipad, a helicopter waiting but inactive, as well as a passel of soldiers.

“Cover me,” Solo requests, heading for the skylight off to the left, close to where the lab is. Illya follows, letting off suppressive fire, scooping up rifles from those he’d already downed. They don’t have much cover, but what there is is solid enough concrete, and Solo ducks nimbly over and behind vent shafts and raised maintenance structures to get at the hatch. He’s still struggling with the glass by the time Illya reaches him, crouched along the edge of the skylight.

“I thought you were good at locks,” Illya says, hitting the ground hard to avoid a sling of bullets that pepper the concrete behind him.

“These are not locks,” Solo says, a bit affronted. “And give me a moment, would you?” His knife is wedged underneath the lead seal of the frame, working steadily along the edge with inhuman strength.

A bullet glances off the edge of the frame. Solo doesn’t flinch. Illya returns fire, and switches guns again.

“Aim better, why don’t you?” Solo suggests.

Illya rolls his eyes. Squeezes off another round. Frustratingly, they hit home.

“Very good,” Solo says, fitting his fingers beneath the now-gaping frame and prying upwards. He sticks his head and shoulders into the gap briefly, and then pulls back out, nodding. “Just outside the lab,” he confirms. “Shall we?”
“Let me just—” Illya scans the roof, and takes one last shot. The final guard jerks back, wheezes, and dies.

“Very good,” Solo repeats, “Now could you give me a hand? This really is a bit heavy.”

Together, they pry the glass up and away from it’s frame, exposing a narrow walkway below that leads into the laboratory.

“Guards?” Illya asks.

“Occupied with Waverly’s men, it looks like,” Solo says. He cocks an eyebrow at Illya. “After you?”

“No please, be my guest.”

Solo smirks, and smoothly drops down, catching himself on the window frame like a gymnast before depositing himself relatively quietly on the walkway below. Illya follows with far less fanfare.

At the end of the walkway, the door to the lab shows a keypad and a hatch mechanism.

“No this is a lock,” Solo says with satisfaction, and reaches into his sleeve for what appears to be a small chip attached to a rainbow of wires. He unscrews the faceplate of the keypad and fits the chip into the electronic mess behind it.

Seconds later, the keypad beeps admission.

Solo casts a look back at Illya, who refuses to change expression.

“Still missed the retrofit before,” he says.

“Always a critic.” Solo lifts the latch carefully and with strength, as silently as he can muster, and it swings aside, well-oiled. Shoulder to shoulder, they slip inside.

Their entrance has put them on the upper level of the lab, which wraps only around the outside walls of the vast room, leaving the ground floor open and visible below, able to accommodate massive spires of computers that reach up to the ceiling in vast assemblages of dials and gauges. Their footsteps clank slightly on the walkways, and so they creep steadily along the edge, trying as best they can to stay out of sight.

Beyond one of the pillars of computing power, they finally see them.

Alexander and Victoria Vinciguerra are below. So are Gaby and her father.

They’re ranged next to one of the massive computer banks, which is in turn attached to a series of large glass chambers, inside of which are...well.

Solo makes a noise of distaste. “I can’t imagine the Aryan elite have seen these in person,” he murmurs. “Surely they’d disapprove.”

Illya isn’t inclined to disagree. In each of the chambers is an android, but they have nothing of the uncanny verisimilitude that is Solo’s stock in trade. Their faces are human, and varied—presumably duplicates of their human counterparts. Their faces, however, give way to sleek chassis of silicon and metal, with grim military postures and only the barest indicators of gender, or even variation between the build. A delicate woman’s face is placed on the same shaped body as a square-jawed, heavyset older man’s. It ruins even the hints of sleek elegance which the chassis make gestures towards.
Illya makes a count—eight chambers in total.

“I expected more,” he says.

“As did I,” Solo replies, “Which worries me.” He pauses. Then adds, more lightly, “I do believe that’s the Viscount Allerich’s daughter. Strange, I wouldn’t have pegged her for a fascist.”

Illya shushes him.

They creep forward to get a better view.

Gaby stands at attention near one of the control boards, her face a rictus of attention and carefully rationed fear. Her hands are busy, apparently being put to work under duress, and Victoria is supervising her, arms crossed over a beautiful black and white dress, one finger tapping against her forearm the only sign of her impatience.

Dr. Teller, meanwhile, is standing at attention, looking like a spooked deer, frozen in place. For good reason—Alexander has a gun trained on his forehead.

“Next step,” he says.

Dr. Teller swallows, and says, “The final calibration check. Right hand side, Gaby, the meters should read no more than 1000 milligrams and 3 PSI, respectively. If there’s disparity, the dials to the left will adjust it.”

Gaby checks the gauges, and twitches one dial slightly to one side. Her hand shakes slightly.

A few moments, and then she stops. “It’s done,” she says.

“Correctly this time?” Victoria asks, almost through her teeth, lip curled in a feral half-smile. She looks down her nose over Gaby’s shoulder to check as well.

Gaby closes her eyes for a moment. “Yes,” she says. There’s still steel in her voice, but worry too.

“She isn’t lying,” Illya says.

“No,” Solo agrees. “I’m afraid she isn’t.”

“The upload sequence, Doctor,” Alexander says. He holds a small handgun level with Teller’s face.

“Please don’t do this,” Teller says, ashen-faced.

Alexander cocks his head, and takes the safety off the gun. “The sequence,” he repeats.

Teller’s shoulders slump. He moves to the keypad closest to him, and heavily, begins to type.

Solo hisses through his teeth. “We can’t let—” he starts.

“No,” Illya agrees, and takes aim.

Then a lot of things happen very fast.

Illya lines up his shot, and takes it.

Teller presses one last key.

Alexander lurches back, but his gun goes off.
Victoria shrieks rage and runs forward and then, without warning, there is fire.

Illya is thrown back, that much he knows—his spine cracks against one of the metal rails of the walkway and he nearly careens over the side were it not for Solo grabbing the front of his jacket and pulling him forward to steady him. His ears ring, even though he doesn’t remember hearing any blast, just a fuzz of white noise.

The fire dies, leaving sunspots in front of his eyes. Once his ears clear too, it’s eerily quiet save for the sounds of a hacking cough.

“Well,” Solo says, looking over his shoulder, still pressed close to Illya and holding on to his lapels. “That was rather dramatic.”

“What happened?” Illya asks, and it comes out sounding strangled.

“Miss Teller happened, is what,” Solo replies. He turns back to Illya and then seems to notice the position they’re in. Oddly, it seems to give him pause. When he lets go of Illya’s jacket, his hands flex flat for a moment before he pulls away. He goes to the edge of the walkway. “All right there, Miss Teller?”

Illya absently rubs at where Solo’s hands had been.

“No,” Gaby calls back, her voice tight. “No, we’re not all right.”

He exchanges a look with Solo, and they run for the stairs.

On the ground floor, it’s a mess. Alexander Vinceguerra is sprawled to one side, breathing steadily, out cold. Illya had shot him in the shoulder, but he must have hit his head on the edge of one of the consoles when he fell. There’s a heavy gash along the back of his head, bleeding sluggishly, but probably not enough to be deadly. Illya won’t mind, either way.

A few feet away, Gaby is kneeling next to her father, who is clutching his shoulder, damp with blood. A chunk of Gaby’s skirt is missing, pressed to the wound. On the ground by her hip, there’s a mess of mechanical contrivances in the vague shape of a crooked gun.

It takes Illya a moment to connect that with the long, black smear on the floor opposite her, and the charred marks that outline a narrow, still-smoking blast area. He lifts a finger towards it, and asks Gaby with a raised eyebrow, “Victoria?”

Gaby’s answering smile is very grim indeed. “Victoria. They shouldn’t have let me near the spare parts.”

“What’s the situation?” Solo asks, striding forward.

“It’s too late. It has already begun,” Dr Teller says. His hand trembles where he holds cloth against his bullet wound, and his breath rattles at every intake. His eyes look empty. “The upload sequence.” He points.

On one of the consoles, a computing screen is scrolling code, stark white letters cascading down the screen. To its right, a series of warning and progress lights blink. And now that Illya’s hearing has returned, he takes notice of a steady hum, like generators powering up, emanating from the life-support chambers.

“How do we stop it?” Illya asks.
Teller snorts. “You don’t. There are no failsafes, no kill switches. I tried to build one, for safety, not even as...but they said no. They said no.”

Solo presses his lips together. “Cut the power,” he says to Illya, and Illya nods, moves to begin methodically tearing every power cable he can find out of its socket.


Illya grits his teeth, and shoots a glance at Solo, who nods. He goes to the nearest cable and rips it out anyway. The consoles shriek protest, but the lights next to the screen only dim briefly, and then resume.

Gaby makes a frustrated noise in her throat. “There has to be something,” she says. She hoists up her father’s head and gets her knees under his shoulders, propping him up with difficulty, and then taps his cheek sharply. “Please just think, Papa.”

Teller shakes his head loosely from side to side, his face pale gray and shiny with sweat. “There’s nothing. There’s…” His head tips to face Solo, and then suddenly he stills, his mouth going slack.

Illya straightens; Gaby’s shoulders visibly tense.

Solo just stands, waiting.

Teller lifts a hand from the floor to point. “You’re…” he begins. And on a wet exhale, “Ein Androide.”

Solo’s face does a strange, painful thing, mouth and eyes twisting at the edges. “Yes,” he says, clipped. “What about it, Dr Teller?”

“How are you...I thought the program…”

“You were only one small piece of it,” Solo said dismissively. His hands are fists at his sides. “Did you really think they believed you, when you said a fully autonomous learning program wouldn’t be feasible for another twenty years?”

Teller’s mouth works. His hand drops to the floor. “I had hoped,” he rasped. “They would not finish one before I finished the stellarator. So that when you came, you would be free.”


Solo frowns, opens his mouth to speak.

They don’t have time for this.

“Dr Teller,” Illya says, stepping forward and pointing at the raft of androids. “We need to stop these things from waking up.”

“I told you, we can’t,” Teller replies, eyes tracking over to him unsteadily, but he sounds distracted this time, distant. “They’re coming online as soon as the upload finishes. But—”

“Then we need to call Waverly and nuke this place,” Solo says.

“But wait,” Teller cuts in with considerable effort and sudden, sharp focus, looking back over at Solo and flailing an arm out towards him. Gaby hisses admonishment and adjusts the cloth at his shoulder,
now soaked further with blood. He ignores her.

“What?” Solo asks.

Teller huffs, and then coughs wetly. “You’re here. We can disrupt the protocol upload. Overwrite it.”

“With what?” Gaby asks.

Solo sucks in a breath, meeting Teller’s eyes. “With me,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliffhanger. I'm still working out plot points. Plot is hard, yo.

I should have perhaps mentioned earlier that stellarators and tokamaks are a thing! A very fascinating thing, which I obviously do not have the physics knowledge to fully understand. Is that stopping me from employing them willy-nilly? Hell no.
“Explain,” Illya says. He doesn’t like the look on Solo’s face.

“A portion of the data being uploaded to these bots are a blend, I presume, of compressed brain patterns and chemistry simulations that make up the ‘human’ part of each consciousness,” Solo says quickly, still not looking away from Teller. “That’s what makes them personalized—not quite a carbon copy of their charming progenitors, but a fleeting impression. But worldview, personality, preference, these are only a small portion of what a person is; there are ongoing protocols, too—behaviors, impulses, ways of approaching the stimuli of the world. People tend to develop those over time, in accordance to the circumstances of their lives: their parents, teachers, socio-economic status.” Solo smiles without humor. “I would imagine that in this case, however, they come prepackaged, and very...single-minded.”

“They are the last thing to be loaded,” Teller says. “They can be replaced. It’s not a perfect solution, but it is one sure thing we can do.”

“The only way, is it?” Solo asks, in a way that almost sounds rhetorical.

“As I said, there are no failsafes,” Teller replies.

Solo nods, even as his mouth is pressed thin with unhappiness. “Miss Teller, you’ll need to guard the doors, I’m sure someone will have heard the...whatever you did, and they had best not disturb us.”

Gaby nods and picks up her improvised gun, her attention laser-sharp.

“Illya, with me.”

Illya nods, and follows Solo over to one of the consoles directly connected to the rows of glass chambers.

“Is this not a good plan?” Illya asks quietly, as Solo studies the rows of gauges and controls.

“It’s not perfect, but under the circumstances, it’s a very good plan,” Solo says, not looking at him.

“And Teller is right? It’s the only thing to do?”

Solo pauses. “Conveniently, yes.”

Illya watches him.

Solo starts running his fingers along the borders of one of the control panels until he finds a seam. He pulls out his knife and begins carefully extracting the screws at the corners of the faceplate. “A little help?” he prompts.

Illya nods, and pulls out his own knife, kneeling to reach the lower screws.

“It’s a good thing half of this data is analogue, or we’d not have very much time at all,” Solo comments, and flings a loosened screw onto the floor before starting on another one.

“We’ll still have people shooting at us in less than ten minutes, probably,” Illya counters.
“Buzzkill.”

Illya looks up at Solo with growing suspicion. “You’re sure this will work?” he asks.

“Yes,” Solo says, too shortly.

Illya waits.

Solo makes an impatient sound. “The boundary between protocol and data storage aren’t as cut and dried as Teller imagines, but...never mind,” he says. “It’s good enough. Now could you...?” he gestures at the screw Illya has halfway unfastened. Illya finishes with it and tosses it aside.

Solo isn’t telling him something. Oleg’s instructions come suddenly, dangerously to mind. “The boundary in them? Or in you?” he asks, on a hunch.

“Does it matter?” Solo asks, too smoothly.

“I am beginning to think so,” Illya says.

Solo uses his knife to pry up the metal panel, revealing rows of circuit boards and vacuum tubes beneath. He shoves it towards Illya. “Hold this.”

Illya takes it and sets it aside. “It has to be your boundary—these things are too new to have bleedthrough, if what you said about different storage banks are true. What is wrong with not having a good boundary?”

“No relevant, Peril,” Solo says, but there’s an undercurrent of danger in his voice now, and that means Illya is getting close. He’s flicking through the tight array of circuit boards until finally he seems to recognize one enough to prise it out of its embankment and pull a set of wires from it, including a serial cable.

“Something in your data storage you don’t want shared, then?” Illya posits. “Something that’s bled into protocols?”

“Stop,” Napoleon snaps, turning on him. “I have it under control, Kuryakin.”

“What?” Illya asks, grabbing his arm. “What do you have under control, Solo? Napoleon?”

Solo finally stops, and looks at him directly, the gold in his pupils refracting the light. “Don’t,” he says, very carefully, and with emphasis. “For both our sakes, Illya—don’t.”

Illya swallows. His hand has moved to the small holster at his ankle, where that afternoon, he’d reluctantly replaced his small pistol with a miniaturized, high-strength cattle prod. 35,000 volts. “I have orders, Solo.”

“So have I,” Solo replies.

They look at each other for a long moment.

“What’s your status, Solo?” Gaby says, looking back over her shoulder at them. “I think I hear men in the hallway.”

“Working on it,” Solo says to her. Then he turns back to Illya. “If you incapacitate me, these bots will absolutely come online and start annihilating everyone and everything that gets in their way,” he points out.
“If I don’t incapacitate you, the bots may not be a problem, but whatever the CIA told you to do to them might be,” Illya counters.

Solo sighs. Illya has grown familiar with the variations of Solo’s world-weariness, but this seems altogether different and more serious.

“Then I suppose you’d best take this before it’s summarily fried,” he says, and reaches into one of the pockets on his tak vest, and before Illya can protest, grabs his free hand and presses something into it.

Illya blinks, looks down, and freezes. “My father’s watch,” he says, blankly. “How…”

“One of the henchmen had it,” Solo says, studying him. “I was blessed with a bit of good fortune.”

Fumbling, Illya puts it back on. The leather warms quickly, its worn contours molding instantly to his wrist, like it had never changed hands at all. A knot that has been sitting like a tight fist inside him loosens its hold. He wonders how much storage space in Solo’s hard drives such a trivial thing such as this had taken up, how Solo managed to keep it through the data scrub of recharging. He wants to ask, but...

“Thank you,” he manages. “But you need to tell me what it is about this plan that has you running scared.”

“Who’s running?” Solo retorts, but that same solemn weariness keeps his face still, his shoulders curved slightly in.

“I don’t want to kill you,” Illya admits. “Please explain so I don’t have to.”

Solo looks momentarily surprised, and then exhales. “I don’t know if I can,” he says.

“Try.”

Another pause in which Solo fiddles with the wires in the panel, and then: “Something happened on the ship,” Solo mutters. “I checked in during the charge, but this time, something was sent back, too.”


“I don’t know,” Solo says through his teeth. “And that’s what’s sending me metaphorically, as you say, running. It’s in data storage, not protocols, I automatically shunt everything they send me there anyway, but it’s encrypted, I can’t access it, which means I’m only the messenger, not the receiver. I think I can partition it, but like I said, it’s not perfect.”

“You’re trying to disobey orders,” Illya realizes, too late. He tries also to digest the idea that Solo has had things uploaded to him before, often enough that he’s programmed countermeasures to prevent them from affecting his protocols, but it’s too difficult, too mind-boggling, they don’t have time. “Did they tell you this would happen? That you would have to overwrite?”

“They don’t tell me anything. They anticipated a lack of failsafes, and in that, found an opportunity. It wasn’t hard, considering.” Solo nods at the mess of Victoria and Alexander on the ground. “One’s overenthusiasm can be one’s downfall sometimes.”

“What do you think it is?”

“What do I…? For god’s sake, Peril, what else could it possibly be? What could the CIA possibly
want more than the destruction of a bunch of murderous, autonomous, unstoppable droids?"

Control. Of course. Oleg would likely have demanded the same thing, Illya thought dimly, if he’d had the right carrier for such a task. But Illya is only human.

“The upload’s nearly reached the protocols!” Gaby snaps. “If you’re going to do this, do it now, Solo!”

Solo looks at Illya, and Illya swallows before saying the only thing he can think to say: “Do it. I trust you.”

Solo’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second, but then he nods, and presses on the already-unsealed panel on his neck, which glides open, revealing the tight coil of cables Illya had, hours before, reassembled. From it, he pulls a small adapter with an open serial port.

“If I say so, you need to disconnect this,” he says. “If I say so, it means it’s uploading too much, and I need you to—”

“I’ll do it,” Illya says. “If it’s too much, I’ll stop it.”

“Promise me,” Solo says, something desperate in his voice.

“I will,” Illya promises, a part of him sensing that this was about more than just preventing the CIA from getting the upper hand, but willing to let it lie, providing they survive this. “I promise that I will.”

Solo exhales, and then nods. “Okay.”

He connects himself to the serial cable, and then sits heavily on the floor.

The disruption is almost immediately visible. Several alarms sound briefly, but then Solo makes an impatient sound and they abruptly cease. A strange over-sound begins to whine on top of the hum of the upload and has Illya gritting his teeth.

Gunfire echoes close, a percussive trill almost on top of the lab doors. Gaby makes a noise of rage, and cocks her gun. Illya pulls the rifle he’d stolen off a guard from his back and takes the safety off, aiming at the door through which he and Solo had broken in, keeping half his attention there and half on Solo, who has begun to twitch slightly, his fingers spasming, his face a rictus of concentration.

Shouts follow the gunshots. A mess of British English and Italian—both sides, then.

“Marines are closing in,” Gaby says.

“Doesn’t mean we won’t get caught in the crossfire first,” Illya responds.

Solo hisses through his teeth. Illya looks back at him quickly. “All right, Solo?”

“Ask me again in thirty seconds,” Solo replies. His hands look like claws on his knees, fingertips white.

Illya intends to take him at his word. The gunfire gets louder, until some of it starts pinging off the outer side of the doors. Illya can hear fumbling at the lock—they haven’t found his and Solo’s rooftop entrance, or haven’t gotten up there yet. He shifts his attention to where the sound is loudest.

“Solo?” he repeats at thirty seconds exactly, his cheek against the rear sight.
Solo doesn’t answer.

“Solo?” Illya turns to look at him.

Solo is staring into the middle distance, his mouth moving very slightly, the mere outlines of words.

“Gaby, cover us,” Illya calls, and Gaby nods without taking her eyes off the door, which now sports several bullet-sized dents in it. Illya shuffles on his knees to where Solo sits propped against the control panel. After a second’s hesitation, he puts his hand on Solo’s cheek, and finds it hot to the touch—on anyone else, it would be feverish to the point of hospitalization.

“Solo? Do I need to pull the cable?”

The overtone hum has gotten louder, almost deafening, enough that Illya almost misses the alert that begins to flash on the console. A power surge. The bots were coming online.

Solo’s hand clamps down on Illya’s arm, hard enough to bruise. “Make it stop,” he gasps, and Illya doesn’t hesitate.

The cable disconnects with an angry burst of sparks that sting across Illya’s fingers, and an alarm blares. Solo pitches forward like he’s about to be sick, but instead he fumbles for the panel in his neck, pressing it closed.

“I think it’s okay,” he’s saying, “I don’t think it got through, I think we’re okay, but it’s—ah, we’re about to be shot at.”

Illya whips around, and sure enough, the lab doors blast off their hinges, and Gaby is occupied with setting things on fire from where she’s crouched in front of her father. The Vinciguerras’ men seem to be losing ground fast, caught between Gaby and Waverly’s soldiers, but there’s no reason for Illya not to lend a hand. He raises his rifle and picks off three of them before they notice him and he needs to duck down behind the console again.

When he falls into a crouch, however, Solo is no longer there.

He looks around wildly, taking in the lay of the land—Gaby has dragged her father behind one of the computer towers, and is switching between letting off bursts of machine gun fire and single blasts of what Illya can only describe as laser beams, which leave fire and slag in their wake. It’s enough to cow many of the men, who run into the ranks of Waverly’s unit only to be either cut down or secured. Royal Marines are only just beginning to enter the room, laying down suppressive fire, but clearly wary of the equipment in use. As well they should be—there is movement in the bot chambers.

That’s where Illya spots him.

Solo has his hands pressed to the glass of the farthest chamber like a child at an aquarium, and the gold in his eyes reflects against the chamber like a solar flare. Beyond the glass, a bot with the face of a doe-eyed woman stirs, and opens its eyes.

A stray bullet strikes the glass with a crack.

“Hold your fire!” Solo shouts, throwing a hand behind him, gaze still fixed on the face through the glass. “Hold your fire!”

He either isn’t heard, or isn’t understood.
When asked, Illya reports the basics: that it was difficult to tell friend from foe in that moment, given the uneven surges of the power caused by the bots coming online, causing the lights to dim and flash; that the gunfire was loud in the echoey space of the lab and that there were too many fronts within one area to clearly delineate who was responsible for what.

That the Vinciguerras and their militia were subdued within minutes, though not without considerable damage to the laboratory that make retrieval of Udo Teller’s final work nigh impossible.

(‘Final’ because Teller dies in the crossfire. Gaby will take over the telling of this part—how he’d just lost too much blood, how in trying to defend him Gaby had had to keep her attention on the oncoming enemy fire, and not on keeping pressure on his wound. She will report this as if from a great distance, her voice even, her face pale.)

Illya goes on to say, in a clear and unhesitating voice, that the bots acted almost exclusively in self-defense, and those that didn’t are either in custody or destroyed, so far as they know. That Solo was caught in the crossfire but only sustained minor damage, and that Gaby came away with little else beyond burns on her hands from her improvised laser cannon overheating.

(Waverly’s eyebrows, when Illya repeats this in the group report, rise over the phrase “laser cannon”, but Illya stands by it, and Gaby nods her approval over it, so.)

He coolly deflects any implication that Solo did anything but what he was ordered—that the upload was interrupted when they had to dodge gunfire, and that perhaps (just perhaps) Illya might have had something to do with the interruption.

(Oleg is pleased when he hears that bit, though only insofar as one’s handler can be pleased when Illya’s actions only reflected the overall intention of his orders, but not the letter of them.)

Much of this is the truth. What Illya will remember most, however, is what they don’t report.

“Hold fire!”

The glass of the chamber next to where Solo is standing cracks under another stray shot, and then shatters, but this time from the inside out. With it, comes a familiar fire.

“Get down,” Illya shouts to Gaby, who ducks back behind her computer column again in time to avoid the blast.

There’s a clamor of shouting from all sides, trying to identify the new threat and replacing the whine of electrical power with a far more human cry. Several of the glass chambers are empty, but Illya can’t see where the bots have gone, can only spot one or two in flashes before blasts of fire rush across the room and men are forced to scatter. He can only hope that Solo’s reprogramming worked, that the outside threat of gunfire is what called the AIs to arms, but he has every reason to doubt.

There’s nothing to do about it now.

He keeps his eyes on Solo, who in turn remains focused on the one bot remaining in the far chamber, whose glass is still retracting from in front of her. His mouth is moving, shouting something Illya can’t hear, and he’s pointing at the other empty chambers. The bot blinks back at him, eyes darting everywhere, clearly trying to process what must be an overload of information, hands rising slowly as if wanting to ward the world off. It doesn’t flinch back from Solo, though; when he reaches
forward, it lets him clasp its hands in his own, not to lead or pull, just to hold.

Another barrage of bullets sends a shower of sparks across Illya’s vision to his left; he turns, identifies the source as Italian, and offers a squeeze of answering fire. When he looks back, the bot is shaking its head at Solo, slow and unsure.

New alarms jangle and blare, and the power dips again, lights struggling to come back online.

That’s when Solo gets clipped.

He barely staggers, but that he moves under the impact at all is worrying; the sparks that fly off him, more so. Illya moves to stand, but before he can take two crouched paces towards him, the bot moves.

It steps nimbly out of its glass confinement, shifting Solo’s grip on its hands into a steadying grasp on his forearms. Illya makes his way towards them, picking off targets on his way, dodging behind shrieking consoles, but he’s in time only to see the bot lean towards Solo, speak in his ear, and then throw a hand out, fingers splayed, palm gathering light—

“An electrostatic discharge,” Solo supplies, when they reach that part, standing between Illya and Gaby, before the table at which Oleg, Sanders, and Waverly sit. “Strong enough to wipe out the lab and slow anything electronic down, myself included, as well as give anything living a bit of a jolt.”

That is putting it mildly, but neither Illya nor Gaby try to correct him.

“You were taken offline?” Sanders asks. His face has gotten increasingly pinched over the course of their group report, and it had been quite sour when they’d begun—Illya presumes Solo had already tried his patience to the extreme during the individual debriefs.

“For a few minutes,” Solo replies. “As I mentioned before.”

Definitely tried his patience. Illya hides his amusement behind a slow blink.

“And when all of you came to, as it were?” Waverly inquires.

“There was a hole in the roof,” Gaby says. “The bots were gone. Vinciguerra's men were preoccupied with that, which made subduing them easier.”

“You didn’t go looking for the bots yourselves?”

“No point,” Solo says. “Any AIs outside the blast radius would have at least three minutes drop on us, and they can move at roughly the pace of a car, with a lot more maneuverability.”

“And you know this, how?” Oleg asks. He’s less sour than Sanders, but no less intent.

“I had access to their specs during the upload. Not all of them, but enough.”

This is where the lies begin. Not one of them standing before their handlers makes a sign of knowing it.

The shock isn’t terribly serious, at least to Illya—he will later compare it to grabbing an electric fence and holding on for about ten seconds. Enough to hurt, enough to occupy all of his attention until it’s
over and his muscles stop twitching and his heart finds its beat again, enough to feel it in his joints for hours afterwards. But he’s not incapacitated, and is the first to scramble to his feet.

When he can finally focus his eyes and stand upright, he is greeted by eerie, stilted silence, and an overabundance of shadows. The lights are all blown, many of them swinging slightly on their wires, halfhearted sparks launching from their shattered bulbs. The only source of light is a massive rent in the ceiling where the faint glow of sun shines in from behind clouds. The buckled and fragmented concrete is black-edged, broken rebar bent out like eyelashes around the breach.

It’s beginning to rain, and the water is louder than any of the living or dead.

Biting back discomfort, Illya picks his way forward, careful on the now-uneven terrain. There are a few of Vinciguerra’s men on the ground, groaning back into consciousness and nursing burns, and he disarms them as he goes, but other than that, he lets them be.

In the growing patch of wet where the rain is coming down through the fissure in the roof, Solo is crouched down, shuddering unnaturally. There are frayed wires sticking out from a hole in the back of his jacket, near the slope of his shoulder, spitting out fitful sparks, and there’s something wrong with the corresponding arm—it keeps jerking slightly from where it hangs at an odd angle, totally unlike the fluidity of his normal movements.

*Water is getting into his system and causing further shorts,* Illya posits. Without considering it further, he takes off his jacket as he approaches.

Solo seems to take no notice of his malfunction; his gaze is fixed downward, eyes searching, even as static charge passes over his hands, down his neck, jumps across the rainfall.

“Come on,” he’s muttering. “Get up. Get up.”

That’s when Illya sees the bot, the one that Solo had been talking to, who had set off the blast of...whatever that was. It’s curled in a heap, one arm still outstretched, pale chassis collecting rain, but seemingly otherwise unharmed.

Illya crouches down when he reaches Solo, and wordlessly puts his jacket across Solo’s shoulders, careful not to let it touch any of the frayed wires while still covering the hole in Solo’s chassis. Solo turns his head with a jerk, but doesn’t otherwise move, eyes bright and hard.

“We can’t let them take her.”

Illya looks at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we either destroy her now or we let her go. We can’t let her be—”

*Like me,* he doesn’t say. Tethered. Illya has nothing to say to that. He surveys the rest of the lab instead. Soldiers are slowly getting to their feet, but there is no sign of the bots. “The rest of them?”

“Gone,” Solo replies. “The ones who survived the first firefight at least, they’re gone. She told them to get out. They have—” he makes a vague gesture with his good arm near his head. “Connections.”

Illya thinks about that for a moment. “Must be nice,” he says eventually. “Not to be alone.”

Solo nods slowly. Then he stiffens.

The bot’s hand twitches.
“If she wakes up and they take her, they’re going to find out how much I failed to upload,” he says, and even though his voice remains flat, the speed of his words increases, and Illya can practically hear the binary turning over, possibilities clicking into place too fast and with too much fear. “The logs can’t be forged. If she dies they die with her, but if she—they’ll take her apart to see how she works, they’ll reverse engineer the stellarator and that means powering her down entirely, and she—”

“What if there’s a third option?”

Both Illya and Solo pause, and then look back.

Gaby stands unsteadily in her low heels, her dress long since ruined, her hands a mess of burns and blood. Illya stands, and doesn’t think about how it’s placed him firmly between her and Solo.

“Dr Teller?” he asks, eyeing her bloody hands.

She exhales, and shakes her head. There are tear streaks on her face, he realizes. She’s made no effort to wipe them away, and her eyes are red-rimmed, but dry now.

“What sort of third option?” Solo asks, wariness betrayed only by the rigidity of his shoulders beneath Illya’s jacket.

Gaby glances at her hands, grimaces a moment, and then looks back at him. “Britain’s been working on its own AI projects, did you know? They’ve got almost no resources for it, but they have scraps from the war. Turing’s old things. And a lot of people just...working on the theories of it. Thinking through the implications of what the Americans managed to build.”

“What, actually consider the consequences of their actions?” Solo says humorlessly. “How gauche.”

“Waverly says it’s helped to have Mary Shelley ‘shouting at us from beyond the grave’,” Gaby says, with a twitch of a smile that’s quick to fade. “You might’ve ruined his original plans, taking me over the wall, but you gave him a lot of food for thought, too.”

“You’ll excuse me if I’m not overly pleased at such an idea,” Solo says sharply.

She winces. “What I mean is, Waverly could hide her.”

Illya shakes his head. “We don’t know Waverly, and we’re running out of time.” He could see Waverly’s men beginning to round up the rest of the Vinciguerra soldiers, casting glances at the three of them in the pool of falling rain. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Solo cast a surprised glance at him.

Gaby bites her lip, but squares her shoulders. Illya doesn’t trust her, but he can’t help but admire that. “It’s that or you take your chances trying to hide her from a room full of Royal Marines,” she says. “I’d rather have their help, personally.”

“I think I have a say.”

Solo makes a small noise, and then seems to go on gentlemanly autopilot, supporting the bot as it sits up slightly. It blinks several times, expression unsettlingly blank. It has the face of the Viscount’s daughter, Illya realizes, after a moment. Figures that Solo would gravitate towards her—bot or not, he did seem to have good taste in fine-boned women.

“That is how this works, isn’t it?” it asks. “You consider options, and then make a choice according to circumstance and preference. Since it pertains to me, I get a say. That is correct?”
Solo looks at Gaby, eyebrows rising.

Gaby raises her chin. “Yes, that’s how it works. Or should work, at least,” she says.

“Then I will go,” it says. It looks at Solo. “I think I don’t know enough to run and stay hidden for long.”

“You don’t know what you’re risking,” Solo starts.

The bot looks at him, head tilted to one side. It’s so reminiscent of Solo’s own bird-like behaviour that Illya is, for a moment, stunned to stillness.

“I don’t,” it agrees. “But I am not equipped with other options that are feasible or appealing.” It pauses. “And I do not want to be in the custody of whatever organization gave you that…” It makes a strange gestures with two fingers that it seems to take a moment for Solo to understand. When he does, his mouth goes flat, and he looks away from her, towards Gaby.

“I want assurances,” he says.

Gaby huffs. “I’m not exactly in a position to make demands, Solo.”

“Find a way.”

She seems almost surprised at his sharpness, almost hurt. It takes a moment for Illya to realize that she doesn’t know—that she betrayed them to further Waverly’s agenda, yes of course she is aware of that, but the consequences of that betrayal, nothing has reached her. She’s been on this island, doing her job.

He wonders if she even knew of what her uncle was capable.

Solo is still waiting, jaw set. The bot is looking between him and Gaby with unabashed interest.

“I’ll try,” Gaby says uncertainly.

The bot nods, and gets to its feet. It is still a strange creature—too bulky in the shoulders to be delicate, too trim in the waist to be as unequivocally masculine as Solo. Metal fused with flesh make any mistaking it for human totally impossible. The chest cavity has a strange, rippling shape to it, no doubt to accommodate the contours of the toroidal stellarator. Though he would not admit it aloud, Illya thinks it has good instincts—there are some things on this earth which were simply never built to blend in. Sometimes, it is a painful fact to bear. This bot seems to take it with equanimity, at least.

Solo is slower to his feet, and his damaged arm is deadweight, putting his shoulders into a tortured angle. Illya moves, without thinking, to adjust the jacket slung across his shoulders.

“We managed to find each other in the wreckage,” Solo reports, hands clasped loosely behind him, his bearing almost military. It also hides the patch on his shoulder, where connections and replacement plating had been hastily tacked on to hide the extent of the damage he’d taken. “The bot who had set off the discharge was long gone.”

“We were ready to salvage what we could of Dr Teller’s work,” Illya says. “We moved to make contact with the marines to coordinate.”

“We forgot that Alexander Vinciguerra was still alive,” Gaby says darkly.
In this, at least, they are telling the complete truth.

Illya is just about to find the nearest marine to make contact with Waverly when there is a loud, shuddering rasp of breath behind them. A scrape of metal and concrete.

They turn.

Alexander Vinciguerra emerges from behind a fallen pillar, blood smeared across his face like war paint. He’s holding a transmitter in one hand.

“‘You think this is over?’ he hisses, in sneering, coldly standard Italian. “It is not over until this world is cleansed.” He flicks the switch on the transmitter.

Illya shoots him between the eyes.

They all pause in the wake of the gunshot. Then Solo runs forward and switches the transmitter off.

Nothing happens.

“Well,” he says slowly, “We haven’t exploded yet. That’s a good start.”

Gaby exhales. But then—

“Oh,” the bot says from behind them, almost to itself. “Oh no.”

A rumble shakes the ground beneath them.

“What,” Illya starts.

“The drones,” the bot says. It looks between them. “We should go.”

“There were disturbing reports from flyovers that day,” Sanders says, flicking through a folder. “Of strange projectiles.”

“Certain parts of the lab proved...volatile,” Gaby equivocates.

“Only eight bots,” Solo says in resignation. “I said I was worried about that, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Illya confirms, “And now we must go.”

“Waverly’s men, do they know you?” Solo asks Gaby. She nods. “Then start getting them out. Now.”

She nods again, seems to take a moment to gather herself, and then runs off in the direction of the nearest marine on his feet.

Another rumble shakes the lab.

“They’re...this is odd,” the bot says, its head tilted towards the ground. “They’re not...they can’t all hear me.”
“Hear you?” Solo asks.

“They are ours to direct. We are the Generals,” it says, and then with a strange expression, corrects, “Were the generals. But we were meant to lead them as one. They were meant to be one.”

“But you’re not one. You’re eight,” Solo breathes. “And so they are, too.”

Eight minds, eight personalities, each connected to a contingent of drones, untethered from their singular purpose as dictated by the Vinciguerras’ protocols.

“Teller,” Illya says, in sudden understanding. One last rebellion by Dr Teller, one last gesture to give independence to his creations.

“I can stop them,” the bot says.

Solo looks at it steadily. “Will you?” he asks.

It presses its lips together. “I will lose those that I have.”

Solo nods. “Will you?” he repeats.

It searches his face. “I will try,” it says. “We still must leave.”

Solo exhales, and touches its shoulder. “Okay,” he says. “Let’s go, then.”

“It was a self-destruct sequence,” Illya rejoins smoothly. “Alexander Vinciguerra triggered it. A last act of defiance.” It was the truth, of a sort. Alexander Vinciguerra did trigger something. And it did, in a sense, self-destruct.

Or was forced to, depending on how you looked at it.

“It was only through Solo’s quick thinking that we were able to evacuate the men in time before the fortress was leveled,” Gaby adds.

Solo tips his head in modest acceptance.

They run out of the complex and towards the boats, stumbling over the dead, chased by spidering cracks in the foundations and the roar of awakening engines until there’s a burst like an earthquake punctuated by clicking, shrieking metal. The bot, who has been bringing up the rear of the group only by virtue of Solo’s hand on its wrist, leading it along, suddenly swings around to look back, and makes a noise like radio static.

“They’re trying to follow their masters!” it says, quickening its pace. “They just want—”

“Don’t let them!” Solo shouts over his shoulder.

“They’ll just disappear! They won’t do anythi—”

“Don’t let them!”

Illya looks back at the bot just in time to see fleeting, blank resignation cross its face. “Very well,” it says.
And they run.

By the time they reach the shoreline, soaked to the skin and slipping on the mud and sand, two walls of the fortress are rubble. Small explosions keep cutting up from the ground, like mortar fire driven up from below. Illya catches his first glimpse of one of the drones as one escapes, a vaguely humanoid craft, spindly and catching the rain with its gunmetal limbs, spinning into the atmosphere, only to be shot down with a sizzling crack from shots fired on the perimeter of the complex.

It falls like a pheasant hunted, tumbling and spiraling down in a curl of smoke and fire.

Others follow, and fall.

As they load up, Solo stays close to the bot, his expression grave, the contact of his hand against its shoulder constant. Will it learn, Illya wonders, as he starts the engine to the small boat, that touch of that kind is meant as comfort, or will it always know it as a reminder to persevere, to carry on with the assigned task, no matter how frightening or painful? There are so many possible meanings to small gestures, small words. Illya, an imperfect student of five languages and cultures and counting, knows this too well.

The bot climbs into the boat next to Solo, and as soon as it sits it goes unnaturally still, as if all of its attention has turned inward. Its arms wrap around its folded knees, its head and back curls down. It looks small, like a child.

Illya rather supposes that it is one.

One of the Royal Marines takes the helm of the boat they’re on just as the final wall of the fortress gives way as drones destroy it from within, and kicks the engine into gear. It spits and splutters, but then they’re off, cutting away through the water, not looking back.

“I suppose that is settled, then,” Oleg says, shuffling his file together. “Kuryakin, you’ll report to me in Moscow on Monday.”

“Tovarisch,” Illya nods.

“Same goes for you, Solo,” Sanders says, standing. “Only make it Friday, at the Pentagon. Your flight’s already on file. You’re overdue for a workup, I think—I see you trying to hide whatever damage your shoulder took.”

“Sir,” Solo acknowledges.

Oleg and Sanders leave the room, one after the other, hats and coats on, briefcases firmly shut. Illya waits for his cue to be dismissed, along with everyone else.

It doesn’t come.

Waverly remains sitting. His mask of easy affability, however, falls away. From his pocket, he withdraws a small radio scrambler, and switches it on. Solo clenches his jaw for a moment, and then relaxes.

“A very good tale,” Waverly says. “And well told.”

“Think they bought it?” Solo asks.
“For now, at least. It will take at least a week before they’re able to get their people in to inspect the island, and by then we’ll have everything cleaned up.”

“How is she?” Gaby asks.

“Your new acquaintance? With its permission, we’re taking it to England to meet some of our theoreticians. They’ll have a field day asking it all manner of questions, and hopefully it will be able to have some quiet time to absorb its rather traumatic circumstances of birth.”

“I want—” Solo starts; Waverly holds up a hand.

“Assurances, yes, I was told,” he says with some amusement. “It had a message for you: All clear.”

Solo visibly relaxes.

“So that’s that sorted,” Waverly says, sitting back. “One coverup achieved, one prisoner of war, so to speak, ushered into a new life. All loose ends tied, at least for the moment.”

He pauses. There is something very expectant about his silence. Illya has no patience for it.

“That’s it?” he asks, after a moment.

“It could be,” Waverly answers, with a slight smile. “You’ve saved the world, done some unlikely interagency cooperation, a feather in your cap. You can report back to Moscow on Monday as agreed.”

“And yet we’re still standing here, looking at you,” Solo points out.

Waverly glances at him. “So you are.” Then finally, he looks at Gaby. “Miss Teller.”

She straightens her shoulders.

Waverly puts his elbows back on the table, his hands folded. “Why don’t we revisit some of the events of the day, one more time?” he suggests.

Gaby nods. She flicks a glance at Illya, and then at Solo.

Waverly watches her steadily. “Why don’t,” he prompts gently, “You take it from where your father gave you the location of his backup copies of the miniaturized stellarator, as well as the blueprints to Mr. Solo’s kill switch?”

Chapter End Notes

Now that the recap's ended, we can move on to the real plot!! Ha. Ha. Haaaaaaaa.

Sorry for the cliffhanger again. There might be a lot of those in future. Consider this a blanket apology.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This is mostly a lot of talking. Blah.

Infinite thanks go to Aprille for her help with Russian translation!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I should not be listening to this,” Illya says immediately. “My superiors—”

“Would very much like to be privy to the discussion we’re about to have, no doubt,” Waverly agrees. “And I suppose if you’d like, you can leave now. But I was rather hoping you’d consider staying. After all, we’ve already edited one report for Mr. Radulov.”

Illya hesitates. The coverup had been necessary, a way of avoiding bloodshed, of letting either the East or West gain the upper hand in their ongoing silent arms race. Illya had made his peace with that hours ago. The stellarator however, while a part of that, is not ultimately entwined with the construction of the robots they had stopped today. It would be a military advantage, to be sure, but without the AIs Teller had programmed, it is far less of an outright threat. It could be, however, a very valuable piece of technology, employable in innumerable ways by the Soviet government.

Into the waiting silence, Solo clears his throat. “How did you know about that, sir?” he asks, rather quietly.

Waverly casts one last look at Illya, and then turns to him. “The kill switch? I made an educated guess, which Miss Teller has since confirmed. You were given a great many freedoms when you were made—more, I suspect, than the CIA would have liked. It only makes sense that they would have ordered you be insured, against...well.”

“Accidents of disloyalty,” Solo nods, stone-faced. “It was integrated into my code the day after I was activated.”

Illya wonders, with a pang of horror that was beginning to feel depressingly familiar, what Solo had done in his first twenty-four hours of consciousness to prompt such measures. What he had shown himself capable of that made the CIA consider him as a threat, as well as an asset.

“Just so,” Waverly says, not unkindly. “Miss Teller?”

Gaby clears her throat. “When I woke up after the explosion—or I guess, the discharge...well. My father knew he was dying, that he was going to die very soon. As soon as I found him, I tried to put pressure back on the bullet wound...he told me not to bother.”

She breathes slowly, one long inhale and exhale.

Then she continues. “He told me that he still had a lab, in Berlin. He hadn’t been there since he was recruited by the Americans, but he—he had known, when the war ended, where he was going to end up, and what he would be doing. He knew that governments would be keeping their advantages close to the chest, he’d seen enough of that during the war. And he had wanted the stellarators, especially, to be made public—a gesture of peace, to give power to the world equally.” She smiles
“He was very good at telling fairy tales to himself, not just to me.” She swallows, and clasps her hands in front of her. “So he left some of his notes and blueprints hidden in Berlin. For the right time.”

“That won’t be up to date,” Solo points out.

“No,” Gaby agrees. “But they’re more so than you might think—stellarators were dismissed for a long time in favour of tokamak research. My father worked out the essentials of stellarator design, including the beginnings of its miniaturization, just after the war. Then, along with the rest of his colleagues, he abandoned it to work on tokamaks for many years. It’s only been recently that anyone has turned back to stellarator research as a viable source of constant power.”

“Who else might know that these blueprints exist?” Illya asks.

“Whoever has bothered to investigate his old lab,” she replies. “But that won’t be many people. It was gutted when he went to the US. I’m surprised it’s still standing. I passed it on my way to the auto shop sometimes, when I took the long way. All the windows are smashed in.”

“Nevertheless, considering some of the fruits of that labour have now been released into the world, it behooves us to retrieve some of the information surrounding them,” Waverly says. “Particularly given that it might otherwise be used in less scrupulous ways.”

“Us,” Illya echoes. He realizes suddenly that the moment in which he could have left with plausible deniability has passed. Cold settles in his stomach.

“Mm,” Waverly says, as if there is nothing strange about it. “And the kill switch, Miss Teller?”

She nods again, this time more easily. “He’d known he’d made the right decision, about keeping some of his work to himself, when they started making plans for you,” she adds, looking at Solo. “That’s when he also made copies of some of your early code. The parts he had been privy to, before they gave the complete programming job to your maker.”

Solo nods.

“Where did he keep them?” Illya asks. His voice comes out raspy.


“Ah, good. Easily accessible, then,” Solo says.

Illya snorts. Waverly clears his throat.

“Gentlemen, I have a proposition, if you will,” he says. “And it is contingent upon a number of factors, the first being your sense of self-preservation, Mr. Solo.”

“And what about the lady?” Solo deflects, with a mock-offended gesture at Gaby.

Waverly gives him a tired look. “Already my agent, Mr. Solo. Now, your self-preservation.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Solo says. “I preserve myself only in whatever condition I need to be preserved.”

“But that’s not true,” Gaby objects. “Is it?”

Solo looks sharply at her.
Waverly says, smoothly, “Indeed, Miss Teller reports that you showed quite a bit of hesitation at the idea of giving away some of yourself in the gambit of rewriting the code of the nascent androids.”

Solo blinks, and then his expression towards Gaby eases. “Ah,” he says, still facing her. “That. Not…?”

Gaby looks back at him. “I didn’t tell,” she says, sounding slightly offended that Solo would ask. “I won’t, if you don’t want me to.” Her mouth purses. “You’ve fought hard enough.”

Solo studies her for a long moment. Then he says, without inflection, “You don’t know the half of it.” He turns back to Waverly. “You were saying…?”

Waverly looks discomfited; his gaze darts between Solo and Gaby. “Yes. Well. Where were we? Ah yes, self-preservation. I ask about it because it seems that you actually have quite a lot of it. More, perhaps, than what you were originally programmed to have.”

“Not knowing what my maker’s original parameters were, I can neither confirm nor deny,” Solo says.

“Indeed. Well. I suppose my next question is, do you have enough of it to be interested in acquiring the codes to that kill switch at the risk of summary decommission?”

Solo studies him, and then looks down at the radio scrambler on the desk. “I suspect it may be of little surprise to you that I have no great loyalty to my country of origin,” he murmurs.

“I rather think that anyone, no matter where they are born, if they are born into bondage, will hold no great love of their motherland,” Waverly replies. “And that this might be especially true when one’s motherland makes large claims towards being a place of civility and freedom.”

Solo snorts. “I don’t give it quite so much thought, sir. Or at least, I try not to.”

“Be that as it may.” Waverly steeples his fingers. “Have you any interest in stealing your freedom?”

“What’s in it for you?” Solo retorts.

“Solo!” Gaby hisses.

“Why, an excellent spy and an expert in robotics and artificial intelligence, I suppose,” Waverly says, without missing a beat. “Should you have any interest in that, of course.”

“Of course’,” Solo echoes with obvious scepticism.

“I don’t really expect you to trust me, Solo,” Waverly says, with a slight smile. “But I do hope that you’ll be tempted enough to take a gamble.”

“Stealing him from the CIA would be an act of war,” Illya points out.

Waverly’s attention on him is sudden and unsettling in its intensity. “It wouldn’t be stealing if he left of his own accord, would it?” he replies. “I’m not sanctioning anything, as yet.”

“Yes, who would be doing the sanctioning exactly, if it came to that?” Solo asks. “What sort of authority do you really have?”

Waverly smiles, close-lipped. “That depends on the second contingency.”

Illya has a sinking feeling in his gut. Waverly clearly notices his trepidation.
“Miss Teller’s reports that you had an argument before Solo began the upload process, Mr. Kuryakin.”

Solo flicks a glance at Illya. “Kuryakin had questions. I endeavoured to answer them.”

“In the spirit of international cooperation, I’m sure,” Wavelry says dryly. “During a world-ending crisis.”

Illya feels compelled to point out, “I was...determined to have answers.”

“Hm,” Waverly says, sounding neutral and dangerous all at once. “And yet you eventually allowed Mr. Solo to do as he planned?”

Illya suspects this is a trick question, but doesn’t quite know how it possibly could be. “Yes.”

“You trusted him.”

“...Yes.”

“How very lucky for the world,” Waverly murmurs. His gaze has the cool sharpness of a surgical blade.

Illya shifts on his feet.

Waverly observes him a moment longer, and then looks at Solo. “Are you interested, Solo? In obtaining your freedom?”

Solo looks back at him, expressionless. “You know that I am,” he replies.

“Report to me by Monday with your liberty, and I’ll shield you from whatever the CIA throws at you. You have my word.”

Solo is very still. Then he stirs. “Sir,” he says slowly. “With all due respect, your word means nothing to me.”

Soundless, he lets himself out of the room.

Waverly doesn’t look displeased. He only looks at Gaby. “You’re his backup,” he says. “Starting now.”

Gaby gives him a troubled look, but after a moment’s hesitation, follows suit. She closes the door with barely a click.

Illya wants, so badly, to follow her. But he knows he hasn’t been dismissed, and some things have transcended manners and training. He stays where he is.

Waverly acts as if there is nothing abnormal about this. When the door shuts the second time, he sighs.

“Now. That was the other thing I wanted to talk about, particularly with you, Kuryakin. Trust. Trust is hard to come by in this business,” he says. “Within a single organisation, let alone across two opposing ones.”

“We had a common purpose,” Illya says, his English coming out stiff and overly-formal. “Equal stake in the outcome.”
“Even then,” Waverly dismisses. He shuffles some papers, seemingly without purpose, glancing across titles, names. “Perhaps it just seems particularly notable to me, given your training background.”

Illya is quite sure his expression doesn’t change. That his shoulders remain loose, his hands open at his sides. He is sure because it is precisely these things that he has learned to monitor.

“Spetsgruppa UR, yes? The Conditioned Response Unit. Very hush-hush.”

Illya knows now why Waverly had ushered Solo and Gaby out of the room. No one was supposed to know. How does Waverly know? He says nothing.

Waverly glances up at him. “You seem an unusual case for them,” he says. “They call you their greatest success, and yet you’re markedly different from the others I’ve encountered from that particular program.”

“Others?” Illya blurts, and then immediately clamps his mouth shut again.

“Beside the point,” Waverly says, unruffled. “You’re quite different, Kuryakin, because you’re apparently capable of making smart field decisions that conflict with the particulars of your original briefing while serving the greater good.”

“I did nothing against my instructions,” Illya protests.

“You protected Solo, when it might have been more expedient to dispatch him,” Waverly points out. “You also took instruction from both him and Miss Teller over the course of the mission. These are not the characteristics of an SUR agent.”

Shame crawls in Illya’s gut. He hadn’t realised how many concessions he’d made, but now that Waverly points to them, they’re impossible to miss, glaring and awful, and yet he wouldn’t take them back, he can’t—

“They are, however, the characteristics of a potentially exemplary team member.”

Illya stares at him. “I work alone,” he says.

“So you do. Except for this time, when you managed to save the world.”

Illya says nothing.

Waverly watches him for a moment longer. “I had a long chat with Mr. Radulov before you three reported in. Mostly, we talked about Solo. He is unique. An achievement whose value we both agree the United States government does not fully appreciate.”

Illya purses his lips in silent agreement. Waverly smiles slightly.

“The space race might not yet be won,” he continues. “But the public has widely considered the robotics arms race cold since the manless march on Hiroshima. Once Russia made a show of their own remotely-controlled automata, mutually assured destruction surely guaranteed the stagnation of any further technological advances within that field—where else is there to go after the possible destruction of the human race as we know it, after all?”

Illya snorts. “Naive,” he says.

“Not without reason,” Waverly says, his lips tilting to one side, “But yes. And so the war is still on;
only the battlefield has changed. In lieu of greater firepower, we are now all in a race for intelligence. And a race for intelligence, as you well know, is a race for the perfect spy.”

“Solo,” Illya supplies. The lead in his stomach twists.

“Well, I don't know about that,” Waverly hedges. “But he's certainly of interest. Not just to me, but to your people too.” He pauses, and then adds carefully, “A perspective on his inner workings would be very appealing to your government.”

A great deal becomes clear. “...Ah,” Illya says eloquently.

“'Ah', indeed.”

“You spoke about this. With Oleg.”

“I did.”

“And?”

“And he is not going to turn his nose up at an opportunity for valuable intelligence-gathering,” Waverly replies. “Particularly when he has an agent in place who, despite all odds, has managed to develop a rapport with the relevant person of interest.”

“I report to Moscow on Monday,” Illya says slowly.

“Yes,” Waverly agrees. “Plenty of time to take a trip in between then and now, don’t you think?”

"That is just for the kill switch, though," Illya points out. "What about the stellarator plans?"

“Well, I suppose we'll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Waverly says. He sounds satisfied.
Illya swallows. “Sir.”

Waverly soberes. "Your choice, of course, Mr. Kuryakin," he says. "This is off-the-books, and high risk. I'm making a specific play here, and your handler is indulging it for his own purposes. You have a right to refuse. Stay in Rome for a few days, rest up, and head back to Moscow, where you'll be quietly lauded before being sent back into the field, business-as-usual. I won't force your hand." He smiles a bit. "I doubt I could, to be honest."

Illya lets his gaze slide to one side, away from Waverly's expectant face. He lies to himself regularly, but he's unwilling to lie about this—he is both tempted, and averse. It would be prudent to walk away. To show he is uninterested in muddying himself further with Western nonsense.

He finds his gaze settling on the closed door that Solo and then Gaby had slipped through.

“I will need to confirm with Oleg,” he hears himself say.

Waverly makes no sign of being either surprised or expectant. “Please do. A secure telephone is just outside.” He simply flips through his papers, and then holds out a dossier. “Your plane tickets to Washington are here, along with your necessary paperwork. Best of luck.”

Illya’s fingers feel numb as he takes the file.

Summarily dismissed, Illya walks to the door.

“And Kuryakin?”
He stops.

“The SUR has a reputation for producing abject failures and resounding successes. While you are certainly one of the latter, you may want to remember that there are other measures of success that are also worth striving for.”

Illya frowns, but nods anyway. “Sir.”

He manages to be just as quiet as Solo when he exits.

***

Oleg confirms Waverly’s plan when Illya calls, though in far less appealing words.

“Trust no one,” he says. “The British are powerless and penniless, and that makes them tricky. And I don't know what Waverly has bought the girl's loyalty with, but I doubt it's enough to keep her if things go wrong.”

Illya isn't sure whether he agrees with that, but he lets it go.

“Do not follow through with the theft unless you are absolutely certain of success. We don't want an international incident on our hands, and I will not hesitate to disavow you. The most important thing is what you can observe of the android; a full threat assessment, and any insight you can gain into how best to manage him and those who might come after him.”

“Da, tovarisch.”

“As for dealing with the android himself: Do not, under any circumstances, allow him to know that this is a wild goose chase. He already reads you too well.”

Illya freezes.

“Wild goose chase?” he repeats, the sudden English phrase not the only thing jarring him.

Oleg make a dismissive noise. “Idiotic British expression. Dead end, red herring, what have you.”

Waverly told Oleg there was no kill switch code.

Illya should say something. But perhaps this is the truth—Gaby, under Waverly’s instructions, made up her father’s hidden code in a gambit to draw Solo out. But that wouldn’t make sense either; once Solo inevitably found out the kill switch wasn’t reversible, he would be tied to the Americans permanently, and while he would certainly hate that, he would, Illya is sure, choose life in service over his own destruction. What would be the point for Waverly? A thought exercise? The British have no resources to build their own androids, not in the way Russia does. And if they weren’t going to steal the kill code, what were they meant to steal? Raw data? Other information on Solo’s design and coding?

“Kuryakin, are you still there?”

“Da,” Illya replies. He opens the dossier Waverly had given him and shuffles through it. No sign of other data they could look for. No sign of anything outside of what Waverly told him.

Waverly is keeping Solo's defection a secret. He is covering it with a proposed theft of American intelligence for Oleg’s benefit, one that they have no parameters for.

“Da, I am here,” Illya says, tongue slow and thick in his mouth. “And I understand. He will not
know.”

“Good. On Monday, full debrief.”

A thousand curse words cross Illya’s mind and thankfully, not his lips. Illya will have to either return with a tale of failure or a new set of lies to cover for Solo. *Making a specific play...* Waverly is a *bastard.*

“Da, tovarisch. Monday.”

The papers in the dossier are trembling along with his hands. Nearly dropping some inner leaves in the shuffle, he turns to the front of the file to extract his plane tickets. They are for tomorrow, early in the morning.

He has to pack.

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If Gaby is surprised to see him on the plane the next morning, she doesn’t show it. Illya sits down next to her and asks, “Solo?”

“Had his own flight,” she says, “It wouldn’t do for him to look like he was still colluding with us. I gave him the dossier, and now he’s on his way.”

“He’s going to try for the code?”

“He wants to be free. What do you think?”

Illya nods. His shoulders feel sore and overused, and the bruises and scrapes from yesterday throb. He hadn’t slept well.

They endure take-off in silence, and then Gaby says, “Are we okay, Illya? We haven’t—we didn’t talk, except for the debrief. I didn’t get a chance to apologize for...well.”

“You were doing your job,” Illya says, and knows immediately that he sounds as stiff as he feels. “I would have done the same.”

“That doesn’t mean it wasn’t bad manners,” Gaby points out.

Illya shifts in his seat. He doesn’t want to have this conversation now, when everything is still so raw. He supposes Gaby’s instinct is right—clear the air, before they go on. But he would rather sleep, and anyway, her quasi-betrayal ultimately had very little effect on him.

After a moment, he says, “If you owe anyone an apology, it is Solo.”

Gaby cocks her head. “What do you mean?”

Illya looks at the back of the seat in front of him, hard enough to burn a hole in it. “That is for him to tell.”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“Because he has forgiven you,” Illya says, with a snort.

“But you haven’t.” He can feel her eyes on his face. “Illya, what happened?”
“You were right,” Illya says, gripping the armrests. “I am fast; the dogs would have needed a good head start, and they didn’t get one.”

Gaby is silent. The stewardess comes by and offers them peanuts and refreshments. Both of them refuse politely.

Minutes pass.

Illya realizes that there is just one thing he has to ask, has to know. “Did you know,” he says, “That your uncle Rudi had an interest in machines?”

Gaby frowns. “He worked with my father on a couple of projects, I suppose. It wasn’t in a professional capacity, I don’t think. My father called him a tinkerer. Wanted to know how things worked, liked to take things apart. Why…”

She stops, her throat audibly closing.

Illya looks away, studies the ugly pattern of the carpet in the aisle. Beside him, Gaby is very, very still.

“What happened,” she whispered.

“Ask him,” Illya says, and doesn’t feel guilty when she flinches.

“I will,” she says, after a long pause. She even sounds like she’s telling the truth.

She's strong, still. And Illya still, against his better judgement, admires her.

The rest of the flight they are quiet, speaking only to answer queries from the stewardesses. Illya manages to sleep in short, unsatisfactory bursts; at one point, he almost thinks he half wakes to find Gaby looking at him, but when he blinks, her eyes are on the window.

***

When they arrive, they check into different rooms in a well-appointed hotel in Arlington, just south of the Pentagon.

“It’s crawling with diplomats,” Gaby says, when they’re down at the bar later. Solo is meant to meet them here whenever he escapes his handlers to check in and plan their operation. “No one will look twice at us.”

“Why the Pentagon?” Illya asks, sipping at seltzer water. “Why isn’t Solo based at CIA headquarters?”

“He was a military project first,” Gaby says, looking at him oddly. “You know that.”

“He’s been CIA for seven years.”

“He was military for three. And the CIA don’t exactly want it to be common, or even uncommon knowledge that they have an android in their ranks. Better to keep all of their robotics staff and research within the Department of Defense, and let the CIA liaise.”

“Cooperation between the CIA and anyone else?” Illya says dryly. “A small miracle.”

Gaby snorts.
Solo enters the bar. He looks entirely normal, not unlike how he had looked when Illya had seen him first in Berlin: immaculate, not a hair out of place, meticulously dressed. Illya wonders how Solo acquires his suits—the CIA, surely, would have no interest in funding such aesthetic wants unless they were for work reasons. Illya wonders about Solo’s life here, when he’s on American soil. Whether he has an apartment of his own. Whether he is watched.

He has an idea, at least, about the latter. There doesn’t appear to be eyes on them now, though, which means that either Solo has shaken his tails, or the CIA isn’t worried about him going off the reservation. Either option is acceptable at this point.

Without looking at them, Solo strolls to the bar and settles at Illya’s back, his upper arm just brushing Illya’s shoulder blade. “Bourbon, neat,” he says to the bartender. “It’s been a long day.”

“You got it.”

The bartender goes to pluck a bottle off the shelf. Illya says in an undertone, head tilted just slightly over his shoulder, “Room 412. Half an hour?”

“Lovely.” Solo drawls, just as the bartender comes back with his drink. “Thanks very much.” Illya can feel him shift, just slightly, to look across Illya’s shoulder and cast a glance in Gaby’s direction. “Guess I’d best drink up, then,” he murmurs. Illya feels his breath puff against the small hairs on the back of his neck. Before he can shiver, he shifts, stepping away from the bar and putting a couple of coins on the counter for his and Gaby’s drinks. Gaby slips off her barstool, but casts a worried glance in Solo’s direction before falling into step with Illya.

“He looks...normal,” she says.

“Was put back together, probably,” Illya says. “Needed his shoulder fixed, they probably fixed everything else, too.” He tries not to think about how Solo had tried to hide his injury during the debrief. How on the boat back to the aircraft carrier, he had asked Illya hastily to reconnect the wires that were split and spitting sparks, to patch up what he could with spare pads of silicon and patches of adhesive vinyl he’d scavenged from the navy’s supply, meant for boat repair. Why he might have gone to such haphazard, inelegant lengths.

Gaby is clearly thinking the same. She closes her hands around her elbows, her shoulders hunching down and inwards, as they walk towards the elevators.

“Half an hour, you said?” she asks, as they step in the elevator and head up towards the fourth floor.

“Yes.”

“I’ll wash up then.”

Illya nods, and she breaks off to let herself into her room. Illya walks further down the hall to his own and begins the steady process of scanning for bugs. He is more thorough than usual, both for safety and for the sake of his nerves; in the last few weeks, he has stepped outside of his carefully maintained boundaries more times than he has since joining the service, has nearly lost control almost as many times as he has in the past five years. A little more order imposed upon his surroundings, especially in the shadow of the Department of Defense, won’t go amiss.

He wishes Waverly hadn’t mentioned the SUR. He can’t say it hasn’t been on his mind, but to hear it spoken of offers a different sort of reminder.

He shakes his head, and sweeps his detector in between the jackets he’s hung in his closet.
Gaby knocks on the door as he finishes up, and he lets her wait while doing his final sweep of the telephone and smoke detector. By the time he lets her in, she has a pointed look on her face.

“All freshened up?” she asks ironically, looking at the rumpled clothes he’d put on just after they’d checked in that afternoon. She, by contrast, is in a clean, demure butter-yellow sheath, cut perfectly and flaring from her waist in a loose bell before ending well above her knees.

“I’m not going out,” he replies. “Are you?”

“You never know.” She goes to his bar and scopes it out. “If you’re not going to drink this, I’m going to take it back to mine.”

“Help yourself,” Illya says, rolling his eyes.

She gives him a closed smile and pours liberally from the bottle of vodka, swaying over to the couch where she sits down against the arm and kicks her feet up to take up the maximum amount of room, her slim legs bare of stockings, and thus revealing several abrasions and one long graze across her calf from their shootout at the Vinciguerra fortress. She isn’t going out, Illya realizes. She’s just being defiant, in her own, persistent way.

Illya puts away his bug detector and retrieves Waverly’s dossier from his luggage.

A knock sounds against the door.

Gaby raises her eyebrows at Illya in expectation, not moving from her seat.

“Not your fiance anymore,” he mutters at her, but goes to the door anyway.

Solo slips past Illya as soon as the door is more than a fraction open, seemingly able to maneuver himself through small spaces effortlessly despite his bulk. “Got started without me?” he says to Gaby, nodding at her drink. She tilts her head back and forth in non-answer.

“Your check-in went okay?” Illya asks.

“As well as it could,” Solo says briefly.

Illya and Gaby look at each other, and then Illya says, “What do you have for us?”

Solo nods. “Good news and bad news.”

“Bad news first,” Gaby commands.

“We have a great deal of work to do if that code is where you say it is, Miss Teller.”

Gaby’s lips flatten at his use of her last name, but she doesn’t comment. “It is,” she says. “He was very specific.”

“Right. Well, I can produce a fairly accurate map of the path we’ll need to get there, but the security measures will need some dealing with. Do you have paper?”

Illya hands him a notepad. Solo proceeds to draw, with an unnaturally steady hand, a perfect blueprint of what Illya presumes is a sub-basement of the Pentagon.

“Handy,” Gaby comments.

“In another life, I could have been an art forger,” Solo says, not looking up, carefully labeling locked
doors and security checkpoints. “Now, your father said he kept a spare set of disks in his old office, next to Lab Nine, where they did most of the development on my AI. That’s not surprising—it’s where most of the German scientists in the field were stationed, and it’s separate from the engineering block, where I spend most of my time while back here.”

The distaste was palpable in his voice. Both Illya and Gaby heard it, and waited. Solo continues as he finishes his diagram.

“Here’s where it gets tricky. This is state-of-the-art security as we get towards the most sensitive areas of the Pentagon, and the robotics laboratories past Lab Three are about as sensitive as you can get. It won’t just be security guards—there are automated exit alarms, electronic key cards to forge, and everything goes on high alert after 10 pm. Techs are obliged to leave, you need special dispensation to stay overnight. It’s a desert by 9:30, only three men left per floor, but sensors all come on, and security from upstairs is briefed to check on even the slightest disturbance.”

“Shift change?” Illya asks.

“Mm,” Solo agrees. “Happens at 1:15, and I think it’s the only way to at least get a start on things. But even then, we’ll have to override the special permission protocols on the key cards we use to enter. I lifted one today,” he produces from his inside coat pocket a keycard, “But we’ll need at least one more.”

“Surely there’s less going on during the weekend,” Gaby says. “Is there any sort of change there?”

“There are fewer techs about, but security stays the same,” Solo says. “If anything, it will be worse.”

Illya took the keycard from between Solo’s fingers and studied it. “What sort of protocols?” he asks.

“Short binary string tagged onto the magnetic strip,” Solo answers. “You’ll need an overwriter, at the very least, but the string changes every week.”

“Surely that gets sorted out at the front desk?” Gaby says. “They must have an encoder there.”

Solo nods.

“Do you know anyone specific who might have asked for permission to stay overtime this weekend?”

Solo smiles. “I might. And he’s lonely.”

Gaby smiles back. “Good.”

Illya clears his throat. “You said something about good news.”

“Mm, yes,” Solo agrees. “I did at that. You see, once we get into the lab, we have the most advanced security of all. All of the locks are encrypted, you need special access cards issued by the DoD. Now, as is only sensible, the DoD has top-of-the-line encryption, mostly derived from their most advanced hard- and software achievements.”

“That doesn’t sound like good news,” Gaby points out. But Solo is looking at Illya expectantly.

Illya blinks. “The Marchers?”

Solo clicks his tongue and nods. “Military AI encryption. Which, as it happens, hasn’t really changed since I was in Vietnam.”
Vietnam. That hadn’t been in his file. Illya had wondered, though, when Oleg had first briefed him on the enigma that was Napoleon Solo: the pride, but not joy, of the CIA, who has one of the highest success rates of the agency and yet seems to have popped out of the ground, no apparent military history or record beyond having been listed as an Army Sergeant from ‘53 to ‘55.

So he had been tested in Vietnam, maybe Korea before that, not long after he’d come online. Baptism by fire, Illya can’t help but think.

Solo is watching him, no doubt knowing exactly what he’s thinking. Oleg was right—he does read Illya too well.

“So you can crack whatever stands between us and the code, once we get you in the right place?” Gaby says.

Solo nods, still looking at Illya. “Once we’re in, we’re good. Getting out will be just as tricky as in, but shouldn’t be any worse, barring any unforeseen alarms.”

“You should definitely check for those,” Illya says pointedly, and Solo sighs.

“I am good at my job, you know,” he says, long-suffering.

“So you say.”

“Gentlemen,” Gaby interrupts, sounding very much like Waverly for a moment. “The order of events, please.”

They nod, and begin to lay out their timeline.

Chapter End Notes

The tech at work here will be a weird mishmash of period-accurate and sci-fi, thus the guard-heavy building security and mag-strip ID cards, both of which are, from what I can tell via google, appropriate to the 60s. Technological advance, after all, is a very uneven beast.

The developmental history of stellarators and tokamaks is accurate, but compressed—obviously, we've not yet harnessed fusion power, but we have been working on both methods of fusion containment for a long time, and the stellarator model was discarded for a long while. We're only now coming back to it as a viable design. They're also, however, currently the size of large cars, so miniaturisation is in the far distant future, or not on the table at all.

The SUR is, of course, fictional. More about that later.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s the height of summer in DC, nearly as hot as Italy and twice as humid, the spring beauty of the city’s flowering trees giving way to stultifying perfumery and throngs of unfashionable tourists. Illya is forced to tolerate it for lunchtime coffees and sandwiches in outdoor cafés, which Gaby and Solo seem to insist upon.

“I’ve never been to America,” Gaby says in explanation. “I want to take in the atmosphere.”


“You’ve been?” Gaby asks.

“Once. A blissful week. I was told to gain an arts education, so as to better fit with the American elite,” Solo says, delicately sipping an espresso. “It was a delightful visit. Very few time constraints. Met an heiress who took me to a stunning production of Dido and Aeneas.”

“I’m sure Sanders enjoyed that,” Gaby says dryly.

Solo smirks, and idly hums *Dido’s Lament*.

He and Gaby have been on decent terms since their first evening in the US, though Illya can tell that Gaby hasn’t dared ask yet, about what happened on the Vinciguerra estate. Solo behaves perfectly affably towards her, all generous smiles and easy conversation, though there is a certain reserve to him that wasn’t there before, which she clearly notices, and is discomfited by. It stands in direct contrast to how he has changed towards Illya; the aloof, watchful poise of their time in Italy has softened into something like curiosity. Illya can’t help but feel scrutinized, but also can’t deny that he deserves it—he has been erratic, unpredictable, the opposite of how he should be, and how Solo no doubt expected him to be. Berlin had shaken him; Italy destabilized him.

He tells himself now that he is putting himself back on track.

He knows this is not the case, because he is here, on this unsanctioned mission.

He wants to know what Solo sees now. If it would help him understand what is happening. He has only spoken briefly to Solo outside of planning, however.

“When does Bergen get off work?” Gaby asks.

“5 o’clock, though he has a tendency to stay late, which is why we like him. Nevertheless, I recommend putting your strongest German accent on and acting helpless and confused about ten minutes before then,” Solo replies.

Gaby clasps her hands together in her lap and tilts her head down to look up through her lashes. “Excuse me please, ich verstehe nicht. Diese Karte ist so verwirrend,” she says, plaintive and wide-eyed. “Hilf mir, bitte? Ich bin so lost!”

Illya rolls his eyes hard enough to risk straining something; Solo claps in sardonic appreciation.
“How are the uniforms?” he asks, turning to Illya.

“How are the uniforms?” Illya answers, “But they’ll do.” He’d liberated them from a laundry service early that morning, intercepting their delivery to their rightful owners.

Solo wrinkles his nose a bit at the prospect, but nods anyway. “Then I suppose we’re as set as we can be.”

Gaby hums, and sips at her espresso.

They’re going in on Saturday night, during the shift change, as discussed. It’s a solid plan, Illya can admit to himself, and they do, as a team, have the complementary skills to see it through. It helps that they absolutely have to see it through, if they don’t want to cause an international incident or three. Gaby has, to Illya’s knowledge, only checked in once with Waverly, to assure him that all three of them are on scene, but beyond that, it’s clearly a black-bag job, and they’ll have no one to turn to if anything goes wrong.

Solo, for whom all of this is happening, remains carefully unshaken, the chilly parting words he’d thrown at Waverly tucked away but not forgotten. Even when they’d finished laying out the plan that first evening, and Gaby had announced that she was going to bed to deal with her jetlag, he’d only lingered very briefly in Illya’s room.

“I’ll admit I was a bit surprised to see you,” he had said, after the door had closed behind Gaby.

“Waverly and Oleg had a talk, apparently,” Illya had offered.

Solo had raised his eyebrows. “So you’re here ostensibly to help me, and by extension, Waverly,” he surmised. “But you’re also here to spy on me.”

Illya shrugged, which was admission enough without actively compromising himself.

Solo snorted softly. “I’ve had worse partnerships,” was all he replied with. He stood, straightening and squaring himself. “You’ll keep these secure?” he said, gesturing at the various diagrams and lists they’d drawn up.

“Of course.”

Solo nodded. “Thank you.” He met Illya’s gaze briefly with his own, a surprising hint of warmth to it, there and gone in less than a moment. “Good night, then.”

Illya had only managed to mumble in response before Solo was out the door again. They hadn’t spoken of anything but Saturday since then.

If anything, this is an even stranger alliance than the one they had made in Berlin.

Gaby looks at her watch. “I should get going. Bergen’s probably starting to pack up.”

“Have fun,” Solo says.

Gaby makes a face, and then pastes on a charming, impish smile. “Aufwiedersehen,” she says, with a small salute.

They watch her go.

“You told her,” Solo observes, after a moment.

"Rudi."

Illya twitches his lower lip upwards, and offers half of a shrug. "I didn’t. I asked if she knew that he liked machines."

"And did she?"

"He used to ‘tinker’, apparently."

Solo hums. "Leave it be, Illya. She didn’t know."

"Actions have consequences," Illya says, caught off-guard by the way Solo says his name. "If she is a spy, she should know this."

"She’s still learning. I can appreciate that."

"You’re fond of her." Illya doesn’t mean to sound accusing, but he knows he does. He’s also discomfited to know that he believes this, now—that Solo is capable of affinity.

Solo looks at him. "She’s a rare breed,” he says. “Adaptable, practical. But not cold.”

Illya looks away.

"And very beautiful," Solo adds. “Obviously.”

"‘Obviously’," Illya echoes.

Solo watches him for a moment, and then diverts. “We’re both capable of extracting ourselves from difficult situations anyway,” he points out. “At least, ordinarily. She knew that much when she decided to do what she was ordered. And Waverly is apparently invested in the survival of at least one of us. I’m beginning to suspect both.”

“For what, though.”

“What, indeed,” he intones.

Illya carefully begins shredding his napkin into thin, even strips. “If we succeed...what will you do?”

Solo is quiet. He looks almost asleep, his eyes tipped down, his breathing even, his face serene.

“If I cared to, I could calculate the number of times I’ve thought about situations in which I could extract myself from my position in the CIA,” he says at last. “It would likely be a number best expressed via scientific notation.”

Illya nods.

“In the vast majority of those imaginings, I am statistically likely to remain free—that is, entirely autonomous, free from any government or other organization’s control of any kind—for between one and five years. If I’m very lucky and very clever, there’s a slim chance of getting a decade.”

“You are very clever,” Illya points out, a little grudgingly.

“And getting cleverer by the day,” Solo says, smiling a bit. “But the effect of my intelligence on my chances, while not negligible, offer diminishing returns. The fact remains that I’m not human, and as
such, humans remain not-100% predictable. Then, of course, there’s the ‘lucky’ bit of the equation, which sadly, I do not have the power to affect.” His mouth pulls up at one corner. “I’m afraid I don’t share the human compulsion to internally exaggerate one’s own odds of success. And my odds of success, in a world ruled by a different sort of being than myself, are realistically very thin.”

Illya nods again, but doesn’t offer further comment. Solo cocks his head slightly.

“You’re not going to tell me that hope is a good thing?” he asks.

“Hope is not always useful,” Illya replies. His hands flatten over the neat array of napkin shreds.

“Ah,” Solo says, in a way that Illya has come to associate with his seeing too much. He pulls the napkin shreds into an orderly pile, one strip on top of the other. A tremor of his hand makes itself visible in the delicate paper.

“You’re right, of course,” Solo says, watching him. “It isn’t always useful. It certainly hasn’t been over the past few years with Sanders.” The name is said with a slight but unmistakable sneer. “I now rather wonder, however, if by examining likely scenarios more thoroughly than unlikely ones, I’ve now failed to predict my changed circumstances.”

“Waverly?” Illya asks.

“Waverly, or someone like him, was a likelihood,” Solo dismisses. “It was even likely to come from England—they have all of the intellectual resources, but their economy and lack of manufacturing capacity point to their own bot creation being unfeasible. Poaching is a rational alternative.” He pauses. “You and Gaby, however, were less foreseeable.”

“You predict Waverly but you don’t predict agents under him?”

“I predicted agents,” Solo says, shooting him a strange look. “I didn’t expect allies.”

Illya exhales. That choice of word—that implied a great deal.

“And have your statistics changed?” he asks levelly. “Since then?”

Solo is very still. “I think so,” he says at last, unmoving. Then he tilts his head, and with heavy irony, adds, “I hope so.”

Illya, unused to hope himself, finds himself harboring a shard of it, slipped beneath his ribs like a dagger.

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On Saturday evening, they assemble what limited equipment they have in the hotel, folding away everything they might need, first into their clothing, and then into the car.

“I don’t like that I’m on the outside the whole time,” Gaby says, not for the first time. “I’m the one who made first contact. Did you know that the guards have no idea what Bergen and the other techs in that department do? The CIA’s totally frozen them out. It’s caused a bit of uneasiness amongst the administration, and security’s picked up on it. They kept looking at me like I was crazy for taking an interest in Bergen.”

“The CIA are like that, despite how often they recruit from the DoD. But we need eyes on the perimeter,” Solo says, also not for the first time. “And you’re our getaway driver.”
“Still.”

“You’ve done enough,” Illya says. “And you’ll do more.”

Gaby makes a dissatisfied noise. Illya has a feeling she won’t ever be satisfied without a gun readily to hand, with a high probability of discharging it. Clearly having one in the glove compartment is not nearly enough for her.

Illya has mostly armed himself with knives, as well as a few strategically-placed handguns and tranqs, all in carefully padded holsters and secret compartments in his suitcase to evade detection through patdowns and inspections.

For his part, Solo has folded lock picks, infrared signal disruptors, wire cutters, and various interface adapters into the uniform Illya had acquired for him on Thursday. He had brought his kit to Illya’s room to change into, unwilling to walk about in it where he might be seen by his CIA shadows.

“Are they acting normal? Or is this different?” Illya had asked, when Solo explained.

“No better no worse than usual,” Solo had said. “I frequent the hotel bars around here. There’s nothing particularly unusual about my coming here, not enough for them to raise any red flags.”

Illya made an involuntary face. “To do what? Drink?”

“The taste of good scotch is incredibly sophisticated, you know,” Solo said, a little scornfully. “I don’t need to have human taste buds to appreciate the chemical complexity.”

Illya sniffed. “Vodka is better.”

“Vodka is pure,” Solo countered. “That makes it just about the least interesting beverage I could consume. Barring the joys of inebriation, it’s deeply boring.”

Illya expressed his disapproval over the grave insult Solo had dealt with pointed silence. Solo blithely broke it by adding, “And why do you think I just drink? Company isn’t bad either.”

Illya had exhaled, and very carefully scrubbed that statement from his mind.

Solo had cast a last glance at him, and then pulled on his uniform jacket. His own suit was carefully folded over the back of an armchair, the shirt and tie hung up in Illya’s closet. Illya didn’t allow this to be distracting.

Now, the uniform looks polished and sleek in the darkness of night, medals gleaming under the streetlights.

Parked in the front lot, Gaby turns and looks at them. “All set?”

Solo nods.

“We’re not back in two hours, leave,” Illya advises.

Gaby narrows her eyes. “Okay,” she lies.

“In all seriousness,” Solo says, “You should.”

Gaby sniffs. “Be back in two hours, then.”

Illya and Solo look at each other, and then climb out of the car. Gaby shuts the headlights off,
leaving them in the valley of shadows between the overhead lamplights.

The hardest part of getting in will be getting past the human guards at the door and on the floors below. They had gone through a vast array of clandestine plans, and ultimately, what they found they really needed was permission.

Illya hates this type of espionage—it requires being seen, being anything other than what he is. The low buzz of adrenaline was starting up, just under his skin, burbling in his stomach.

“You are certain you will not be recognized?” he asks Solo, not for the first time.

“The day the agency lets me in and out through the front door is the day the US falls to anarchy,” Solo replies. “I’ve never once gone outside of my own lab, and even the people working directly on my programming had no contact with me. I even have my own entrance—it cuts from the Arlington metro stop over to here.”

“And we aren’t using that, why?”

“Because that entrance is specifically designed to prevent me from moving in and out without permission,” Solo says, a little testily. “We’ve gone over this.”

Illya grunts. He really hates this sort of operation. It isn’t what he’s made for.

“Relax,” Solo says as they approach the doors. “You’re meant to be here.”

Illya makes an involuntary pained noise.

Solo flicks a glance back at him, and after what seems like a moment of intense indecision, reaches back and finds Illya’s wrist in the dark, and squeezes it delicately with his third finger and thumb. It’s so brief Illya almost misses it.

“Come on,” he says.

Illya swallows, and obeys.

Inside, Bergen is pacing in the lobby. Tall and gawky, with thinning dark hair and a snub nose, he looks exactly how one would expect of a man who spends his days deep underground. Mole-ish and spindly beneath his baggy lab coat, his stork-like legs take him across the acreage of marble tiles too fast for his liking, sending him into the walls prematurely, forcing abrupt about-faces.

Just before they step into the lights surrounding the building, Solo tilts his head from side to side, and then abruptly, his walk changes. His smooth stride suddenly becomes a harried march, shoulders suddenly squared and stiff, any languid confidence carved away, leaving military straightness. It’s so sudden that Illya nearly trips over him before he adjusts his stride to accommodate.

Bergen spots them as they are illuminated, and quickly goes to the door to let them in.

“Commander Magnusson?”

“Doktor Bergen,” Solo says in perfect, crisply Swede-accented, British-educated English. “I understand you met my wife on Friday. What a perfect stroke of luck, when you are just the man I was hoping to see this week.”

“I did, lovely girl—woman! Woman,” Bergen corrects. Gaby had done an excellent job, it seems.

“She is, isn’t she?” Solo says, just a little bit knowing, but not enough to exacerbate Bergen’s guilt.
Starkly handsome and imposing in his stolen slightly-too-small Swedish naval uniform, he exudes the air of a man who is well aware how beautiful his wife is, and who takes pleasure in her being lusted after when he is the one to take her home. “She said it was so lovely to find a fellow German here. I would not know, of course, but it was good to see her so pleased, especially when we are far from home.”

“We have a great many Germans around here,” Bergen says, a little obsequious, “But I was certainly the lucky one to have run into her.”

Solo smiles, satisfied and thin-lipped. “Well, I’m sorry I was too late to catch up with you both. But I thank you very much for meeting me, and at such an unusual time. It is very hard to get away from one’s responsibilities, when on a quick diplomatic trip such as this.”

“Well, better late than never!” Bergen says, with a bit more cheerfulness. “And the hour is not so unusual for me, Commander—I am a night owl myself. Though it is not often that they let me stay so late, so I suppose you are doubly lucky!”

“Then I shall be doubly thankful for your time,” Solo says, with a warmer smile, his head tipping forward just slightly in Bergen’s direction, gracious and engaged. “I do so look forward to seeing your work.”

“Nothing classified, mind.” Bergen says with a grin. “I trust you understand why.”

“Frankly, even if you were to be so dishonest, my country wouldn’t know what to do with it,” Solo says with a conspiratorial chuckle. “We are woefully backwards in such subjects. I am just delighted to have an opportunity to speak to fellow experts.”

“I must say, from what Mrs. Magnusson says of your work, I’m very surprised I hadn’t heard of it before. The ah, robotics community is an awfully small family, I find.”

“I keep my work very close to the chest, as you might say,” Solo says. “And it is a hobby more than a professional pursuit, though I like to pride myself on staying upon the cutting edge. But as I said before, Sweden is backwards in these matters. It is part of why I was so interested to talk to you particularly, Doktor. You have a reputation for discretion, and with my nationality, I have a need for it.”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here,” Bergen laughs. He smooths his hair across his pate, which only highlights how it shines with a day and evening of grease. “Do come in—you have your cards?”

“Of course,” Solo says, “The Agency has been most accommodating, as I have come to expect. After all, it has been a decade since Mr. Erlander made his visit—we must keep up our friendly ties between our countries, eh? Bjørn, you have the case?”

“Ja, Komendör,” Illya mutters. Though he’s decently fluent in Swedish, his accent is not as good as it could be; he is happy to be the monosyllabic bodyguard for a plethora of reasons.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Solo says to Bergen, gesturing a bit carelessly at Illya. “He has clearance of course; it is all, how does one say, above board. I simply cannot risk my personal security more than I must.”

“Of course,” Bergen says, eyeing Illya. “If he has clearance, that’s no trouble.”

They amble over to the front desk, where a security guard who has been watching them with dubious interest takes the cards from Illya and Solo.
Illya tries not to hold his breath as they’re swiped through—the mag strips were fairly easy to overwrite, once Gaby had gotten hold of Bergen’s late-night passcode, but whether the ID profiles they had added to solidify their false identities will be cross-checked quickly enough to get them caught remains to be seen.

The guard yawns and flicks a glance between his computer screen and Solo. Then he does so again for Illya. Bergen shifts on his feet. Illya refrains from doing the same.

“Passes confirmed,” he says eventually, with an air that implies a certain skepticism about the value of their time. “Commander Magnusson and Mr. Hedburg, you are authorized for twenty-four hours only.”

“I will be in the country for hardly more than that,” Solo jokes. “Thank you very much, Mr. Andrews.”

Mr. Andrews is clearly unaccustomed to being addressed properly. He blooms a bit under the recognition. “You’re very welcome, sir. Now, Dr. Bergen, you’ll keep them to your lane?” he turns with some dislike towards Bergen. “No wandering outside your purview. DoD takes its security seriously.”

“They are here for my department only,” Bergen says with a sniff.


“Don’t mind him,” he says as they walk away. “They don’t understand the magnitude of the work we do—though obviously, that is as it should be. It can be trying, to be based among these military types, but...never mind,” he flicks an apologetic glance at Solo’s uniform. “Er. Right this way,” he gestures. “Now, Mrs. Magnusson was telling me that you’ve been working on streamlining discipline protocols, is that right?”

“Yes, indeed,” Solo says, nodding. “As we witnessed with the Marchers, discipline was generally rigid by design, but it was also quite clunky, don’t you think? There were slow reaction times, particularly as more and more adaptive data had to be processed.”

“You’ve studied the footage.”

“Who with an interest in robotics has not?”

Illya pays only partial attention to their discussion, content to lope a pace behind them. It’s clear that Solo is in his element, and not just because he is skilled at the con—he strikes a perfect balance between being knowledgeable enough to be compelling to Bergen, but not enough to give away that he knows anything about the AI research that gave birth to him. He interweaves technical discussion with small details about his life in Stockholm, and Bergen seems to drink it up, having not been back to his native Germany since well before the war. He is, apparently, not a forced transplant like Teller had been—never a tool of the Nazis. As such, he speaks fondly of his country, but with detachment come from long estrangement followed by active research that had served against it. Solo treats all of this with the politely warm interest of visiting authority. He must, Illya thinks, have been a very good sergeant in Vietnam.

They descend several floors and have to show their IDs three more times; each time seems more painful and protracted than the last. No one questions them—just the late hour.

“Changing shifts in a few minutes, you want me to leave a note for Jerry?” the last guard says, handing their cards back.
“If you wouldn’t mind,” Solo says, “I would hate to cause undue fuss.”

“I’ll let him know. You’re awfully high up to be doing the graveyard shift.”

Solo’s smile is modest. “When we have no time, we make it.”

“That we do, sir,” he says, and tips his hat. Illya would shake his head, if it wouldn’t give him away.

Once they’re buzzed through yet another reinforced steel door, Bergen leads them down the hall and finally unlocks the key to a laboratory. The room itself is not small, but it is mostly certainly claustrophobic—banks of daisy-chained servers occupy the right wall, one massive computer surrounding a small screen and keypad takes up the left, and endless printouts are labeled and stacked sometimes nearly up to Solo’s shoulders, everywhere else.

“Here we are at last,” Bergen says, “This is where the magic happens.”

“Splendid.” Solo takes an anticipator peek at the top of one of the stacks. “Bjørn, the case please. I am very much looking forward to comparing the adaptation matrices I assembled at home with the protocols you’ve been publishing on.”

“As am I,” Bergen says, rubbing his hands together. “I just ran a batch of tests this week, let me see, where did I put them…”

He begins to rummage, and Solo flicks a glance at Illya, the first eye contact he’s made since they exited the car. Illya nods.

The syringe is out of the case, in his hand, and then inserted into Bergen’s neck in less than a second. Illya catches him as he makes a strangled noise and then slumps towards the floor. “Chair,” Illya says.

Solo pulls out the small office chair that had been shoved under the computer’s keypad and maneuvers it over. Illya slides Bergen into the chair so that he looks, for all intents and purposes, like he took an impromptu nap.

“One hour, starting now,” he says.

“Let’s go,” Solo nods.

The Pentagon is a warren, and it only gets worse on these experimental floors.

Solo leads Illya further down the hall and through a set of double doors, keeping watch for any lights still on, any signs of prying eyes. Then they’re headed along a series of winding turns along narrow, badly-lit corridors lined with server space and, increasingly, engineering labs. towards the end of one hallway, they hit an elevator, keypad activated.

“Got that adapter?” Solo asks.

Illya nods, and carefully pries open the faceplate of the keypad, and hooks up the adapter. When he turns and looks up, Solo has a scalpel in his hand, and is drawing a thin, bloodless line down the side of his neck, right where Illya remembers the panel Solo used to hook up to the Vinciguerra bots is. It’s jarring enough for Illya’s hands to go nerveless for a second; he fumbles the adapter, but manages to catch himself quickly enough that Solo doesn’t seem to notice.

Solo puts the scalpel away and tilts his head enough that the silicon parts at the seam he’s made, and then he works his fingers over the patch of skin until there’s an audible hiss and the panel opens up.
“Okay, hand that up?” he says, nodding at the free end of the adapter.

Illya does, and then goes about redistributing his own equipment into less clandestine, more useful positions—clips of tranq rounds in his outside pockets, suit jacket unbuttoned for better access to his shoulder harness. They have another bank of guards to deal with on the floor below, which they’ll have to traverse to get to the development labs, where Teller had worked, and Solo had been made.

The keypad beeps obligingly, and the elevator doors opened.

A guard with his gun out and ready moves to fire from inside the elevator; Illya jams a tranq into his thigh and he crumples across the threshold. Illya grabs the gun out of his hand as he falls, preventing a stray shot.

“Good reflexes,” Solo says.

Illya grunts. Solo drags the guard out into the hall and leans him up in the closest doorway.

“Chop chop, Cowboy,” Illya reminds him, holding the elevator door.

“Just keeping everyone tidy,” Solo says, but he jogs to back over. “So that was one. Three more, by my estimation.”

Illya nods. Solo presses the button for their descent, and the doors close.

Moving across Sub-basement 3 is Illya’s wheelhouse, and at last he feels marginally at ease. Without a sound, he moves in front of Solo, taking in his muttered directions and with judicious use of signal disruptors and cut wires, blocks all communication outward or to the main security offices. Any guards that come their way are gently put down before any alarms can be sounded. They will all wake in time, having seen nothing, apparently uninjured. The floor is otherwise deserted; they meet no other night owls like Bergen.

By the time they reach the development labs, they only have half an hour to download the information they need and get back before Bergen wakes. It’s enough time, but leaves only a narrow margin for error. Solo lets them into the lab with the keypad adaptor and then quickly surveys the room, which seems to be an open plan laboratory divided into smaller workstations by sheets of particleboard. It’s very clear that the vast majority of the department’s budget goes directly towards synthesizing and programming the bots themselves.

The synthesizing equipment, however, is looking decidedly dusty. Solo follows his gaze. “Haven’t gone through with one in a while,” he says briefly. “At least, not one that can walk around outside.”

“After you?” Illya says. It doesn’t come out unkind, for which he finds he’s grateful.

“Mm,” Solo confirms.

“Where did Teller work?”

Solo tilts his head in the direction of a row of smaller offices that open off of a snaking corridor to the left. They follow it down, Illya checking their six every few paces, until they reach the end, where Solo pulls out lock picks and kneels to work on the office door.

After several seconds, Illya looks down at him. “Okay there?” he asks.

“Traditional keys are fiddly,” Solo says.
He works for a few more moments.

“Would you like me to—”

“Yes.” He steps back, and hands over the lock picks.

Illya kneels in front of the door. “You did not learn this before?”

“I did,” Solo says tightly, watching the corridor. “But my hands have...limitations. Do you know how many nerve fibers are in human fingertips?”

Natural movement must have been prioritized far above Solo’s touch sensitivity. Teller might have done good work on them, but any number of things had probably come before their manufacture, before efforts towards their quality control. And hands were fragile, easily broken, difficult to fix. A thought to be put away until later examination. “Should have just said before,” Illya grunts. “Is no shame in bad engineering.”

Solo sputters a half-indignant laugh. “Says you.”

Illya feels the delicate catch of the lock giving way, and twists the pick and tension wrench clockwise sharply. The doorknob gives way, and Illya is greeted with a puff of stale air.

“Twenty-five minutes,” Solo says.

They creep in and close the door silently behind them.

Where within the rest of the laboratory space there had been a faint hum of computers compiling and fans circulating air, there is only silence in Teller’s office. It clearly hasn’t been touched since he was taken by the Vinciguerras. Illya flicks on the overhead light.

In one corner, a tower of CPUs sit in a nest of wires, guarded by heat sinks and several fans, and next to them is Teller’s desk, on which sits a monitor, keyboard, and reams of papers, both printed and handwritten. Fiction and fact line the walls, some familiar texts Illya remembers receiving in translation during training, some he’d seen other trainees hoard and pass amongst each other. Turing and Asimov, Adamov and Odoyevsky. Wells and the Strugatskys, Hoffman and Freud. They're all lumped together on the shelves, no apparent thematic or alphabetic order to them.

Solo scans the titles, and makes a small sound of triumph when he finds what he’s looking for. Illya looks at what he’s retrieved—Modern Man in Search of a Soul. He snorts.

“It’s the only Jung here,” Solo points. “It must be the one.”

“I’m not arguing,” Illya says, “Just questioning his taste in books.”

Solo hums and flips through until a piece of card falls out from between the leaves. He picks it up.

“Good lord,” he says. “We’re going analogue.”

“Does he have a reader for that?” Illya asks dubiously, looking at the punch card.

“Must do, if this is the key. Let’s have a look.”

They comb the room, looking methodically while leaving as little trace of their presence as possible. Finally, Illya happens upon it—tucked into a hidden shelf underneath the top of Teller’s desk.

He calls Solo over as he fits the reader into one of the ports on Teller’s computer. Solo turns on the
power, and the computer comes to life with a hum and whir.

“Not even solid state,” Solo notes. “For a man on the cutting edge, Teller had a lot of trust in the old.”

“It’s unexpected,” Illya says. “Safer.”

They wait for the computer to boot up. When it asks for a password, Solo slips the punch card into the reader.

The computer screen flashes red for a brief moment, then goes blank.

Code begins to cascade.

Solo fumbles with the adapter cable still hooked up to his neck. “Plug me in.”

Illya grabs the spare end of the adapter and searches for the port on the body of the computer, finally finding one beneath the desk with the bank of hard drives stacked against each other. As soon as he manages the connection, Solo goes rigid, staggering into the closest chair.

“Okay?” Illya asks, gripping his arms when he falls into the rolling chair.

“Fine, fine,” Solo assures, though he sounds preoccupied. “Just...a lot. More than you’d expect from some basic overwrite code. It’s...well. It’s. There’s a lot. I just…”

Illya settles onto his knees. “Cowboy?”

Solo stares at the ceiling. “This is more than we expected.” He frowns. “And it’s all scrambled, there’s no fast way of extracting the code from the rest of the files. These drives haven’t been defragmented in years, and the file structure is a mess. What was he…”

Gaby’s reminiscences about her father come to Illya’s mind. “He used to mix his subjects,” he says. “Start working out physics equations for tokamaks and end up in binary.”

“Well, it shows. I don’t even know if all of this is his work—it’s too heavily encrypted, and we don’t have time for me to crack it.” He looks at Illya. “This might be far beyond our purview.”

Illya makes a face, but shrugs. “I’m here for intel. I doubt Moscow would complain if I bring back more than expected.”

Solo snorts. “If Waverly lets you bring it back at all.”

Illya scowls. “He’s not my boss.”

“No,” Solo agrees. “But don’t think he isn’t making a play for you, too.”

Illya chooses to ignore this, at least for now. “How long until you’re done with the transfer?”

Solo presses his lips together, and tilts his head meaningfully. Too long, then.

Illya looks at the tower of hard drives. “Those are—”

“Far too big to casually carry out under our arms, I agree,” Solo finishes.

Oleg ordered that if there was a significant chance of failure, they should abort. Now would be the time.
Solo is watching Illya’s face. “You could go,” he says. “Make up an excuse for my whereabouts, or just leave. I can take my chances with my usual exit route.”

“You’re staying,” Illya says, not bothering to make it a question.

Solo nods.

Illya swallows. They’ve come this far. And if there’s more than just the kill switch at the end of it, he can justify the risk.

He wants to justify the risk. He wants to know what Solo has uncovered.

“You’ll get caught trying to get out your way, and both of us need to be there for a clean exit out the front door.” He crosses his arms. “How long, and how much space do you need?”

“I can create enough space to download it all, but,” he tilts his head back and forth, “I’ll need to...hm.”

“Solo,” Illya warns. They have less than twenty minutes before Bergen wakes and wonders where they’ve gone.

“Yes, there’s too much,” Solo murmurs, mostly to itself, it seems. “I need to partition and...” He looks at Illya. “That word I gave you. Tell it to me.”

Illya blinks. “Now?”

Solo nods.

“...Kaesong.” He stumbles over the pronunciation.

Solo’s eyes flare, and he blinks rapidly. “Oh,” he breathes. “Huh.”

“What was that?” Illya asks.

“I can only partition once per person,” Solo says quickly, staring at him, seeming to almost drink him in. Illya flushes under the scrutiny. “Once I compress everything I can, I password and voiceprint-protect it. That’s how I work around check-ins—Sanders can’t access it, and neither can I.”

Illya nods; it’s a slightly more detailed explanation than before, but nothing unexpected.

“It takes up far less storage space too,” Solo continues. “But if I need to compress more, and have to use the same voice print, I have to decompress the original material and then add the new material to the file marked for partition and compression. Which means I’m now remembering what I left encrypted with your voiceprint from before.”

“Oh.” Illya desperately wants to know what those memories are now, if they’re making Solo look at him like *that*. “Okay,” he says, refocusing. “So do I need a new word?”

Solo nods. “Once I’ve downloaded everything. At the pace I’m extracting it now, I’ll give it to you in two more minutes.” He flicks a glance back up at Illya’s face, and then suddenly he reaches forward and takes Illya’s wrist in his hand. “Thank you, by the way,” he says quickly, almost under his breath, “For what you did. Putting me back together.”

Ah, of course. Illya would have partitioned that too, if he could. “Of course,” he says.

“No one but the technicians here have done that,” Solo continues, almost talking over him. “And
they tend to be clinical. So thank you. For that, and other things.”

Illya nods. He doesn’t have time to ask, even though he wants to. Solo’s hand is very warm.

Solo exhales, and abruptly lets go. “New word: Eleanora.”

Illya nods again. “I’ll remember.”

“Good,” Solo says wryly. “Because I won’t.”

He closes his eyes, and goes still.

Illya checks the time again—fifteen minutes to get back up to Bergen’s office.

It takes five for Solo to complete the download and compression.

Illya is on his feet and pacing by the time he stirs, adrenaline rising with every second ticking down. Solo twitches and looks disoriented for a moment, but then he surges out of the chair, disconnecting himself from the hard drives and pocketing the punch card.

“We’re good?” Illya asks, heading for the door.

“As good as we can be,” Solo replies.

They run.

It’s easier, backtracking, the guards in their path still out of commission, but it takes time, time they don’t have, to cross the subterranean labs to reach the second elevator, to only go through doorways Solo can hack. Illya has a finely-attuned sense of time, and he knows down to the second when there’s no longer any denying it—Bergen will most certainly have woken up, and they are not there with him to be accounted for. Illya makes plans, aggressive ones, for extraction, and knows Solo is doing the same.

They’ve both drawn their guns. There are guards on this floor, guards they haven’t put down, guards who Bergen will call if he’s found them gone, who will request a lockdown, all those reinforced steel doors locking between them and open air.

They skid out of the elevator towards Bergen’s office. Illya takes the safety off his gun—

Solo freezes in front of him. He raises a hand to bring Illya to a halt.

They’re two doors down from Bergen, and there are voices.

“Well obviously I ran into dear Bjørn doing his usual shadowing act further down the hall, and he said Ivor had gone to the WC, so I thought I’d wait for him here, with you,” Gaby’s voice rings out in careless, rapid-fire German. “I never expected to catch you napping on the job though, Dr. Bergen! Ivor must have worked you awfully hard. He’s just so obsessive with his hobby sometimes, it’s truly astonishing...”

Illya and Solo look at each other, and then sort themselves out in a silent frenzy—Illya slipping his armaments out of sight, straightening his jacket and taking up position just outside the door, away from Bergen’s line of sight; Solo holstering his gun and smoothing down the silicon panel on his neck as best he can before altering his gait once more and striding confidently into the office. Illya strains to listen, head pressed back against the wall, his hands shaking against where he’s pressed them flat to his thighs.
“Dr. Bergen, have you joined the land of the living yet—ah! And, my darling, what…? I told you not to wait up for me.”

“It’s nearly three o’clock, dearest, and you have a meeting at the Embassy this morning,” Gaby replies, her voice tight with mixed relief and irritation. “I know you’d rather tinker away with Dr. Bergen all night, but you do have responsibilities.”

Solo sighs. “I suppose you’re all too right, as usual.”

“How did—when did—what?” Dr. Bergen asks faintly.

“You were explaining your new innovations in learning matrices—the long-term crosscheck mechanisms and the like?” Bergen must nod, because Solo goes on more confidently, “And I suppose we got a bit sidetracked.” He then adds, with an air of dignified embarrassment, “That is, perhaps I got a bit sidetracked. I’m afraid I must have quite bored you to sleep with my ramblings. Ilsa knows too well how I have a tendency to carry on.” Gaby coos with indulgent disapproval.

Dr. Bergen splutters a bit more as he strives to overcome the fuzziness of tranquilized sleep. Illya knows from experience how difficult it can be. “Well I, that is. I’m sorry,” he stops, and tries again. “Excuse me, but you still haven’t answered my question, Mrs. Magnussen—how did you even get down here?”

“Why, I had one of the guards let me in,” Gaby says, as if it were nothing unusual. “He recognized me from the other day. We had a lovely chat, and I explained that if I didn’t retrieve Ivor he would most certainly oversleep and miss his meeting, and then Secretary Rusk would be very upset. Mr. Andrews was perfectly understanding, and gave me a temporary pass. A most helpful staff you have here, Dr. Bergen, diligent yet accommodating.”

“But I suppose we must be going,” Solo says, before Bergen can get a word in. “As you say, I should get some sleep before seeing the Secretary. There is so much more I should like to learn, but unfortunately my country must come before my passions. Dr. Bergen, it has been an absolute pleasure, and do try and get some proper rest some time soon. You work too hard. Bjørn!”

Illya takes his cue and steps into view. “Komendör?”

“We are off. Do stay in touch, Dr. Bergen.”

“Yes, yes of course,” Bergen says vaguely. “Take care, Commander, pleasure meeting you.”

Without further ado, Solo leads the way out of the warren, nodding courteously to the guards as he goes, apparently unaffected by the white-knuckled grip Gaby has on his elbow.

When they reach the lobby, the early morning-shift guard at the front desk spots them and smiles. “You found him, Mrs. Magnussen! Commander Magnussen, I presume?”

“You found him, Mrs. Magnussen! Commander Magnussen, I presume?”

“I did Mr. Baring, danke schön,” Gaby says, dimpling, “Your understanding is so appreciated.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to cause an international incident with Sweden,” Mr. Baring jokes, tipping his hat at Solo. “Commander. Hope you got what you came for from that lab rat.”

Solo tips his head in dignified acknowledgement, a warm smile on his face. “I did indeed, Mr. Baring. Have a wonderful rest of your evening.”

They step out the doors and walk unhurriedly into the parking lot, out to the car, which Gaby
unlocks with trembling hands.

They don’t speak until Gaby has driven them out onto the highway.

Then Solo clears his throat, and says, “Miss Teller, I could kiss you.”

Gaby lets out a half-hysterical breath. “And I could kill you,” she replies.

Illya tips his head back against the headrest in the back seat, and barks out one short, incredulous laugh. He’s fairly sure it’s the first time he’s laughed in years.

Chapter End Notes

If I were writing this as original fic, I would probably call a historian to find out the security measures of the Pentagon during the 1960s, but I am not, so this is purely conjecture from reading some stuff on general security measures from the period. Guards were much more numerous, and electronic gadgets/metal detectors/etc. much less so. Magnetic strips were only recently being put into use on credit cards, and thus were fairly viable security pass measures. Also, according to Hopscotch, my favourite CIA film of all time, cameras were mostly positioned over check-in desks to verify identities of people being buzzed into secure areas. My knowledge just about ends there. Hopefully nothing is egregious, but if I've learned nothing else from LeCarre and others, it's that the human element of spying and the art of the con were far more prominent at this time than we see now in current pop-culture spying. So I went with that!
By the time they arrive back at the hotel, Illya is dead on his feet, spent adrenaline leaving a burnt-out hollow inside him. Gaby isn’t much better, shaking her head intermittently to rouse herself.

Solo has stripped off his jacket and folded it away, leaving him in military trousers and his own shirt and tie. He ruffles his hair out of its careful slicked-back order, letting it fall a bit into his eyes, and then he loosens his tie, and takes Gaby by the hand to lead her through the lobby. She lets tendrils of her hair fall from where it was neatly tied back, smudges her makeup a bit, and pastes a tired smile on her face. The result is nothing like the accomplished, mature military husband and wife of less than an hour ago; instead just a young couple happily stumbling in, having spent the night dancing.

Illya follows some paces behind, unwilling even now to betray any sort of connection between them, if they’re being watched.

“Any of your people here?” he asks, when they load into the elevator. He doesn’t see any himself, but he is less familiar with their movements than Solo.

“Not that I can see,” Solo replies. “The guards we drugged should be waking up by now, though. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“We should lay low tomorrow.”

Solo nods. “I’ll start sorting through Teller’s files, getting them onto outside drives. They’re taking up too much space, it’s hard to keep up my full functionality.”

“Stay in my room, then,” Gaby says. “I can go out and run errands if need be; you won’t have to leave the suite.”

Solo squeezes her hand, and nods. He does look a bit vacant, Illya notices. Like there are pieces missing. He doesn’t like it.

“You need to charge?” he asks.

“Can’t,” Solo says. “Not until I clear everything out and install the kill switch override. It might be partitioned, but even the CIA will notice if half my RAM is occupied with unknown content. And anyway, the moment I do, they’ll know exactly where I am.”

“You’ll make it?”

“I certainly hope so.”

Illya nods, and accompanies him and Gaby to Gaby’s room; his own is further down the hall. He lingers in the doorway for a moment after Gaby has gone inside and Solo has stepped just to the opposite side of the door.

“You’ll be all right?” Illya asks, feeling a little foolish but nonetheless needing to ask. “With her?”

Solo gives him a puzzled look. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Illya opens his mouth to say something incredulous, and then abruptly stops. “Never mind,” he says
instead, and then steps away from the doorway quickly. “I...will see you tomorrow.”

Solo nods, blinking slowly. “Okay. Until then.” He shuts the door, which is good, because it pushes Illya into motion, away from Gaby’s room and towards his own, when his most powerful impulse is to barge through the door and draw battle lines.

He unlocks his own door without seeing it and slips inside. Slips off his jacket, shoes and belt, then trousers and shirt. Splashes water on his face in the bathroom, and then crawls into bed with the receiver he’d brought along just in case. There’s a signal when he switches it on; Solo must not have swept for bugs this time around. Sloppy.

There’s not much sound coming through, just the slow faraway footfalls of Gaby making her way around the room.

“You’ll be all right in the chair?” she asks.

“I can’t keep watch from the bed,” Solo replies. His voice is far more distinct—he must be closest to the bug Illya had planted on the floor lamp. Probably sitting in the chair just next to it. “Don’t worry, I’ve got enough charge left. You get some rest.”

Gaby must agree, because there’s a further shuffle, and then the sound of running water in the bathroom.

Illya breathes slowly and rolls onto his side, pushing his head into a pillow too soft for his taste. Through the receiver, the water shuts off and a door opens and closes.

“Well, goodnight, Solo.”

“Goodnight, Miss Teller. Thank you for your help tonight.”

A pause, and then, “Even if Waverly hadn’t ordered me to, I would have...well. If you had asked, and I was able....” She drifts off.

Another long pause, and then quietly. “Go to sleep, Miss Teller.”

And Gaby must do so, because the sound falls abruptly away, leaving only the shift of cloth, and a steady something that it takes a moment for Illya to identify.

It’s the whisper-quiet susurration of Solo’s breath. There is a difference between it and human breathing, which one wouldn’t notice if one wasn’t looking for it and hadn’t heard it before. Illya knows this only because of the long walk across the seabed that Solo had taken Illya through, when his breath had been Illya’s, and Illya’s ears ceased ringing, and then the water had muffled everything but the closest sounds. There is the smallest whir of servos beneath every inhale and exhale, the slightest hiss of air moving across carbon fiber instead of tracheal sinew.

It is an even, perfect rhythm; the kind that they teach you in the field. Illya, enthralled and exhausted, matches the steady rise and fall with his own, and slips into sleep.

***

Illya wakes far too early, considering the hour at which he’d fallen asleep. As soon as he’s close to conscious, his heart starts beating hard, adrenaline kicking up as the the magnitude of what they accomplished (committed) hits him, the depths into which he’s swum. Alarm bells are blaring in his head, he—
His phone is ringing. It does so twice more before he makes himself pick it up.

“Da.”

“Illya, get over here,” Gaby says. Illya is shamefully glad it is her, and not Oleg. He isn’t at all prepared for that conversation. Then he registers her tone.

“What’s wrong?” He asks.

“Solo’s running out of power, and we can’t let him plug in yet. He says you might have a solution.”

“A solu—” Illya breaks off, stares at nothing, and then curses soundly. “I’ll be right there.”

He hangs up and pulls on a sweater over his wrinkled shirt and trousers. His hair is still flattened on one side and he feels sticky with sweat from last night, but he ignores it and grabs his equipment case from the coffee table before heading down the hall.

Gaby answers on the first knock. “He’s been an idiot,” she growls. “He told me he had enough power to decompress and transfer everything, but apparently he was off in his estimation.”

“In my defense, this is very distracting material I’ve been going through,” Solo says from further inside. He’s slumped very carefully in the same chair as he must have been last night, beneath the floor lamp, his limbs just slightly akimbo. “And I had to install the override, that took a lot more doing to find and unpack than you’d expect, I’ll have you know. But then there was just so much more...” He drifts off, evidently talking more to himself than anyone else.

“So the override did work?” Illya asks Gaby, hoping for greater coherence from her. “He can’t be reached any longer?”

“Oh, they can still find and interrogate him if he plugs in,” Gaby says darkly, “But apparently yes—if they throw the kill switch, the signal shouldn’t register with him.”

Illya nods.

“What did he mean when he said you could help?” she asks.

Illya gives her a speaking look, and goes to approach Solo.

“I very much hope,” he says, stepping into the room and holding out his taser in accusation, “That you were not referring to this when you said that I could help.”

“Oh, they can still find and interrogate him if he plugs in,” Solo says, eyes brightening for a moment. “But apparently yes—if they throw the kill switch, the signal shouldn’t register with him.”

Illya nods.

“What did he mean when he said you could help?” she asks.

Illya gives her a speaking look, and goes to approach Solo.

“I very much hope,” he says, stepping into the room and holding out his taser in accusation, “That you were not referring to this when you said that I could help.”

“Oh, they can still find and interrogate him if he plugs in,” Solo says, eyes brightening for a moment. “I suspected as much. You looked like you had one, when we were in Rome.”

“This is 35,000 volts,” Illya hisses, gesturing with it. “It is designed to incapacitate you.”

“I doubt that,” Solo says, waving his fingers dismissively. “It’s not as if tasers are specifically designed for disabling robots.”

“Are you kidding,” Gaby says. “Ever since the Marchers, people have been looking for ways to disable bots.”

“But not me specifically,” Solo says, serene. “Because no one knows about me.”

“That is no longer the case,” Illya says through his teeth. “And how is this going to charge you?”
“Torturously,” Solo replies, with a sunny half-smile. “But I’m quite certain it will work. We’ll need a bit of your knowhow, Miss Teller—I’m afraid that while my electrical engineering knowledge is decent, I’m quite rusty on the application. And I should probably save my energy,” he adds, as an afterthought.

“You’re out of your mind, possibly literally,” Gaby says. “Why can’t you just partition what you have left and take a normal charge?”

“Because then dear Sanders’ll know where I am, and it won’t take a moment to put two and two together. Two being me slipping my watchers for several days, and two—that is, the other two—being the theft from Teller’s office.” Solo cocks his head. “Huh. Oh, that is interesting.”

“Are you still processing the files?” Illya asks, in disbelief.

“Obviously, that’s how we got here, isn’t it? Need to, or I’ll keep winding on like this ad infinitum. Fascinating stuff. I’m fairly certain I’ll care more once I dedicate some RAM to actually comprehending it. Right now, however, it’s just deeply interesting.” He looks at Illya a little wide-eyed. “I disabled the kill switch last night. Illya, I could leave.”

Illya looks at the ceiling, because anything else will make him want to destroy things.

“How long until you run down?” he asks.

“I would very much like that not to happen,” Solo says earnestly. “It’s only happened once and it was very unpleasant, almost as bad as maintenance standby. Also, I might lose things.”

Illya keeps looking at the ceiling. He is not thinking about what Solo might mean by maintenance standby. “How long.”

“Oh, right. Mm. Two hours? Three? Let’s go with two, just to be safe.” He blinks slowly. “Two.” His lips purse over the word in apparent fascination.

“Himmel, arsch und Zwirn,” Gaby mutters. “Illya, give me the taser, and then you need to go out and find me the following things.” She goes to her purse and rummages through it to retrieve a pen and slip of paper. She scribbles hastily for several moments, and then hands it over. “Quick as you can, please.”

Illya nods a bit numbly, and forces himself into motion. He needs his hat and jacket from his room, as well as his gun and wallet.

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Illya takes no chances in his excursion—he takes the back entrance out of the hotel and slips down an alley into another, smaller establishment to charm a waitress into directing him towards a hardware store, keeping an eye out for tails. He thinks he perhaps spots one skulking at a newsstand, and is careful to stay out of his eye-line. There is no question that there’s a certain tension outside, of a type he’s familiar with when something has gone wrong within the inner workings of a capital—frenetic movement of certain men in suits, a greater-than-usual number of cars driving a little too fast, screeching around corners. He doesn’t let it faze him, just wanders as casually as he can into the hardware store to pick up a soldering iron, capacitors, and various other sundries. The man at the counter doesn’t look twice at him, probably still half asleep, his cup of coffee steaming beneath his nose on the counter. Illya takes his purchases quietly and makes his way back as quickly as he can.

He knows there’s something wrong when he steps into the hotel kitchen from the loading entrance. It’s late enough that the staff should be bustling, distributing newspapers and serving breakfast.
The kitchen is silent. So is the hall when Illya steps out into it, towards the service elevator. Either everyone’s been herded into their rooms, or the whole place is deserted.

Illya draws his gun, but keeps the safety on, and shifts his grip to the barrel. His steps are light as he goes down the hall and presses the button for the elevator. He steps to one side of the elevator doors, flush to the wall.

The ding of the elevator’s arrival is like an alarm bell. As the doors slide open, a man steps out, leading with his gun.

Shoddy work.

Illya slaps the gun out of his hand, pulls him forward and off-balance and then puts him down with a strike to the back of his head. The man crumples. Illya hauls him to the side and gets into the elevator, pressing the button for the fifth floor. A cold calm settles on him as the doors slide shut and the ascent begins.

The elevator reaches its stop with a slight lurch.

“Back already, Mi—”

Illya reaches through the opening doors and grasps a wrist before he ever sees a face, slams it against the door frame, gets a grip on the head and smacks it on the wall as he steps out. A third man goes down hard two doors down, a sharp kick to the right outside knee collapsing his articular cartilage, pistol handle to the skull temporarily relieving him of the painful experience of a displaced kneecap.

The two men outside Gaby’s room get a chance to draw their guns and fire. Illya ducks into a doorway, changes his grip and takes the safety off. Waits two breaths, delivers answering fire and hears a fervent curse.

Risking a quick glance beyond the alcove allows him to plan a zigzagging path to Gaby’s door. He executes it easily, crossing the distance in long quick strides, snatching shelter in two more doorways, dodging a close shot that clips the wall close to his ear without flinching.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Sanders must’ve been right, it’s that fucking Russkie, Kuryakin—”

Illya cuts him off with prejudice, heel of his palm to the base of his nose, angled up, a satisfying crunch, before grabbing the top of his gun, forcibly disassembling it and using the slide to support his fist as he lands it on his temple and sends him to the floor. His companion squeezes off a shot that goes wide, a rip in the upper arm of his suit jacket revealing where Illya’s shot had landed. Illya breaks his hand, then his forearm, follows through with his elbow up under his chin to send his head snapping back, his knees crumbling underneath him as he loses consciousness.

It’s very quiet, then. Illya breathes through it, checks the hallway for any arriving backup, and then considers Gaby’s door. He doesn’t have a key.

He raises a (slightly bloody) hand, and knocks.

“Yes, one moment.”

Gaby sounds calm. Illya cautiously puts the safety back on his gun.

There are quiet footfalls beyond the door, and then the click of the lock and scrape of security chain. Gaby exhales when she looks up at him, and then glances down at the bodies at his feet. “Are they
“dead?” she asks.

“No. Will be very unhappy when they wake up, but.” Illya struggles to smooth out his accent. It has been several weeks, he realizes, since he’d last been in such a familiar environment as this, and for a brief moment it had transported him back to the training grounds outside of Roshal, where bombed out buildings were transformed into hotel complexes, warehouses, and government buildings, all ready for infiltration. He dismisses the memory, and holds up a finger. “One moment.”

He jogs back to the elevator, and retrieves the bag of electrical equipment from where he’d deposited it when the elevator had first landed. He comes back and offers it to Gaby.

She looks inside. “Perfect. Thank you.”

He nods, disproportionately pleased. “How is he?”

“Finally done with the decompression and transfers, and high as a kite,” Gaby says dryly. “Also, mind where you step.”

Illya looks down and finds Sanders, bound on the floor and breathing noisily against the carpet.

“He is not dead?” he asks. A taser with that amount of power would kill a man easily and instantly.

“No, I was taking apart all of the circuitry when he came in, he only got about a thousand volts,” Gaby says, holding the cannibalized taser. “Weak heart though, it might be a while before he wakes up. Hopefully.”

“They’ve got no idea what we have,” Solo says from across the room, sounding dreamy. “No idea what he had. Teller, you sly dog.”

Gaby flinches slightly. “I’ll get to work on this,” she mutters, “We haven’t got much time before these people either miss check-in or wake up.”

Illya nods. “Does Waverly know we’re leaving ahead of schedule?”

“He has ears in the CIA. He’ll know.”

Of course he does. Illya shakes his head, and goes back out into the hall, grimacing slightly as he looks at the men still out cold on the ground. A couple of them are beginning to shift, struggling towards consciousness. He needs to take care of this.

He goes to his room, where he gathers his belongings and Solo’s suit from yesterday with practiced efficiency, and then brings them back to Gaby’s. Once there, he grabs a length of rope from his pack, and then goes to the bathroom to filch several hand towels from the shelves inside. When he comes back into the room, Gaby has safety goggles and gloves on, which look a bit bizarre with her sundress, but Illya doesn’t allow time to note it, just asks, “Packed?”

“Everything is by the door,” Gaby replies, not looking up.

“Good.” He casts another glance at Sanders on the floor, and nods. “Be right back.”

Gaby grunts acknowledgement, and turns on the soldering iron. Solo casts a dubious glance at him, but doesn’t say anything.

Back out in the hall, Illya methodically checks that the CIA men remain unconscious, and then goes back downstairs.
The first man is where he left him, in an untidy sprawl. Illya slings him up over one shoulder, and gets back in the elevator. The hotel remains eerily quiet. Illya wonders if Sanders’s men requested the phone lines be cut, in addition to flushing out the staff and guests. It would have been a good job, had Illya not needed to step out for supplies.

Methodically, he drags the rest of the men into the hotel room, dumping them on the floor in a line before tying their hands and feet, and gagging them with the hand towels liberated from the bathroom.

“How long until they’re missed, do you think?” Gaby asks, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

“How long, but long enough,” Solo says, also watching, but with far less concern. “Not that many people are at this paygrade.” He regards Illya’s handiwork with glazed eyes. “An extraordinarily neat job there, Peril. Color me impressed.”

Illya shrugs, and carefully does not flush.

“Peril.”

He cuts a glance over to him. “Yes?”

“What’s Spetsgruppa Usovnly Reflex?”

Had Solo said it in any other manner than how he did—with unconcerned, distracted curiosity—Illya might have killed him. As it is, he stills entirely, like a rabbit under a floodlight.

“Ask me when you have a functioning battery,” he says, aiming for snide, and landing at slightly desperate.

Solo looks at him finally, and cocks his head. “Okay,” he says, peaceable.

“Right, I think we’re ready,” Gaby says, to Illya’s relief. “I’ve lowered the overall discharge rate and value, took out the last set of step-up transformers, and smothered the C3 capacitor to give your battery a chance to recover from each pulse. With any luck, it won’t explode.”

“What’s your C2 value?” Solo asks, clearly having to work to concentrate.

“1.95µF. I moved the two capacitors into parallel.”

“Smart girl.”

“You ready?” She asks, bringing the circuitry over to him.

“As I’ll ever be,” Solo replies, smiling a little. “I’m sure I’ll regret it after, but it really is the most expedient way, and anyway—”

“Stop babbling and let me do this,” she cuts him off.

A little more gravely, he nods, and then catches Illya’s eye. “Could you get my scalpel? It’s in my jacket.” He begins to unbutton his shirt, and shoots a look of distaste at the men on the floor. “I’d rather not do this with an audience, but...needs must, I suppose.”

The scalpel is where Illya remembers Solo retrieving it from last, a small hidden pocket Solo had cut in on the inside of the military coat, hidden behind the service ribbons. He moves to hand it off, but Solo shakes his head. His shirt is now discarded at his feet. His skin is pale and too even, ripples of
silicon in just the right variations of thickness to imply muscle and sinew beneath. Illya averts his eyes.

“It’s small incisions, hard to reach. You don’t mind, do you?” Solo says.

Illya swallows. “Where?”

Slumping forward on the edge of the chair, Solo indicates with loose fingers two places, one at his sternum, one on his back. Illya remembers the first from before—a place where the main lithium battery connects to the bellows system, the connecting terminals just beneath the skin. The second is between the fifth and sixth ribs on his back, just to the left of his spine.

Holding his breath, Illya kneels to reach and cuts small crosswise incisions where Solo indicates, enough to peel back the corners and connect the small clamps with which Gaby has replaced the nodes of the taser to the terminals just beneath. As usual, Solo is disconcertingly warm, and even warmer beneath the skin. Illya keeps his gaze directly on the space he works on, refusing to acknowledge the slow rise and fall of Solo’s ribcage, or the nagging, irrational expectation of blood in the place of adhesive as he cuts in, no matter that he’s already seen what’s beneath Solo’s silicon surface.

“Okay?” Illya says, when he’s finished and the two clamps are in place. He steps back, well out of the way.

“Absolutely,” Solo replies gamely, but for the first time since Illya woke this morning to find him dopey on energy loss, there’s a flicker of trepidation, turning his smile into a grimace. “Miss Teller, if you please. Twenty seconds ought t’doo it.”

“Here goes nothing,” Gaby mutters, and pulls the trigger.

It’s nothing like seeing Solo in Rudi’s chair. It’s worse.

Without the straps to hold him down, Solo seizes and his hands clamp down on the arms of the chair, fingers turning to claws on the upholstery. His back arches and his his jaw clamps and Illya has the sudden, illogical thought that they should have put something between his teeth before they started, and—

“Don’t touch him,” Gaby warns, but her voice shakes. “Keep count with me, twelve seconds left…”

Illya stays where he is and counts down under his breath. Doesn’t look away.

“Four, three, two, one,” Gaby breathes. She takes her finger off the trigger. Solo spasms, and stills.

“Napoleon?”

He hisses out a breath through his teeth, and then seems to work to get his jaw loose. “Ten more seconds,” he rasps. “If you don’t mind.” His eyes are big in his face, but his tone brooks no argument.

“Schieße,” Gaby says under her breath, then louder, “Fine.”

She pulls the trigger. Illya has the private thought that if he’d ever had doubts about her ability to be a spy, this moment has erased them.

They both count down in silence, hearing the whine of the taser charge and discharge, watching Solo convulse in the chair. Ten seconds feels like an hour.
“One,” Gaby whispers, and releases her grip.

Solo sucks in deep breaths. His hands have torn the upholstery, warped one arm of the chair. There is a strong smell of burnt plastic in the air surrounding him. Illya and Gaby watch him in silence.

He blinks rapidly, and then detaches one hand from the chair to run it through his hair. When he withdraws it, he studies it as if expecting blood or something else to come away, but his hand is clean.

“Well,” he remarks, sounding slightly unsteady, but very sober indeed. “That was unpleasant. And now we need to go.” He pauses, and then looks away. “I...apologize if anything I said or did distressed you. Generally, I don’t like letting myself get to that point, due to how it affects my ability to interact with people.”

Gaby purses her lips. “It’s fine. You’re good to move? The switch is still disabled?”

“More than, and so far as I can tell, yes.” Solo flashes a tight smile at her. “Hand me my shirt, would you? And Illya, would you—” he stops abruptly, then shoots an apologetic glance at Illya. “Never mind. Easy enough to manage myself.”

With that, he reaches behind him and, somewhat awkwardly, detaches the clamps from the terminals beneath his skin. Illya hisses when he sees melted silicon come away with them. “Are you—”

“Fine, Peril,” Solo says, watchful. “Don’t worry about me.” The difference between his previous largesse and his current care is striking. He takes his shirt from Gaby and shrugs it on. “The drives?”

“The smaller suitcase,” Illya says. They'd been steadily piling up, according to Gaby, as Solo had transferred all of the data from Teller onto secure hardware that wasn't directly wired into him. Now there were about eight in all—several terabytes of data at least.

Illya would be lying if he claimed not to be interested in what was contained there. If he claimed to have no motivation beyond getting those drives to Moscow, where they would be whisked away and he would never know their contents beyond their fallout.

Their belongings gathered, a tense agreement of silence as to what they had done in place, they slip out of the hotel and drive to the airport in a borrowed car.

The smell of burning plastic lingers right up until they board the plane (Waverly’s, left on standby in case of this eventuality), at which point Solo announces that he’s going to sleep for a while, even though all of them know that he doesn’t sleep like a human at all. They let him have the illusion.

Through his small window, Illya thinks he sees men in suits barging into the control booth on the airstrip as they take off, gesturing wildly.

They're in the air and away before he can see anything more.

The adrenaline of the morning doesn’t seem to abate; instead, it continues to drone under Illya's rib cage, insistent and full of foreboding.

***

They land around midnight at an RAF airfield outside of London, where Waverly meets them on the tarmac. It's lukewarm and drizzling, and makes Illya feel as if he’s been submerged in a muddy puddle.
“Well, you three certainly know how to make a splash,” Waverly says, with a mixture of resignation and annoyance. “I do hate fielding calls from the CIA.”

“You shouldn’t have told us to rob them, then,” Gaby retorts. “Do they know what’s missing?”

Waverly presses his lips together, and then after a moment, he gestures to the town car he’d emerged from on the strip. “Come along, best we go to a more secure location.”

They pile in, Waverly facing them. He taps the glass partition and the car lurches into motion.

“Congratulations are in order, I gather?” he says, looking at Solo.

Solo watches him for a moment, and then nods. “Thank you, but don’t read anything into it, sir.”

“Ha,” Waverly murmurs, “Wouldn’t dream of it.” He taps his fingers on the leather armrest.

“Sir?” Gaby says, more intently. “Do they know?”

“No,” Waverly replies. “Thankfully, Teller was very secretive indeed. All they know is that there has been a treasonous act, and a breach of Pentagon security, the likes of which has not been seen in the short history of the complex. They know it has to do with Teller, but they don’t know what’s been changed or taken.”

“That’s...good,” Gaby hazards.

“Mm,” Waverly agrees. “It was about as clean a job as I could have hoped for, I suppose. One doesn’t go on a raid of the Department of Defense expecting no consequences.”

An uneasy roil is making itself known in Illya’s gut. He closes his hand into a fist on his thigh.

Waverly takes his time. As they get off the A40, he finally stirs.

“Reading or not, I’m inclined to bring you into the fold, Solo,” he says, after a moment. “At least on a trial basis, if you’ll agree to it. I think, if you see the operation that I’m attempting to assemble, you’ll believe that I may be your best chance at autonomy in the current climate.

“You see, as of two hours, twenty-three minutes ago, I have been informed that your kill switch was activated from CIA headquarters. You are, so far as they know, a heap of metal and silicon awaiting retrieval.”

Solo opens his mouth, makes no sound, and then shuts it again. It’s very clear that Waverly isn’t finished.

“Rather sooner than you were expecting, I imagine,” Waverly notes. “Awfully hasty of them, to try to disable and potentially damage a one-of-a-kind prototype so soon after realizing it had gone rogue.

“Now, I’m sure you know better than I do what your chances are of getting tracked down and dragged back to somewhere you don’t want to be, even with the head start of being presumed offline,” Waverly continues. “But I can hazard a guess that they aren’t high. Meanwhile, I can offer you protection, both technical and, hopefully, political. Our goals may not even be as misaligned as you have previously assumed. And of course, in the immediate future, you have a need of cutting off the rest of your reliance on the CIA, or they’ll be on your doorstep within the week. I can guarantee you help with that.”

They cut through the outskirts of London towards Belgravia. The silence in the car is stifling. Illya
tries to breathe slowly through his nose.

“Kuryakin,” Waverly says, several intolerable minutes later, as they begin to wind through the residential streets. “Are you aware that you were identified while at the hotel?”

Illya can feel his face turn to stone. Of course—the first agent guarding Gaby’s door. He turns to look at Waverly, but says nothing. There’s no need to say all that such a statement implies.

Waverly meets his gaze, and looks almost apologetic.

He could take the intel and run. Grab the suitcase of hard drives, kill Waverly and Gaby, disable Solo, make his way to Moscow. It would be messy and visible, but for the intel that is sitting in this town car, Oleg and the agency would forgive him. Would perhaps protect him, even if they disavow him publicly.

Perhaps.

The car pulls up in front of a quiet residence on Wilton Crescent.

“Our base of operations,” Waverly says briefly. “At least, for the time being. Coming?”

Illya exchanges a look with Gaby, who raises her eyebrows. Solo refuses to look at either of them, but he gets out the car.

They follow, and Waverly leads them up the steps to the front door, which opens onto a tasteful, if ordinary foyer, adorned only with William Morris wallpaper and a small mahogany table with a lightly-wilted flower arrangement on it. “Lock the door behind you if you please, Mr. Solo,” Waverly says, as he walks further into the house.

Solo does as he’s bid, all of his diffident mannerisms back in place, hand delicate on the doorknob. They all troop to the back of the flat, where Waverly unlocks a basement door and leads the way down into dim, slowly warming light. Faint but growing louder is the sound of whirring fans, the tapping of keystrokes, and a murmur of voices.

“There are a number of houses around here,” he says, still descending, “Which have extensive underground presences. Wine cellars turned into air raid shelters, expanded to become fallout shelters. The Crown acquired this one after the previous tenant died, the last of his line. Discreetly, it has since absorbed several of the neighbors’ setups as well. It suits our purposes for now.”

Illya blinks when they reach the floor. The space is both surprisingly cavernous and unsurprisingly orderly, less of a basement and more an open plan office, broken up sporadically by cubicles and a few thin-walled offices. Computer equipment lines the walls, as does an array of surveillance monitors, which are complemented by several small communications booths. Off to one side, several women in casual dress sit reading long rolls of printouts, occasionally making notes. Another two shuffle between the notes and the computers, inputting processes, and studying the results.

“What is this place?” Solo asks, after a moment.

“This,” Waverly says, with no small amount of satisfaction, “Is UNCLE.”

Chapter End Notes
My electrical engineering knowledge is nonexistent, but I'm drawing Gaby and Napoleon's dialogue from this explanation of stun-gun construction. Hopefully it's not totally off-base!
“UNCLE?” Solo echoes.

“United Network for Cybernated Law Enforcement,” Waverly supplies. He quirks a smile. “We were perhaps overzealous in our search for a good acronym.”

“And overly optimistic about your jurisdiction,” Solo points out. “Considering no one has heard of you.”

“Early days yet,” Waverly says with alacrity. “Come and meet the team. Just the late shift and some night owls but, well, scientists being what they are, there are certainly some choice personalities among those.”

He begins to walk them over to the main warren of cubicles, only sparsely populated now, but populated nonetheless. The overhead lights aren’t harsh, but they feel it—Illya’s eyes are grainy with lack of sleep, and even walking feels like an incredible effort. He tallies the hours of rest he has gotten since Rome and finds them alarmingly wanting.

The dull thud of adrenaline from being identified, from probable disavowal, and from even the contemplation of running, continues to thrum under his ribs, unabated since the car ride.

“I suppose you deserve a bit of context at this point,” Waverly says as they walk. “When Agent Sanders showed his hand in Berlin, as it were—his hand being you, Solo—he set off a chain of events which I doubt he or his superiors foresaw. You confirmed what had only been a suspicion amongst the Soviet higher-ups, and when you proved, under their diligent watch no less, just how resilient you are, well.” He tilts his head back and forth, “It caused a stir. Everyone started paying very close attention to the proceedings in Italy. Myself included. At first I had thought I would merely be containing the disaster you and Mr. Kuryakin had instigated, but then—well. You know how things have shaken out.”

“Have you been here before?” Illya murmurs to Gaby.

Gaby shakes her head. “I’ve never been to England before.”

So she apparently had gotten on board with Waverly without ever seeing the full extent of his work. He chances a look at her. She seems exhausted also, but not troubled. She has made her allegiances already, and knows, at least in the abstract, where she is sleeping tonight.

“This organization all was established before that, though not by much longer,” Waverly continues, appearing not to hear them. “In the wake of the war, it became clear that robotics was the new frontier, and while Britain was not at all equipped to venture forth, we could at least be prepared for when others did. I thus got permission from the Navy and Her Majesty to begin this side project. Dr. Gillman, how goes?”

Dr. Gillman is a plump, grandmotherly brown-skinned woman with pince-nez perched on the tip of her nose, her tweed suit and trousers wrinkled in all directions, clearly at the mercy of a (possibly habitual) long work day. “It goes, sir, as always,” she says, matter-of-fact and West Indies-accented. She looks over the four of them with a careful, flickering glance. “Who are your people?” she asks.
Waverly gestures towards them. “Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo, present collaborators, and my operative Gaby Teller, recently of East Berlin.”

“Teller?” Gillman repeats, with interest. “Are you…?”

Gaby nods, a little warily.

“I was sorry to hear of his passing. Very brilliant man, your father, and not a blowhard. We reference his work here often.”

Her smile at that is fragile but genuine. “Thank you.”

“Dr. Gillman heads up our coding team,” Waverly says. “Working with her are Dr. Kumar and Miss O’Malley.”

A petite blonde with an Irish complexion and a spindly, hunched South Asian woman wave a awkwardly from their desks. They’re both a bit owl-eyed, and are hugging mugs of either tea or coffee to their chests like it’s their life’s blood.

“Present collaborators?” Dr. Kumar says. She sounds like finishing school, the sort of English Illya is familiar with from hearing speeches on the BBC. “What on earth is that supposed to mean?”

“Recruits,” O’Malley replies, sounding by contrast rather Cork-adjacent and therefore only partially intelligible to Illya. “On a test run, am I right?”

“Test runs completed with flying colors, more or less,” Waverly says, smiling a bit.

“We usually meet new people before that,” Gillman says, crossing her arms. “We usually are the test run.”

“That’s true,” Waverly admits. “But—”

“We work in the field,” Gaby finishes. She crosses her arms too, chin tilting up.

Instead of the disbelief Gaby was perhaps expecting, the three women’s interest palpably increases. Illya finds himself pulling inward under the scrutiny.

“Can you shoot a gun?” O’Malley asks Gaby.

Gaby shrugs. “Among other things.”

O’Malley grins. “Neat.”

The corner of Gaby’s mouth ticks up in answer.

“You code AIs?” Solo asks O’Malley, expression inscrutable.

“Bits and pieces,” O’Malley says, fast and percussive, between sips from her mug. “No complete consciousness yet—it would be quite unfair to build one without giving it some sort of physical access to the world, and we don’t have the means to manufacture down here. Like call and response, not a conversation. Or something like that.”

Solo blinks, and then nods, very slightly. He begins to drift, very subtly, towards the bank of processors that are printing the various test results the women are studying and marking up.

“How’s that grant coming along, by the way?” Gillman asks Waverly.
“We’re still waiting on some things,” Waverly replies, regretful but not apologetic.

Illya gets the impression that they’ve been told that many times, and are resigned to it. He wonders what precisely Waverly is waiting on. He’s struck also by the assessing look Solo is giving the women in between his studies of the emerging printouts, half the sort of blankness that Illya has come to associate with guarded suspicion, but also half careful, considering interest.

As Gillman and Waverly discuss the possibilities of funding and their current avenues of research, Gaby wanders over to Dr. Kumar’s station and, when Kumar appears unbothered, peeks over her shoulder. “This looks like more than behavior code,” she notes.

Kumar raises her eyebrows. “I specialize in the physio interface,” she says, then makes a face. “Well, in theory at least.”

Gaby nods, scanning the code. “Could I see the model?”

Kumar nods, and navigates to another program.

“Huh,” Gaby says, after a second. “I’ve never seen reflexes embedded that way. You skipped the spinal relay?”

This time, it’s O’Malley’s eyebrows that go up. “You code?”

Gaby shook her head. “Just enough to get by in a pinch,” she says. “Bit of everything, out of necessity.”

“You’re a synthesizer,” O’Malley says, leaning over towards them. “We like those around here.”

Kumar nods, and points to various points on the model. “I thought if I could get the processing power of the full CPU into a sort of closed circuit with the closer impulse-rendering circuitry, it might conserve some power.”

“Where’s the heat sink?” Gaby asks.

“Yeah Rivs, where is the heat sink?” O’Malley says, poking Kumar repeatedly and waggling her eyebrows.

Kumar sighs. “I’m working on that.” She slaps at O’Malley’s hand. “Stop that, you witch.”

“Well, I never!” O’Malley exclaims in what seems to be an exaggerated impression of Kumar’s accent.

“Iris,” Dr Gillman says in bored warning, turning away from Waverly for a moment. “Don’t poke the bear.”

Kumar rolls her eyes in a pointedly unladylike fashion. “She’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Gaby looks...charmed. “Perhaps somewhere near the top of the throat chamber?” she suggests. “Give it some help from the bellows system.”

“Tried that,” Kumar says, but doesn’t sound disheartened. “It caused an interesting feedback problem. See—”

“Kuryakin?”

Illya turns as Dr. Gillman gravitates back towards the cluster of women. Waverly has his hands in his
suit pockets, and is smiling faintly at him.

“Come along, meet the philosophers next. Or at least one of them, Sidney’s usually here until at least three on weekends, unless someone’s dragged her to the pub. Miss Teller, are you…?”

“Be with you in a moment,” Gaby says, not looking away from where she, Gillman, O’Malley, and Kumar are now all crowded around Kumar’s screen. Kumar and O’Malley are bickering through a blend of math and insults. Gillman, rather than breaking up the argument, seems to be egging them on, pointing out various bits of the model that prompt further conflict.

One of O’Malley’s hands is resting high up on Kumar’s thigh, and Kumar doesn’t seem to mind. Illya blinks hard, feels his face heat, and looks away again. He suddenly realizes he’s standing apart from everyone else, stranded next to an empty desk. His hands flex at his sides. They feel sore, tendons overstretched with fatigue and knuckles still recovering from dealing with Sanders’s men.

Waverly just nods at Gaby’s preoccupation, apparently unconcerned. “Solo?”

Solo puts down the print out he had been looking through and slips his hands back in his pockets. “Philosophers. Sounds intriguing.”

“Well, that’s what we call them, at least,” Waverly says, leading him and Illya away from the far side of the room towards a cluster of offices closer to the stairs, while Dr. Gillman returns to her work. “More like psychologists with advanced maths degrees. An unconventional bunch, to be sure.”

“That seems to be your preference, sir,” Solo says, watching him.

“I suppose this whole affair does rather reveal certain eccentricities on my part, doesn’t it?” Waverly agrees. “The Navy had its reservations, too. Thankfully, however, my results so far have spoken for themselves.”

“Do tell,” Solo says, with an almost seductive lilt that makes Waverly shoot him a surprised look and blink rapidly.

“I say,” he says, and then shakes himself. “You are very good at that, it’s quite... quite. But, ah, well. I suppose, to start, there was that incident in West Bengal.”

“West…” Solo starts, and then frowns. “Not—”

“Project Alcove,” Waverly nods. “Dr. Gillman saw it coming, wrote source code to delay and contain it. It could have been much, much worse.” He smiled thinly. “I only delivered Dr. Gillman’s work to the right people. Someone had to. It didn’t feel like much, but it did earn us some attention.”

Illya has never heard of Project Alcove. But he remembers now, blearily as if through many layers of dirty glass, mention of missiles built with rudimentary heat- and life-seeking minds being constructed in South Asia in the late forties as an “enforcement measure.” They had all experienced critical failures at the last minute.

He breathes in and out deeply, beginning to understand the lengths Waverly has apparently gone to create this organization, of the force and endurance of his will that has gotten them all here, over a decade later: Gillman and the rest, and then Gaby and Solo and Illya. Of the way in which Waverly has done all that, and then blinked at them like an absentminded professor while offering them choices that, even now, aren’t truly choices.

The walls around Illya seem closer and closer. He needs rest, and time to think.
Waverly knocks on one of the office doors where a light is still on inside. “Dr. Bering, do you have a moment? And is Emerson available? I think she’d like to see our guests.”

There is a shuffle of papers beyond the door, and then it opens to reveal a broad-shouldered and curvaceous woman in a severe black skirt suit, who raises an eyebrow over the top of her horn-rimmed glasses at the group. “Waverly. This is late for you. And she hasn’t met anyone not previously vetted before,” she says. Illya can’t imagine her setting a foot anywhere near a pub.

“They’ve already met,” Waverly explains briefly, and understanding dawns.

“Oh,” she says, with a significant glance thrown at the three of them. “Which one of you is Napoleon Solo?”

After a moment’s pause, Solo raises his hand slightly. “That would be me.”

Bering nods, but seems deliberately not to change her tone or stance. “Good. She’s been asking about you. I’ll bring her in.” She disappears down a hallway that curves off to one side, where the plaster tails off and reveals rough stone and mortar that looks at least a century old.

“That was Dr. Sidney Bering,” Waverly says, gesturing at her retreating back. “New South Wales import, absolutely brilliant, and has become quite close with Emerson in the past week. She works with twin theoretical psychiatrists, Aina and Aksel Wolff, pioneers in their field—they invented it, they ought to be—who work normal hours, so perhaps you’ll meet them later.”

“Emerson,” Solo repeats, the first real spark of interest in his voice. “Do you mean—?”

“Our refugee, yes,” Waverly says, with a slight smile. “I thought you might like to see how she’s faring.”

How I keep my promises is implied but unspoken. Solo knows it too, from the way he keeps his face very still. Illya is still stuck on the word later, though. As if they are already on board, already a part of this...whatever it is. A foregone conclusion.

“Emerson mostly works with the philosophers; she doesn’t feel particularly comfortable with us looking at her source code or her chassis. Understandable, of course,” Waverly adds hastily. “We’ve mostly just been working to acclimate her—introduce her to human interaction, give her some context for her existence, that sort of thing. She’s a quick learner, of course, and very curious thanks to you, Solo, but it is rather a lot to take in.”

“Of course,” Solo murmurs. “Took me ages.”

Illya rouses himself enough to ask him, quietly, “What’s your measure of ‘ages’?”

A tight smile flickers across his face. “Four days, give or take.”

“Hello.”

Illya blinks.

The bot—Emerson, Illya supposes—is wearing trousers.

Obviously, that isn’t the only thing it’s wearing—men’s trousers in black wool, and a loose, ruffled white blouse buttoned all the way up under a cropped camel suit jacket. It has all been carefully chosen, he notes, to de-emphasize the odder parts of the bot’s anatomy: the too-broad shoulders, the strange, curve-less waist and hips, the bulge of the tokamak where its stomach would be. He
wonders how much of this artifice was chosen by the bot, and how much had been suggested for it.

It is also humming, a low, buzzing thrum that must be the tokamak, whirring away. It gives the vague, unsettling impression that it is housing a swarm of bees.

“Thank you for joining us, Emerson,” Waverly is saying. “How are you this evening? You remember Mr. Solo and his companions.”

“Of course. How do you do?” Emerson says. It speaks without inflection, words just slightly too-evenly spaced to be natural, but the flatness is belied by the way it leans forward, gaze intent. “Napoleon Solo. I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Me?” Solo says, in genuine surprise. “I was worried about you.”

Emerson’s face, the only plastic thing about it, forms a smile. It is a sweet smile, for a sweet face. “I did tell you ‘all clear’.”

Solo nods. “Still.”

It nods too. Then blinks. “It wore off,” it says, seemingly out of nowhere.

Solo, however, cuts Waverly a shifty look. “Distance, lack of use.”

“But that shouldn’t—” it raises its head, then tilts it. Seems to read something in Solo’s face that Illya can’t see. “Well,” it says, voice even flatter. “Never mind.”

It’s such an incongruous dismissal that it seems to silence the whole room.

“...Right,” Waverly says, bemused. “Emerson, would you like to—”

“Why ‘Emerson’?” Solo asks, ignoring him.

Emerson blinks. “Ralph Waldo,” it says.

“Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors?” Solo quotes, cocking his head.

“Speak as you think, be what you are, pay your debts of all kinds,” Emerson replies.

“Be what you are,” Solo echoes. “That’s a good one.”

“He talks about Napoleon quite a lot, too,” Emerson points out, its smile reappearing, small and impish. Illya wonders who it had learned that from, if it was Bering, or one of the other so-called philosophers.

“So he does,” Napoleon agrees. After a moment, he holds out his hand. “It’s lovely to make your acquaintance properly, Emerson.”

It returns his grip with care, as if it might inadvertently crush his hand. Solo’s gaze flickers down to where the stellarator sits inside it, but only for a fraction of a second. “‘Pay your debts?’” he asks, more diffidently. “What debts?”

“The debt of life, of course,” Emerson replies. “I owe a debt for my creation, and my continued existence. It is quite a lot.”

Solo exhales. “Yes. I suppose it is,” he says. Illya swallows.
Waverly clears his throat. “We were just taking a tour of the facilities. Would you like to join us, Emerson?”

“I have already seen everything that I have clearance to see,” Emerson replies.

“That’s true,” Waverly says with no apparent bother, his equilibrium restored. “But we will be seeing just a bit more than that, and perhaps you would like to socialize further with our colleagues?”

“Oh.” Emerson considers this. “Yes, I would like that.” It—she—turns to Illya. “We are not acquainted. I never learned your name.”

“Kuryakin,” Illya says, stiffening, adrenaline irrationally surging again. He swallows it down. “I am Illya Kuryakin. I’m afraid you will not have heard of me.”

“That’s all right,” Emerson says. “I hadn’t heard of anyone else here, and I like some of them.”

“Oh!” O’Malley calls from across the room. “‘Some’? Should I be offended?”

Emerson cocks her head, and then says decisively, “Yes.”

O’Malley makes outraged noises, clearly not much outraged at all. Solo looks like he’s delighted but trying to hide it. Illya is just relieved to have focus drawn away from him again, particularly since it brings Emerson’s attention around to Gaby, still hovering near the workstations.

“You are also from the boat,” Emerson says, advancing past Illya, towards the women around the computer, her strides long and even, unsettling even if she doesn’t mean them to be. “What is your name?”

“She’s Teller, and she’s brilliant,” O’Malley, says, jerking a thumb at Gaby. Gaby flushes, pleased.


“That was my father,” Gaby says. No hesitation this time; she’s getting used to the repetition, and the past tense. “You can call me Gaby.”

“Was? He is dead?”

“He is.” She squares her shoulders. Emerson’s lack of sympathy seems to fortify her. “I’m the last Teller.”

“Then you are important. The first and last of a kind always is,” Emerson says with certainty.

Gaby blinks rapidly, and then betrays a fleeting, unexpectedly genuine smile. “Thank you. I think.”

“Now that that’s all sorted,” Waverly says, corners of his mouth twitching, “Shall we continue? Miss Teller, are you interested in joining us?”

Gaby nods, though she flashes a smile at O’Malley and Kumar, and falls in just behind Waverly, next to Emerson. After a moment, Illya and Solo follow along behind. Illya finds his feet dragging, particularly as Waverly chats amiably with Emerson and leads the group back towards the staircase, then past it, down a dim hallway whose end, perhaps through the haze of his exhaustion, Illya cannot see.

In an effort to distract himself, he turns to Solo. “You know what he is doing, don’t you?” he says quietly, looking at him sidelong.
“Of course,” Solo murmurs back. “He’s doing what he has been doing since he covered for us in Rome.”

“Just because Emerson is not a pile of scraps—”

“Did I say I was sold?” Solo says mildly. “We’re here because there are very few other places we can be.”

“You said it yourself,” Illya says. “You can leave.”

Solo grimaces in remembrance, and then looks back at him. “And you?” he counters. “Where would you go?”

Illya looks away. “I am not expected in Moscow until the afternoon. I have time.” It sounds wooden even to his own ears.

Solo snorts. “This afternoon. Yes, plenty of time.”

Illya swipes a hand across his eyes and mouth. He wonders if this is part of Waverly’s plan too—to keep them awake just long enough that by the time they’re out of his sight, they’ll have no energy left to run. Not that it would work on Solo, he supposes, not for some time now, but Solo has more reason to be here than he. And Solo is looking more and more at ease here, with Emerson seemingly engaged and content in this dim, haphazard bunker.

“Do you want to go back?” Solo asks him, hushed, as they pass the stairs and enter a narrow corridor, dimly lit by overhead bulbs running on faulty wires. “To Moscow? Now, after seeing all this?”

Illya doesn’t answer.

“Here we are,” Waverly says, opening a door on the right of the corridor and stepping into a large room awash with digital light. “This might be more familiar territory to you agency types.”

It is. The control room is small but well-appointed, so far as Illya can tell—the left-hand wall is lined with surveillance screens, flickering with grainy black and white images of Rome, Berlin, Moscow, Washington. There are rows of desks with their own small screens and switchboards, mostly empty at this time of night. A few people are scattered between the desks and the ersatz tea and coffee station towards the far right corner, consisting of a laminate table covered in mugs, which like worshippers at an altar surround a battered kettle heating on an electric burner. Maps line the far wall. A man is transcribing from a headset in the corner. No one looks up until Waverly closes the door, at which point they all carefully finish what they were doing and straggle to their feet and to attention. It is all deeply undisciplined.

“At ease,” Waverly says, as if they weren’t already. “Yu, how are we on the CIA front?”

Yu, a twenty-something Asian man with floppy hair and a suit from the previous decade, makes a face and says, “Sanders called again.”

Solo stiffens, but Waverly just makes a vague noise of distaste.

“Is he asking for an audience, or has he started throwing accusations about?” he inquires.

“Not quite yet,” Yu replies, “But he does want to speak with you. Wonders if you’ve seen Miss Teller recently.”
“Ah. Well, hold him off for a few more hours at least. Tell him I’m expecting her to report in some time tomorrow. Divert him upstairs if you must, though I can’t say it will be much appreciated.”

Yu nods, and turns to his switchboard.

Waverly returns, momentarily, to the role of tour guide. “As you can see, we have a fairly firm eye on almost every major nation in the world here,” he says quietly, gesturing to the screens. “Feeds from other agencies, mostly agreed upon, some less so. As we are not officially an organization approved of by Her Majesty’s government, only funded by it via some choice unpopular lords and a smattering of international higher-ups, we are able to mostly work around the various treaties England has established with its friends, and have full access to whatever footholds can be established with our enemies. The line, moreover, between friend and foe here is a bit less, ah, nation-based, shall we say.” He casts a glance at Gaby. “You spoke to Sanders, I presume, when you encountered him? Or did you knock him out as soon as he came in the door?”

Gaby shrugs. “We didn’t speak much with words. He spoke with his gun, and eventually I answered with the taser. He was more interested in Solo anyway.”

“And I had nothing of substance to say at that point,” Solo says, still apparently embarrassed by that. “For better or worse.”

Waverly takes this with equanimity. “Well, at least he still has very little to go on. Right. Well, nothing else to be done there. Shall we have a look at the data room?”

“I’ve never been to the data room,” Emerson says to Solo, a little conspiratorially.

“Well, then I guess we’ll have to take a look,” Solo says, quirking a smile at her.

“We’ll use the opportunity to begin looking at those files of yours,” Waverly says, leading them across the control room.

Illya had nearly forgotten about the suitcase Gaby had been carrying with them. His gaze darts to it automatically, and finds Gaby looking back at him. *Curious?* she mouths at him.

He exhales and avoids her eyes.

On the far side of the control room, there is what looks at first like the door to a broom closet. Upon closer inspection, however, there is a keypad by the handle, and the door reveals itself to be thick, reinforced steel.

Waverly punches in the key code and the door gives way with a pneumatic hiss.

Beyond, there are...cabinets.

Rows upon rows, stacks upon stacks, of cabinets.

There is a small table in the center of the room, and a plush leather office chair. A small console and a printer are stacked on a shelf in one corner. The overhead lighting is bright, but not harsh. Good reading light.

Everyone steps inside. Illya gets as far as the door frame, as broad and sturdy as the door itself. He stops in its threshold and has to breathe very deeply.

The data room smells of close air and old paper. It is dark and windowless. The light from the ceiling is singular, casting deep shadows where it isn’t directly pointed.
“Come on in,” Waverly says. “Enough room for all of us.”

Illya can’t move.

“Illya?” Gaby asks, frowning. Emerson is watching him, distantly puzzled. Solo is just still, not so much watching as aware, blank-faced.

Illya swallows hard on what feels like unbearable pressure in his throat. He fumbles with the door handle, and lets the weight of the door shuffle him forward as it shuts with a whisper. He counts the duration of each inhale and exhale, and tries to concentrate on the room’s contents, not its size or its distance beneath the ground or its stale, entombed stillness.

He clears his throat, and says, with enough steadiness to hopefully pull attention back away from him, “This is all analogue.”

Waverly nods, pleased. “We are rapidly entering a digital age,” he says. “It helps to keep hard copies, sometimes, especially when there are certain people who would rather have said information erased or otherwise altered. Particularly also when the information is sensitive enough to start a world war. Or end one, as the case may be. I’ve been collecting for a while now. My latent pack rat impulse at work, I suppose.” He shrugs, but his gaze is shrewd.

How did this come to be so personal for Waverly? Because however it had happened, it is clear now to Illya that Waverly cares a great deal for this small band of odd researchers and analysts he’s put together, and for the mission he has created for himself.

“This entire building is fireproof,” Solo says, sounding intrigued. “I had wondered.”

“Regency architecture is some of the most robust against the elements,” Waverly agrees. “I made some small improvements, but there honestly wasn’t much more to do that wasn’t already being done with the larger excavations.”

Illya half-listens and wonders about Waverly’s Naval career, what he had seen and done that transformed him from a no-doubt posh private school boy to this. He suspects that he could ask, and Waverly would tell him, which is frightening in itself. He knows it isn’t trust, but it’s something, and it is unfamiliar to him, unknown and suspect.

He realizes that Waverly has fallen silent, and that Solo and Gaby have stilled, clearly waiting for him to continue—Gaby with certainty and expectation, Solo with intent.

“This collection,” Waverly says at last, slowly, “This whole enterprise. It rests on the supposition that AIs are not simply tools to be used in the decimation of mankind. I believed that when the Marchers razed Hiroshima, and I am utterly convinced now. I have been amassing data, hypotheses, staff, and resources in expectation that at some point, there would come a time when the international community, war-torn and volatile as it is, will be in need of a neutral party, a neutral specialist in intelligence, specifically, that is able to promote peace in ways that nations, that people, can’t. Between your appearance, Solo, and the Vinciguerra affair, I think we’ve reached that time.”

He holds out a hand towards Gaby.

“Miss Teller?”

Without hesitation, Gaby hands over the case of her father’s files, and follows him over to the small computer, helping to unload and dock the stack of hard drives.

“What do those contain?” Emerson asks.
“We don’t know yet,” Solo replies. “I carried them for a while, however, and I remember being very impressed.”

“You decrypted it?” Waverly asks, beginning to scan through the file names on screen as Gaby finishes hooking up the last drives. “That seems a bit going above and beyond.”

“I had to to get at the kill switch,” Solo shrugs. “The rest was done up in the same way, so I just...applied the same parameters while decompressing it.”

Waverly regards him over his shoulder for a moment. “You really are quite a marvel, Solo,” he says, matter-of-factly.

Solo blinks, off-guard. “Thank you?”

“You’re welcome,” Waverly says, his focus back on the files. “Hm. We’ll have to print these or bring a projector in to get the full scope of them. There’s a great lot of schematics, and a good deal of surveillance footage here. Turkey, it looks like, and...Cuba. Hm.”

“I’ll ask Yu about a projector,” Gaby says, and Emerson says, “I know where one is! I will come too.” They slip past Illya, back into the control room.

Illya looks with longing at the brightness of the control room before the door swings shut. After a moment, he starts to follow them out, desperate for fresh air.

“Good lord.”

He pauses. Turns to find Solo peeking over Waverly’s shoulder. Between the two of them, they block the screen from view entirely.

“Oh,” Solo says.

“Is that…?”

“Mm.”

Illya looks back at the control room, but doesn’t move.

“Well,” Solo says, as keenly engaged as Illya has ever heard him. “That would explain my first impressions.”

“Yes, indeed,” Waverly says. “And if those coordinates are accurate, then…”

“This could be very bad,” Solo finishes.

They stand in silence over the monitor. Illya finds himself frozen, staring at their turned backs, caught between wanting to see, wanting to run.

After what seems like an age, Waverly straightens, and turns to look at Illya, putting his hands in his pockets and giving him a worried look. Illya’s hand involuntarily creeps back toward the door handle.

“Illya...” he begins. Illya starts at the use of his forename. “I’m afraid we’ve run rather out of time.”

No.

Solo starts to cut in. “Sir—”
“We show him this, and he either becomes a traitor to his country or a part of the negotiations, or both,” Waverly says, perfectly even, holding Illya’s gaze. “There is no in-between. So if he wants to go back to Moscow, he must go now, while it’s still reasonably safe for him to do so. I can bear a great deal on my conscience, but sending a man knowingly to his death is quite beyond the pale.”

Solo is silent, his reluctant agreement palpable. Illya presses back against the cool of the steel door.

“Illya. I will make your excuses to Moscow for any delay,” Waverly continues, “Insofar as that’s possible. If that is what you want, that is. Though I was rather hoping that I’ve piqued your interest.”

Illya looks between the two of them—Solo pristine and steady, his mind clearly made up, for better or worse; Waverly clear-eyed, ruthless, and unequivocal. Static is filling his ears, a roar and rush.

Illya grabs the door handle and pushes it open just in time to bump directly into Gaby, who is pushing a trolley with a projector on it. “Oh!” she says. “Sorry, did you want—?”

“Oh,” Illya says, suddenly unable to give an answer. He looks back at Waverly, whose expressed has begun to resolve into resignation. “I.” His throat closes.

“I need to—air,” he manages, and pushes past the trolley and Gaby, ignoring her noises of protest. He crosses the control room, barely aware of its inhabitants scattering in all directions, pushing out into the hallway where he has to turn, choose a direction—back towards the stairs and up to the townhouse, or further down the hall, maybe to barracks, maybe offices or a back entrance, unknown.

He sees the stone wall in front of him and he punches it.

The impact travels up from his hand to his shoulder and spine in a lightning strike of agony, and under the static he can hear his knuckles break and several metatarsals fracture. The bloody splits in his skin from the fight in DC reopen and leave a red splotch on the rough stone.

He pulls back his arm to do it again.

He nearly dislocates his shoulder as he lunges forward and finds his wrist caught back in a steel grip.

“Don’t,” Solo says, quiet and firm. “Anything more and you’ll lose that hand.”

“Get off me,” Illya snarls, animal panic setting in. He twists, aiming a left-handed strike at Solo’s face, but Solo is inexorable, his other arm clamping around Illya’s middle as he forces Illya’s fists down to pin them against his chest. Illya kicks out, sending them backwards into the opposite wall, but Solo only stumbles once before bracing them both again. Illya’s breath is still coming too fast, his free hand clawing at anything it can get purchase on, skin, hair, cloth, his grip weakening, not enough oxygen—

Small hands are on his face, one cupping his cheek, one hovering over his mouth.

“Illya? Illya. You’re breathing too fast, you need to slow down. I’m going to cover your mouth to slow your breathing. I’m not trying to choke you. You’re going to be fine. Illya, are you listening to me?”

Illya makes a strangled sound, his sight dimming at the edges. He writhes to get away and knocks his head against something hard, either the wall or Solo’s head, and stars burst in front of his eyes.

“Schieße. Get him on the floor, I’ll sit on his legs. Illya? You’re going to be fine, I promise. It’s alright, you’re fine, you’re alright.”
They slide to the floor, Solo guiding the both of them down, his knees coming down on either side of Illya’s hips and gripping, steadying.

Gaby’s weight on his thighs is next to nothing, but the hand that closes over his mouth and one side of his nose is warm and firm. He struggles to draw in air, forced to take deeper, shuddering breaths that seem to burn in his lungs. He swallows convulsively, choking for a moment on his own saliva. Gaby doesn’t let go.

He breathes.

His vision comes back slowly, in splotches. Gaby’s eyes are the first thing to come into focus, her gaze stern and dark.

His hand begins to throb, broken bones grating against each other. He tries to pull out of Solo’s grip, but when that fails once again, exhaustion overtakes him. His head falls back and he stares at the dim lights along the ceiling. Over the ringing in his ears, he listens to the hitch of his own lungs laboring, and Solo’s even, whirring intake and exhalations. He tries to match pace, tries to be still.

“Okay. Okay, Gaby, I think you can—”

“Ja, aber—ich habe ihn noch nie gese—”

“Alles ist gut,” Solo says. Illya can feel the resonance of his voice box against his shoulder. “Prosti, Illya. We haven’t been kind.”

Illya turns his head away from them, blinking away sunspots from the ceiling lights; Gaby lets him, her hand slipping off his face and coming to rest on his shoulder. He can’t look at either of them, and he knows Waverly and Emerson are hovering somewhere, a safe distance away.

“Illya?” Gaby says, very quiet. “You still have a choice. You could be in Moscow by this evening.”

“He’s already made his choice,” Solo murmurs. “That’s why this happened.”

Illya hates that he’s right. Every decision since Rome has been a choice he’s made willingly, justified to himself somehow in the name of his country, in the name of security for his nation, but he has no more excuses. He wants to be a part of this, wants to know what Teller has hidden away for them, wants to be useful and wanted, not the aberration that he’d been. Even if—

“I can’t,” he says, and it comes out thick, inflection-less. “I—after this. I will never go home.”

Gaby and Solo are both silent for a long moment.

Waverly is the one to clear his throat. “Why don’t you three go upstairs?” he suggests, diffident. “There’s a first aid kit in the kitchen. Emerson, I should think Aina will be here soon, do you have…?”

“Test responses, yes,” Emerson says. “I will see to them, but—”

“That would be wonderful, Emerson, thank you.”

After a moment, Emerson appears to agree, because she takes a step away. Then Illya hears her approach, and tenses. The rumbling buzz of the stellarator fills his ears.

With great delicacy, she pats him on the head.

“Don’t hit walls,” she advises. “They are stronger than you.”
Solo huffs a breath against Illya’s neck.

Illya squeezes his eyes shut for a long moment, and then finally screws up the strength to look up. Emerson is looking down at him in vague but sincere concern.

“Thank you,” he manages to say, a bit dryly. “I will keep that in mind.”

Emerson nods. “Good.”

She walks away, back down the hallway.

“Come on, Peril,” Solo says, getting his feet under him. “Let’s look at your hand.”

Slowly, Illya gathers himself, more tired than he can remember being since training, real training, and stumbles to his feet. They take a few steps forward, and then he stops. “Wait,” he mumbles.

Solo, ever attentive it seems, pauses while still taking a great deal of Illya’s weight. Illya cradles his broken hand in his unharmed one, and turns to look at Waverly.

“I need to know one thing,” he says, fighting the thickness out of his voice.

“What’s that?” Waverly asks.

“Did you warn Agent Sanders that I was there?”

Waverly regards him for a long moment. Then he exhales. “That would have been positively Machiavellian, wouldn’t it?” he muses. “I don’t quite know how I might have done that without compromising myself, but I’m sure I could have found a way.

“As it happens, however, I didn’t. I had other plans in place for securing you, but they were less neat than current circumstances. I suppose I’m counting myself lucky.” He tilts his head back and forth. “Obviously, you have no reason to believe me. But you asked, and so I have provided you what I assure you is my honest answer. Is that enough?”

Illya licks his lips. “For now,” he says. He is sure that, were he determined, Waverly would be able to lie to him and ensure that Illya could not detect it. But he’s equally sure that Waverly was surprised by the inquiry, and that is enough for him to convince himself, if not his trained instincts, that Waverly is being honest.

It hardly matters anymore, anyway. Illya is staying, for good or ill. He no longer has any doubt in his mind that he is disavowed. If Sanders made contact with Waverly, he most certainly made contact with Oleg too. And Oleg has his duty to attend to.

“You do know why I’ve pushed so hard to have you on board, don’t you?” Waverly asks, as if he had been certain before, but now suddenly isn’t.

Illya stares at him.

Waverly exhales. “You don’t. Ah. I can see why, then, you might...well.” His gaze is warmer now, but thankfully devoid of pity. “You have a place here, Kuryakin. Whether you believe this is the case because of my machinations or something else, I can assure you of that much. You are not collateral I am taking advantage of by proxy. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

He smiles briefly—just an upwards, self-deprecating twitch.

“I’ll look through Teller’s files while you’re all upstairs. Now that we’re settled, you can perhaps
avail yourselves of some of the spare rooms, and then we’ll brief in the evening. All right?”

“Sir,” Gaby murmurs, and then she’s stepping forward to take Illya’s good hand delicately in her grip to lead them forward, toward the stairs, Solo steady at Illya’s back.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait between chapters, my struggle with plot continues. PLOT! *shakes fist at sky for the millionth time*

Solo quotes Emerson’s "The Transcendentalist" (1842). Emerson quotes Chapter 9 of Conduct of Life (1860).

I do not recommend physically restraining someone during a panic attack, but Solo’s pretty invulnerable and Illya’s pretty self-destructive, so. Gaby, on the other hand, is doing a correct thing for hyperventilation--blocking off everything but one nostril does make you slow down and take deeper breaths. Thanks internet!

And if you're wondering, the year is indeed 1962 :D
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter touches very lightly upon historical events particularly to do with the enforcement of/conflicts surrounding the soviet bloc, as well as conditions in the USSR post-WWII, including starvation. There's also quite a lot of brainwashing discussed, though none of this is graphic.

Also I've made a slight alteration in chapter 3 in order to fix some continuity problems. Unfortunately when one flies by the seat of one's pants, plot-wise, details have to sometimes be retro-fitted to make narrative work. MEA CULPA. I literally am making this up as I go on, so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Upstairs, the first glow of dawn is beginning to touch the windows, sparking off the rain spatter clinging to the glass. The kitchen is towards the back of the flat, and looks very Waverly —well-ordered, slightly out of fashion, clean and unfussy. The cabinets and walls are all white, and more William Morris adorns the curtains at the windows. Solid wooden counters hold a row of jars holding sugar and tea, and there are several stray boxes of biscuits of different types lined up on the breakfast table. It speaks of the many strays Waverly seems to have collected, who have stayed long hours and then been hosted here, presumably enough times that they saw fit to bring their own preferred snacks and accoutrements. It’s comfortable, quiet, and oddly warm.

They indeed find a first aid kit under the sink, next to a haphazard pile of cleaning supplies. Gaby sorts through it and then hands the relevant materials off to Solo. Illya sits at the small breakfast table, and remains awake only by the grace of the persistent pain in his hand, followed by aching numbness when Solo puts a hand towel filled with ice cubes under his palm.

“This needs to be set,” Solo says, exploratory fingers light over Illya’s broken ones. “You really ought to get an x-ray.”

Illya grunts, and doesn’t move.

Solo sighs. “Be thankful my knowledge of human anatomy is thorough,” he says. “Do you want a drink before I start?”

“There’s vodka,” Gaby offers, poking through the freezer.

“Only if it’s Russian,” Illya mumbles.

Gaby pulls a bottle out and checks the label. “You’re in luck.”

Illya makes a vague gimme gesture with his good hand. With a huff, Gaby retrieves a glass from a cabinet and pours a substantial amount.

“Go ahead,” Illya says, nodding at Solo. “Will hurt either way.”

Solo nods. He takes Illya’s hand, and with slow, awful meticulousness, begins realigning the bones.
Illya downs the vodka quickly. Gaby refills the glass.

“Waverly will take care, you know,” Gaby says, after several minutes. “He got my papers sorted in Berlin with no problems after, well.”

“Child’s play,” Solo says, feeling out the damage in Illya’s third finger with his thumbs. “With us, he’s effectively stolen US military property and KGB intelligence. He might want us here, might even have a lot of weight to throw around, but it’s going to cost him. And frankly, our chances aren’t good.”

“And yet you’re both still here,” Gaby says, a little testily.

“We made our choices.” Solo shifts a phalange into place, and Illya hisses, struggling to stay still. His hand is quickly turning black and blue beneath the smears of red. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Illya mutters. He’s had much worse.

Gaby crosses her arms. Her gaze flicks back and forth between Illya’s hand and his face. He’s too exhausted to draw away. “Illya,” she says, too carefully. “What was that?”

Illya looks at her, and then at Solo, whose hands have gone still around his. He knows perfectly well that she means more than just what happened in the hall. He’s been slipping too much for it to only be about that. He supposes, too, that he’s with them now—they are his colleagues, his fellow agents. They should know, they should be warned. They will know nothing that anyone around long enough in the KGB do not know already, and Solo is in no position to pass on anything he says to the Americans. It is as safe a time as he will ever have, with the noose of his country about, but not yet beginning, to tighten around his neck.

And he is tired of not speaking of it, not thinking of it. Even Oleg, who had known at least the outlines of Illya’s history, had refused to mention it except in pointed, oblique reference to Illya’s defects.

When he finally speaks, it sounds distant from him, like another version of him is reciting history lessons from the next room.

“After the war, Secretary Stalin made it imperative that we achieve the breakthroughs in AI technology that the Americans had done with the Marchers. A special department of the NKVD was created in service of this. They managed to create prototypes by 1950.”

“The CIA followed its development closely,” Solo says, nodding.

Illya is unsurprised. It had only been a secret operation in name—Russia had needed to show its strength, after all.

“We encountered, of course, the same problems that the Marchers had in Nagasaki. Limited power, difficulties with rough terrain, limitations in memory and learning storage. Things we did not have the resources to fix, even if our scientists found ways of overcoming the problems. Industry still had to first go to agriculture, feed the people.”

He remembers the lean years of his youth, after his father was taken—the long lines for bread, the murmurs that they were lucky to be in line, not out in the villages, eating tree bark, bartering furniture in the neighboring towns. Within months though, his mother’s heirlooms had still disappeared quietly from the apartment, and then it had gotten far worse. When the NKVD came for Illya, he and his mother both had been bitterly relieved.
He doesn’t speak of this.

“So an alternative form of elite military was proposed which would represent the very best of Soviet strength and skill, and would stand a fair chance against the Marchers in combat, if that is what it came to.”

“Spetsgruppa Uslovny Reflex,” Solo says, still and steady, his focus hawk-like. “Uslovny Reflex—that’s like Pavlovian response, isn’t it?”

Illya nods. “The NKVD was destabilizing, it needed something to rally around. It would not do any good—would split into KGB and MVD in a few years anyway—but even when it did, the SUR stayed. We were going to be...best of best. We could not be made of metal, but we could be faster and smarter than metal, able to outwit any director of Marchers, devastate with greater precision and for as long as we could go without sleep. We knew it could be done, knew that Russian intelligence and ingenuity on the ground had won our wars. With enough cultivation, conditioning, drills, we were to be the nation’s best defense against AI warfare. Able to think as deeply as humans, and act as quickly as machines.”

Oleg had told him some of this when he had first been assigned to Illya as his handler, after Khrushchev’s Secret Speech had announced Stalin’s crimes to the world, and the accord of silence had begun to break down among both citizens and government workers alike. It had provided context for a process that Illya had not comprehended at all in the years that he had been in development and deployment. All he had known at the time was that his service was needed, his service was important.

“I entered SUR as a trainee in ‘53. The program was dissolved in ‘58.”

“Dissolved,” Gaby repeats. “What does that—”

“It means something went terribly wrong,” Solo says. Illya can almost see in the flicker of his gaze the way he’s piecing together the data, making uncanny, intuitive leaps. “Five years...how long were you in training?”

Illya meets his gaze, and answers evenly, “Three years.”

Solo’s eyes flicker. “Three years...and then two in the field. Only enough time for three or four major deployments. Not a lot, all told.”

Illya stares down at his hand, slowly swelling despite the ice, the throb of his pulse flaring on all sides of it, a welcome distraction. “Two, almost,” he says. “The second was aborted.”

“So something about the program wasn’t creating what they wanted, and it had to be dismantled quickly,” Gaby says.

“It created exactly what they wanted,” Illya counters. He swallows. “But it had costs.”

Training had been endless. Illya barely remembers most of it now, only recalls flashes when small things catch like fish hooks in his mind, suddenly conjuring bright lights, cold water, white noise. Headaches that started between his eyes and slowly spread until his skull felt rent open like overripe fruit. Repetition of call and ever-intensifying response, action and ever-quicker reaction condensing weeks and months into an infinite monolithic day and and borderless, gaping maw of night. Its effects have erased the causes from him, and he knows on some level that he is grateful for that.

“Three hundred of us were recruited,” he says. “Of those, maybe eighty made it into the field.”
Gaby hisses through her teeth, and lowers herself slowly into the third chair at the kitchen table. Illya doesn’t look at her. He has to keep going.

“It was worth it, for those of us who made it,” he says. “At first, it was worth it.”

He lets himself think about it. These memories are sharper than training, in more ways than one—a strange sheer cliff, full of cutting edges and sudden plunges into darkness.

“When training was finished, we were deployed in Hungary. It was difficult at first; it always is, to adjust to combat, but we were well-prepared. We adapted quickly.”

It had been loud and chaotic and perfect. They had gone in ahead of the Red Army, acting as saboteurs, finding and undermining bands of rebels, taking and diverting weapons caches and decimating infrastructure. All carefully considered moves, calculated and coordinated in minutes, through which the military could blaze in their wake, their opponents already hobbled and off-balance. They were three steps ahead of their own commanders, just as was expected of them—they saw every step, executed each one and adjusted accordingly such that the final objective could be achieved. They fulfilled that purpose, and covered themselves in silent glory the moment Budapest capitulated.

“We were perfect,” he says aloud, his chin tilting up.

Solo hums.

“And then?” Gaby asks quietly. She refills his glass again, and then takes a swig of the vodka herself.

“We returned to Moscow,” Illya replies. “Earned medals, met the new Secretary.” He exhales. Drinks down the vodka. “Rested and trained for a time, when our secret presence was more important as a threat than anything else.

"Then we were sent to the Baltics. The army had already driven out the organized resistance, so we were to target guerilla fighters hidden out in the forests, identify them and either eliminate or bring them in for interrogation and deportation. It seemed...almost beneath us.”

Trouble had started with the orders. Out in the wilderness, where guerilla fighters had sought refuge in smaller and smaller pockets of civilization, objectives became more and more vague. How did one delineate and quantify an area unmapped since its devastation by war, and then declare it free of traps and men? Did “overwhelm” include women and children, sleepy villages? Too many questions, too little data.

“We never completed the mission.”

There were small incidents, at first. Disagreements on judgement calls, interpretation of evidence. They decimated a small resistance unit outside of the ESSR and found conflicting evidence of nationality, alignment, source of armaments. Intelligence was too thin on the ground to make definitive steps forward. Protocols misaligned, undermined each other, and then so did members of the unit. Tarasenko and Medvedev had come to blows, and a gun was drawn before one of the officers talked them down.

They were broken up into smaller groups, command hoping to spread their impact wide across the countryside, minimize disagreements, reassert the primacy of command. The orders they were given didn’t change though. Far from the action, unable to even map a front line, command held its position, refused to adapt.
So their men did instead, just as they were conditioned to do.

“We should not have been sent there,” Illya says, slipping outside of himself again. “It was not what we were built for. We were made for a known quantity. To learn and change like machines. Not…”

“Like people,” Solo finishes.

Illya remembers counting. Keeping watch in the darkest hours of night, standing in the shadow of a vast old pine, melting slowly, slowly into its mossy black, and counting. Anything to slow himself, soothe the urge to move, strike, react. Blades of grass on the starlit knoll in front of him, ration packs, bullets. Weighing them in his hands, senses honed so sharp as to identify discrepancies of a quarter of an ounce, less. Getting lost in the ritual of equipment, protocol recitation, trying to block out the furious whispers of his comrades, the patter back and forth in code, no room left in their heads even for their mother tongue. After nearly five years of noise and practice and punishment and praise, the silence of isolation and uncertainty was too much.

“Nishkov broke first. Killed an officer, then himself.”

Where Illya had been the youngest in the program, Nishkov had been oldest, had survived through the famines as a boy, had somehow emerged from the academy strong and exacting, his aim with a rifle near-perfect, his tactical mind as close to optimized as the program could make him. Illya had looked up to him, as a colleague and a brother when Illya’s family shame still held him apart from the rest. Nishkov had had little interest in politics, and hadn’t cared. Illya had been glad, when their unit was broken up into eights, then fives, then threes, that Nishkov stayed with him.

The Baltics undid him, though—he had wound tighter and tighter until he snapped their lieutenant’s neck in the middle of the night, in a farmhouse deep in Lithuania. They’d just gotten word that another unit had been caught in a snare set by rebels—carelessness brought on by rattle of adrenaline probably, and lack of sleep. Illya had been jumping at shadows for weeks by then.

Illya only knows what had happened because Nishkov had come to see him, before going into the woods to die. Had woken him and barely avoided Illya’s automatic knife-draw, the whites of his eyes bloodshot and round. “He didn’t see,” he whispered to Illya. “He wasn’t one of us, he couldn’t see the way we do, what must be done to achieve the objective. He doesn’t know.”

“Know what?” Illya had said, still half-lost in his own dreams, Nishkov like a phantom above him.

“The objective is impossible. The state shall never win. This is not our homeland, we are trespassers.” He had grabbed Illya by the collar then, and Illya had put his knife right up against his throat in response. Nishkov had just kept talking, not seeming to notice.

“I see all that will come. No more. I am deciding.”

“They’ll decommission you,” Illya had hissed.

“I know,” Nishkov had replied. He had nodded his head against Illya’s knife, like the bite of it was a comfort. “Do not look for me.”

He had pulled away and disappeared. And Illya didn’t look for him. He hadn’t needed to—the gunshot had told the tale.

Nishkov had only been the first. Then there were casualties in some of the other subunits, he heard later—efficient, bloodless killings blamed initially on resistance fighters. Everyone knew better.

(When it was over, Illya didn’t trust any of them, not ever again. He slept with his knife, and woke at
every uneven breath. It’s been years now, and he still doesn’t sleep well, knowing that he could be a weak link, a hindrance that needs to be dispatched to complete the objective.)

“We were left there for eight months.”

Perhaps command hoped they would adapt properly, with enough time. Illya will never know. Will never even know how many killed themselves or each other, or just deserted. He doubts the number of the latter is high.

“At the end of it, when so few of us reported back, the program was dissolved and we were all reassigned. It was peacetime, anyway, for a certain value of peace. The state didn’t need soldiers, it needed—”

“Spies,” Solo finishes with him.

Illya nods. “I don’t know where the others are. It took me three months to pass evaluations, and then I was put in surveillance. Worked my way back up to important operations.” He looks at his swollen hand, which Solo is now wrapping carefully with tape and gauze. “But I am...volatile. Not to be trusted. Everyone knows this.”

“You ended up in Berlin,” Gaby points out. Her voice comes out rough, and Illya can’t tell if it’s out of anger or exhaustion.

“Yes,” Illya nods. Then he looks at Solo. “Because they suspected he might be the one to retrieve you.”

Solo meets his gaze. “And then I beat you over the wall.”

Illya swallows. It had felt like an ending then, and it still does. Maybe Illya has been ending for weeks now. “Yes,” he says, and falls silent, hollowed out and finished.

In silence, Solo finishes wrapping his hand, his movements perfectly measured, not a single tremor. Then he holds Illya’s hand between his own, shirt cuffs growing damp from the melting ice on the table.

“You said it yourself, when we were on the plane to Rome,” he said slowly. “I’m not what they wanted either.” He looks at Illya, solemn and calm. “They’re chasing smoke.”

“And you’ve paid the price for it,” Gaby bites out, “In full. You owe them nothing. Nothing, Illya.”

She stands and leans forward, and with care belying her tone, puts a light hand on the back of Illya’s neck. “Come on,” she says, more quietly. “I don’t think I’ve slept in thirty hours. Waverly says there are proper beds upstairs.”

Illya lets himself follow. Together, they drag themselves up the narrow staircase to the first floor, and locate guest rooms and washrooms, Solo carefully shadowing them, offering a steadying elbow, a hand guiding at the smalls of their backs. Illya doesn’t remember a time when he was so handled, and it quiets the dull buzz of his thoughts, the fragments and tangents that he can now admit are the raw edges of his education, tucked carefully out of sight, but ever-present.

“I’m going to go back downstairs,” Solo says, when Gaby and Illya have found made beds, their belongings already deposited there, no doubt by one of Waverly’s people. “Check in on Emerson.”

“I think she’d like that,” Gaby says.
Solo nods, casts a last considering glance at Illya, and then retreats back downstairs.

There’s a washbasin in the guest bedroom, and so Illya runs the hot water until it’s nearly unbearably hot, then dips a washcloth into the basin to scrub panic sweat and the grime of travel from his skin. He doesn’t have the energy for much else, and anyway, he needs to keep his bandage dry. The vodka is keeping the pain at bay, but he is certain it will wake him up in a few hours.

With that in mind, he retrieves a clean undershirt from the chest of drawers—too small, but well made and soft, and shuffles to the washroom at the end of the hall, and goes in search of aspirin.

He finds Gaby braiding her damp hair with the door open, a too-large robe wrapped around her. He knocks on the doorframe. “May I…?”

“Of course.” She watches him as he rummages through the medicine cabinet.

“I know what it’s like, you know,” she says, after a moment. “To change sides.”

Illya finds a small bottle of aspirin and pockets it. Then he turns to her. “You don’t,” he says. “I promised myself. Body, soul, to my country. I didn’t do it for my father, or anyone else. It was my choice. You don’t know what that is like.”

Her mouth compresses, lips turning white. Then she blows out a breath. “Okay,” she says. “You’re right. I don’t know. And I understand that you still probably don’t trust me, not after whatever it was I did to Solo—“

“I don’t,” Illya agrees.

She flinches, but presses on. “—But I…what Waverly said was true. We want you here. Not just because of what you do, or, or what was done to you. We’ve done good work, the three of us. We can do more. I want us to do more.”

Illya nods slowly. “Through UNCLE?”

Gaby grabs a hair elastic off the counter and ties off her braid. “Yes.”

He regards her, aspirin rattling in his hand. “Why?”

“Why UNCLE? Or why at all?”

Illya shrugs. “Both.”

She pulls her robe tighter around her and crosses her arms. “Because Waverly was the first person to tell me the truth about my father and his work, and has treated not just me, but Solo and Emerson, like people, not pawns. Because I’m tired of men making stupid decisions that they don’t think through, and then all of a sudden families are torn apart, countries are at war. I’m tired of being afraid.” She looks up at him, jaw jutting out. “And I want to fight.”

Illya doesn’t trust her, but in this moment, he finds himself entirely willing to fight beside her.

She pauses, and then adds, “What do you want, Illya?”

He shrugs. He’s given enough of himself. “Sleep,” he says, and goes to claim it.

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It’s dark again when Illya wakes, and he emerges from sleep as if from an abyss, only to find his
hand throbbing and mouth desert dry. He sits up and immediately downs the aspirin and water he’d left for himself, and then goes through the tiresome process of washing and dressing himself while sore and still feeling drained. Gaby’s door is open and her bed remade when he passes by it, and so when he’s ready, he picks his way downstairs to the kitchen.

He stops just outside the door at the murmur of voices.

“When it comes to human behaviour, I of course can only observe, and I think that has a tendency to make my handlers...lower their expectations, in regards to my understanding of said observations,” Solo is musing. “It’s not entirely surprising—seeing is one thing, comprehending quite another, of course.” He pauses, and audibly takes a sip of something. Probably earl grey—Illya has noticed he has a penchant for it, and there had been a tin of it on the counter that morning. “They forgot that they sent me to be a soldier first. Be among people who didn’t know what I was, so that I could learn. It was, in a word, revelatory. Emotions are high in the field; they escalate and human beings crack, like desert earth. I could still only observe, but one can’t help but notice patterns, after a while. Patterns which, when placed into proper context, connected with, become something understandable. Even valuable.”

“You can’t identify with them, but you feel a kinship with them, perhaps?” It takes a half second for Illya to identify Dr. Bering’s voice. “A resonance?”

“Resonance,” Solo echoes. “That’s a good word for it, I think. Thank you.”

“Any time.” There’s a smile in her tone. Illya suddenly feels intrusive. He clears his throat, and makes himself known in the doorway.

“Peril, you’re awake,” Solo greets, turning in his chair. “Dr. Bering and I were just chatting about human nature.”

“Where’s Gaby?” Illya asks, voice rasping with sleep.

“Downstairs. She’s thick as thieves with O’Malley and Kumar. Waverly should perhaps be concerned about a coup.”

“He’d probably welcome one,” Bering says dryly. “He could use a vacation.”

“I doubt he’s going to get one,” Solo says. “He’s spent the whole day in the dataroom with Yu and some of the other analysts.”

Illya nods. Bering stands, gaze lingering on his bandaged hand. “Would you like some tea, Mr. Kuryakin?” she asks. “There’s still some earl grey in the pot.”

“Thank you,” Illya nods, on automatic, and moves towards the cabinet to retrieve a mug. Bering, however, shoos him towards the table. “Sit,” she says. “You’re a guest here.” She plucks the tea cozy off the teapot and pours into a clean mug, setting it where she had been sitting. “I must be off back to work. It was lovely talking to you, Napoleon, I’m sure we’ll continue our conversation later.”

“I look forward to it,” Solo says, smiling, and shakes her hand before she makes her exit. Illya cups one hand around the mug on the table, watching the steam rise. Solo observes him for a moment. “How’s the hand?” he asks.

“Broken,” Illya replies.

Solo snorts.
Illya takes a sip of the tea and finds it not nearly strong enough, but welcome warmth nonetheless. He mulls over what he overheard, and decides that there’s no use in pretending he hadn’t eavesdropped. “You were put in the army,” he says, “To learn? Seems risky.”

“It was better than erasing me and never getting any use out of their multimillion dollar investment,” Solo replies, mouth twisting. “They’d already decided by that point that they weren’t going to make any more of my model, and I’d been designed for military capacity of some kind or another. So they put me on ordnance removal.”

Illya winces. Solo clocks his reaction, but only shrugs.

“I was good at it, and it gave me enough distance from the men that they didn’t notice any oddities I might have displayed in the course of learning how to blend in. By the time I got to know some of my unit, and some of the other troops, I was reasonably adept at a human facade. Enough at least that exhausted, hungry men didn’t notice anything particularly inhuman about their companion.”

“When was this?” Illya asks.

“Spring of ’55. The CIA took me out of theater in ’57.”

That about coincided with when the KGB started monitoring him. “Why did they take you?”

Solo shrugs one shoulder. “Any number of things, mostly fear-related. Your people had just launched Sputnik, the first limited AI to enter orbit. We were just beginning to figure out just how far ahead you guys were in terms of intelligence gathering. I was a reasonable stopgap to employ in terms of catching the CIA up to the KGB.” He pauses. “Also I may have nearly incited sedition among the men.”

Illya pauses with his tea halfway to his mouth. “What.”

Solo makes a face. “Military discipline might be a necessity to maintain order over large numbers of people,” he says, “But it’s also the main reason why shit rolls downhill and good men, especially the competent ones, end up dead.” His voice, Illya notices, has taken on a slight drawl, not unlike some of the American soldiers he’d come across in Berlin.

“‘Shit rolls downhill?’” Illya repeats.

Solo twitches a smile at him. “That’s how some of them put it. Aply, to my mind. There are problems in every military system, of course—it’s impossible not to have some, but if there are problems at the top that are only visible at the bottom, there should be ways to submit that for review that don’t immediately cause a court martial for the whistleblower.”

Illya stares at him. “I can see why the military might have been not pleased about you,” he says eventually.

“Just so. I’ve been a pain in the ass of the CIA ever since,” Solo finishes, with no small amount of relish. Then he soberes, and his accent evens out to his customary mid-Atlantic. “It’s the strange thing, about people,” he says, seeming to mull it over. “Even with all of the bizarre, surreality of reality that they live every day, they still expect the things they create to be predictable.”

Illya has nothing to say to that, and so he finishes his tea.

“I had an interesting conversation this afternoon,” Solo says suddenly. “With Gaby.”

“Oh?” Illya says, unmoved.
“She wanted to know what happened to me at the Vinciguerra estate. Now that I remember it in full.”

Illya lifts his chin. “Did you tell her?”

“Yes. Mostly because it’s been very clear that you think she should know.”

“She should.”

Solo shakes his head, an odd expression on his face.

“What did she say?” Illya asks.

“Nothing,” Solo replies, his brow furrowing, mouth flat. “She didn’t say anything.” He looks at his watch. “Waverly said to come down around seven,” he says. “Shall we see what he’s uncovered?”

“You saw some of it already,” Illya points out.

“Yes,” Solo agrees. “And it’s…compelling.”

“I’ve made my choice,” Illya reminds him. “You can tell me.”

“I don’t have the full picture,” Solo says. “Best get it from someone who has spent the last eight hours pouring over it.”

“You didn’t help?”

Solo shook his head. “I’ve been working with Dr. Gillman. I’m going to need a charge within the next couple of days, and if we don’t want both the CIA and the KGB descending on us as soon as I put a hand against a power source, we need to overwrite a good number of my protocols before I do. We’ve been working out how to hack me.”

The idea of anyone knowing how to hack Solo is deeply disturbing to Illya, but he only says, “Any progress?”

“Some,” Solo says. “They’re having a lot of trouble parsing my code. Apparently it’s gotten rather dense and tangled over the years. We’re hoping some of Teller’s work will give us some insights.”

“Hmph,” Illya says.

They stand and deposit their mugs in the sink, and then make their way downstairs. Illya tenses as they descend, vigilant for claustrophobia taking hold of him again, but the static in his head doesn’t rise, and his heart rate remains even.

On the basement level, there’s a slightly higher level of activity than there had been upon their late evening arrival—several faces Illya doesn’t recognize are at previously unoccupied desks, and the printouts are spooling out at full force. O’Malley, on the other hand, appears to be asleep under her desk, while Gaby and Kumar are in steady conversation over her head. When Gaby looks up and spots them, however, she pales suddenly and averts her eyes.

Solo ignores her reaction, and strolls over to her. “Waverly’s due to loop us in, isn’t he?” he says, friendly and neutral. “You coming?”

Gaby nods, but her shoulders hunch in slightly. She looks at Dr. Kumar and says, “Pick this up when I get back?”
Kumar gives her an encouraging, if bemused, smile, and nods. Gaby pushes herself to her feet, as if carrying a great weight, and falls into step slightly behind Solo.

“Guten morgen,” she mutters, as they reach Illya and he begins to walk with them. She doesn’t look at him.

“Tag,” Illya returns, watching her carefully. “It’s nearly dinner time.”

She rubs her arm like she’s cold. “I suppose, yes. Jet-lag’s going to be awful now.”

“It won’t matter soon. Whatever Teller found, it’s serious. We’ll be moving soon.”

“Hm.”

She still won’t meet his eyes.

They weave their way back past the staircase and down the hall to the control room. Illya can hear the buzz of conversation inside from several yards away. Solo cocks his head.

“Gillman’s in there too,” he observes, and pushes open the door.

Inside, it looks like a small bomb has gone off—ticker tape in chaotic spools across the floor, one-time pads stacked high on one desk, in a haphazard, scribbled-on pile on the next. The screens keep flickering from one locale to another with almost frenetic intensity. The refreshments station is a mass of used mugs and scattered coffee grounds.

“We have firm denials from the Iranian government—“

“That’s a lie, we have conflicting reports from here, must have misheard—“

“Got a match on the worm—“

About ten people, including Yu, Dr. Gillman, and Waverly, are calling over each other. Gillman and Waverly are the only ones standing still; everyone else is either at one desk or another, or scrambling through the masses of paper to answer queries.

“—flyover status from Mica?” Waverly is asking.

“Due in five minutes, will take another ten to decrypt,” an analyst reports from the other side of the room while looking back and forth between a slip of paper and one of the large wall maps, which has been covered in pins since Illya last saw it.

“Sector ten, what about that?” Gillman asks, ignoring Waverly, staring at one of the smaller screens, currently streaming code.

“Looking now—“

“Got another string, feeding it through—“

“We have confirmation for Bursa—“

“Run that through again, would you?”

“Holy shit, how did he…“

“Status, Dita?”
“Coming through now.”

“Ah,” Waverly says, spotting them in the doorway. “Hullo you three, excellent timing.” Noticing them, the rest of the analysts follow suit, the clamor settling to a low, but no less frantic murmur.

“For a certain definition of ‘excellent’,” Gillman says dryly. She looks at Solo, and her mouth tilts down. “Napoleon, you should have a look at this.”

“One thing at a time, if you don’t mind, Dr. Gillman,” Waverly says. He looks around at the chaos and says, “Perhaps the dataroom?” His gaze flickers to Illya in inquiry.

“Lead the way,” Solo says, and Illya nods agreement. They pick their way across the room, avoiding piles of reports and ticker tape. A push of adrenaline makes itself known in Illya’s stomach, but it’s a familiar thrum, not the jagged pressure of anxiety from before. He ignores it, and allows the rest of the group to pass first through the heavy steel door before shutting it behind him. The room still smells strongly of dust and paper, but it doesn’t cloy. He suspects it’s gotten more use in the past eight hours than it has in years.

“Right,” Waverly says, when the five of them are assembled around the projector screen. “To start with, I’ll say that from what we can see, Dr. Teller was not simply squirrelling his own work away on these drives, as he did in Berlin. This was a deliberate cache not just meant to keep dangerous knowledge away from the CIA, but also serve as a bargaining chip should he ever wish to liberate himself from the organization entirely. Not an very smart plan, as the CIA would most certainly kill him before letting him bargain for anything, but we can be thankful for his efforts, in any case.”

Dr. Gillman clears her throat. Waverly coughs. “Right,” he amends. “Well, at least in spirit, if not in the way he went about it.”

“What’s the situation?” Illya asks, impatient.

“We’re currently verifying a whole mess of intelligence of varying degrees of importance to verify —“ Waverly begins.

“We have evidence to suggest that, despite back-channel assurances between various Soviet diplomats and high-level officials in the United States, Khrushchev is building a legion of Marchers in Cuba,” Gillman cuts in.

Illya’s first instinct is to sniff. “Is defensive measure. What will they do, march on their allies, on Castro? Not unreasonable to have troops of both kinds there. Maybe it is for Castro himself.”

Gillman clears her throat. “The Marchers appear to have flight capability.”

A beat.

“That’s not possible,” Solo says. “You can’t get enough fuel or charge into a Marcher to propel it across a body of water and then do anything but recharge again once it’s landed.”

Waverly exhales. “Right. That has been the belief, yes. And in fact, the only possible explanation my people can suggest is that the Soviet military have developed usable stellarators.”

“Teller’s Berlin cache,” Illya says, blinking. “They found it.”

“Either that, or their researchers got there on their own. It’s not impossible,” Wavelry shrugs.

It isn’t impossible, but Illya knows that it’s unlikely. Not because Soviet researchers aren’t up to the
task, but because they were under too much pressure to succeed in too short a time. Even before Khrushchev, Illya had been dimly aware through his own handlers and their consultants that patience was not a virtue his government possessed. If anyone had seen the possibility that Teller’s work could compress the timeline of further breakthroughs in developing the SMA, they would have jumped on it immediately. It was in fact possible that Teller’s work had been in Russian possession ever since Teller had been forced to vacate Berlin.

All of this, however, didn’t change the fact that in choosing to prioritize Solo’s freedom over checking out the cache in Berlin, Waverly had made a dangerous gamble. One that made it very clear how much he wanted Solo specifically on this team. Illya doesn’t know whether that makes him feel better or worse about his own choice.

There’s a moment of silence, and then Solo says, “So they were Marchers. What those first photos showed.”

Waverly nods. “They were.”

“Those didn’t look like surveillance photos.”

“No.”

“Cuba is protected airspace,” Illya says. “How did the CIA get eyes there?”

Waverly and Gillman look at each other, and then Gillman says, almost gently, “Napoleon. Have you ever done work in or around Cuba?”

Solo stares at her. It’s perhaps the first time Illya’s ever seen him take more than a moment to think and respond to a direct query. “No,” he says, but there’s wariness in the way he says it. “Not to my knowledge.”

“What do you generally remember after a recharge?” Waverly asks.

“The outlines of the assignment. Specific experiences I break down into working knowledge and general theory so that I retain learning material rather than high-risk intelligence. Non-sensitive experiences I try to store separately in greater detail.” He shoots a glance at Gaby.

“That sounds like a far less extreme version of the code tags around Teller’s data,” Gillman says. “They’re based off of the same protocols the CIA used to do their data gathering. Just more indiscriminate.”

Gaby makes a wounded noise. “He wouldn’t,” she says, almost a murmur. She exhales hard, and then more strongly, “He wouldn’t do that.”

Solo isn’t looking at her though; he is clearly going over every gap in his memory, every experience he’d been forced to redact, or had been forcibly overwritten. “He didn’t know about me, though,” he says, soft and puzzled. “When we saw him, on the island, he was surprised.”

“It’s possible he didn’t know you were fully sentient when he wrote the worm into your charge-and-debrief system,” Gillman says, her gaze resigned. “Mobile prototypes with limited AI aren’t unheard of, taken as extra guards to black ops sites, muscle without the risk of losing good men. He may well have assumed.”

“He started skimming from you about eighteen months ago,” Waverly adds. “I imagine it took him that long to find a vessel that was being taken on missions that might be sensitive, and was being regularly debriefed.”

“He must not have ever looked at what he was gathering,” Gillman says. “Or he’d have known you.”

“I want them back,” Solo says suddenly, looking up at them. “If those are my memories, my recordings, I want them back.”

“You do that, and you will put an even larger target on your back than what you’re already wearing,” Waverly warns.

“That’s not really my biggest concern, sir,” Solo replies, a dangerous edge to his voice.

“Isn’t it?” Illya countered, and everyone else is startled to attention. “Marchers are going to be installed in Cuba. Russia cannot want you or anyone else to know this either, not if it is still in progress. And we need to know what the Americans know, because if they learn about this—”

“They’ll go off half-cocked,” Solo finishes. “They’ve been on tenterhooks for years now. Khrushchev’s ‘bot after bot comes off the assembly line’ comment didn’t help things. You’re right of course, Illya.” He seems deliberately to still himself, and then nods at Waverly. “Fine. Let’s see this apparent intelligence.”

“Napoleon,” Gaby starts.

“Later,” he says, not unkindly, but she flinches anyway. It falls to Illya to reach over, touch her wrist and nod.

“What is the situation,” he says to Waverly, old protocols coming back, familiar order of intelligence, interpretation, action taking root, “From the beginning.”

Chapter End Notes

Khrushchev’s comment is derived from one he made in ’61 (or ’62? it's unclear from my source) in which he compared missiles coming off the factory floors "like sausages from an automatic machine", which is just LOVELY. I don't dislike the guy in the grand scheme of things, but that was a dumbass comment, my dude.

As a general note, I'm now working heavily with historical events and sources but trying to keep them in the background, so a lot of context is left implied but not outright discussed. If anything feels super unclear because of this, or there are certain historical details you would want to know more about in the course of the story, please let me know! This is my first stab at historical fiction (...of a sort) so I am on a learning curve and would welcome feedback.
Chapter 10

I'm trying to up my game here, but that means that this is taking A VERY LONG TIME TO WRITE. Argh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They go through the surveillance—Solo's memories—one by one. Waverly has apparently already filtered through to the most important ones, and Illya wonders about that, what else there is that Teller skimmed, that Solo didn’t get a chance to distill into ‘usable’ memories.

“How did the CIA not notice?” Gaby asks. “All this stuff, just…” She makes a gesture.

“Well, this certainly isn’t everything Solo recorded,” Waverly says. “Teller skimmed, he didn’t outright steal whole days of experience. He got lucky with this bit.”

“I wasn’t specifically being used for recon over Cuba, either,” Solo adds. “They would have noticed if they’d been looking for my observations and gotten nothing. But they have enough flyovers already patrolling that area.”

It’s clear too that even in the moment, Solo’s exacting eye hadn’t taken in the magnitude of what he had seen in the flyover of Cuban airspace. The recovered images are out of focus and fleeting, like he had only glanced out of the window of the plane he’d been riding in. Still, Solo’s vision naturally recorded on several wavelengths, including infrared, and by parsing out much of the noise of distance and interference, the outlines of Marchers were eventually unmistakeable.

“You always see like this?” Illya asks.

“No, I just record it, I don’t process it actively unless I think it’s important,” Solo says. “Otherwise I’d never do anything but stare at everything happening around me.”

Illya can only imagine, so he nods.

“The only good news is that we definitely can crack your recharge programming now,” Gillman says to Solo. “Teller’s worm is fully alterable and replicable. We’ll have it done within the hour.”

“I’d like to look at it before you install it,” Solo says, with a plastic smile. “If you don’t mind.”

Gillman nods, not taking offense. “Of course.”

“The rest of the news looks like short range missiles and long range Marchers,” Gaby says, peering at the photos.

“So it seems. Why would Khrushchev do this?” Solo asks. “Installing troops is one thing, but flight capability?”

“You forget,” Illya says, stepping over to the projection screen and flipping through several slides, to a more standard surveillance photo. “Turkey.”

Solo *hmphs*, and it’s so human, even for him, that Illya looks at him askance. “They’re not *airborne*, at least.”

“They don’t need to be,” Illya points out. “There’s no ocean between Turkey and Russia.”

“I suppose. It’s still a lot of ground to cover, and they’d be seen far before anything that could fly. Do we have a speed for these troops, sir?”

“As yet, no,” Waverly says. “We only have what information Teller got. We’re working to verify it and gain more intel soon, but it will take time.”

“If they can fly as fast or faster than a commercial jet, they’re going to be considered a direct threat to the US,” Solo says.

“What’s the date on Solo’s flyover?” Gaby asks. “If he was there on official business, there’s a chance others noticed what was going on.”

“The flyover was in early May,” Waverly answers, peering at a printout. “Ring any bells, Solo?”

“Not a lot.” Solo looked deeply unhappy about it. “Whip Lash, perhaps? I have that name on file, dated May 8th. It may have been an operation, but I have very little surrounding data. Do any further recordings give us context?”

“I’m afraid not,” Waverly says. He hesitates. “If I were to hazard a guess, though—that is, if it weren’t just a military drill of some kind…” He raises a meaningful eyebrow.

“Castro,” Gaby and Illya say.

“You learn nothing from Bay of Pigs?” Illya asks, rolling his eyes.

“In my defense, I’m pretty sure nothing about any alleged deposition was my idea,” Solo says. “Had I been allowed into any of those discussions, I would not have recommended the poisoned cigar, for one.”

“Why didn’t they ask you, by the by?” Waverly muses. “One would think that of all the jobs to send you on, a complex and obscure coup would be ideal.”

“Yes, well, I had developed several problems with authority by then,” Solo replies.

Illya thinks about sedition and suppresses a snort. Solo glances at him like he knows exactly what he’s thinking, and he is probably right.

“Hm,” Waverly says in consternation. “Well, that aside, if you saw this in July and no reprisals have come up yet, then I think it’s safe to assume that any intelligence of what is happening in Cuba has not yet reached the US. That leaves us with a new set of conundrums, of course, first of which being who we contact—”

“No one,” Illya and Gillman say at once, then look with surprise at one another.

“You do not want to be the ‘neutral’ organization that chooses to take sides in this,” Gillman says.

“You tell anyone, and you are betraying bias,” Illya says.
Because not telling anyone isn’t betraying a bias at all,” Gaby says sarcastically. Illya glares at her.

“How did they ship the parts there?” Solo wonders. “I presume by boat.”

“We’re now getting reports in of some fairly unusual activity around the area you saw from the air,” Waverly nods. “Local sources have repeatedly mentioned large numbers of men in slightly too-uniform clothes moving to and from transport vehicles, mainly at night, but evenings as well.”

“So they’re being noticed, one way or another.”

“What’s Khrushchev’s game?” Gaby murmurs. “He can’t intend this to stay secret forever, this has ‘show of force’ written all over it.”

Illya tries to think it through. He’s still shuffling through the possible reasons for such a move—too many possibilities, with so many moving parts, so many governments and people in play. He can feel a headache starting up between his eyes, and tries to move onwards.

Regardless of the purpose of the Marchers, they will have to be framed as defensive. No other reason could possibly be aired internationally. There has been no such public statement as yet.

“He will need it to stay secret until it’s fully operational,” he says eventually. “Until he can present it as a defensive measure, with no possibility of having to take it back.”

“Why not just do that in the first place? Announce it, I mean?”

Illya shakes his head. Such insights are far above—and indeed, no longer related to—his pay grade.

“We need to get on the ground,” Solo says. “Find out how far along they are, how much the locals have noticed, make a risk assessment. Otherwise we’re dealing with too many unknown quantities.”

Yu pokes his head in the door. “Sir? We’ve confirmed that the CIA is watching the situation, but the extent of their intelligence is limited. We’ve come across PHOTINT and HUMINT reports, but they’re inconclusive at best. The US has made no definitive moves other than intelligence gathering.”

“But that could change at any time, of course,” Waverly says. He looks up at the projector screen, the blurry image in black and white overlaid with thermal. “The moment anyone sees anything even approaching this.”

“By placing us there, you’re putting distance between us and your organization,” Gaby points out, “Which I imagine you’ll need when everyone comes after you for poaching.”

“Which would be now,” Illya adds. “Considering Sanders was on the line this morning, and I was due in Moscow four hours ago.”

Waverly looks at them with vague amusement. “You’re acting as if I need to be convinced,” he says. “Wasn’t it all of you whose reservations I had to soothe this morning?”

Solo raises his chin slightly. Illya just huffs.

Gaby crosses her arms. “Put us on a flight, sir.”

***

It takes some time for preparations, including installing the new recharge protocols in Solo.

Emerson watches the process with fascination, having emerged from her activities with Aina and
curious about the fuss in the control room. “You’re leaving? So soon?” she asks Solo, crossing her arms.

“I’m afraid so,” Solo says, glancing up at her from the spool of magnetic tape Gillman is running through a large computing unit. Illya had already been upstairs and returned with his few belongings; Gaby had done the same. Now they are left to wait while the explosion of motion from the control room spills out to the research lab, where Gillman has been working with her team to complete the adaptation of Teller’s virus, and Waverly has been following up on his innumerable contacts, collecting as much data as he could for them before they were scheduled to leave.

“I should like to help,” Emerson says. “Everyone is nervous, and that means that something needs fixing. I should like to help.”

“You’re not wrong,” Solo says. “But I’m afraid where we are going, we cannot be seen.”

“You mean noticed.”

Solo pauses. “Just so.”

Emerson does not seem to take offense. “So I cannot follow you.”

There is something weighty about the way she says it that has Illya’s attention; Solo’s, too.

“No,” Solo draws out, half a question.

Gillman looks up from the mag-tape and frowns. “What are you suggesting, Emerson?”

“Nothing; I am just thinking.”

Solo nods at her, though, like he agrees with her. To what, Illya can’t imagine. It is clear, however, that should he ask, he would not be given a straight answer.

“The code looks good, Dr. Gillman,” Solo said, diverting her attention by gesturing to the mag-tape. “I’ll load it, if your team is ready.”

“Oh, we definitely are,” O’Malley declares. “I’ve never seen an upload before.” She and Kumar had taken to watching Solo like hawks once they’d learned what he was. Solo seemed...accustomed to it, if not happy with it.

“It’s not terribly exciting, I’m afraid,” Solo says to her. “I just interface with Dr. Gillman’s computer, and then we’re done.”

“Well I want to see it anyway.”

“If he doesn’t want you to, you won’t,” Illya breaks in, crossing his arms.

Solo stares at him. Illya doesn’t look him in the eye, just continues to glare at O’Malley.

O’Malley winced. “Right. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Solo says, after a pause. “I’ll just, it won’t be a moment.”

It may be that Illya hovers through the upload process a little intensely.

Within the day, however, they take a commercial flight to Havana, under innocuous names and countries of origin. Solo adjusts his accent accordingly, listening raptly to the other passengers on the
flight over, mouthing words and phrases and shifting from Mid-Atlantic to something approximating Kent. Illya doesn’t bother with anything so elaborate; Soviet ambassadors and industrialists are a constant presence since the American embargo. Gaby attaches herself to him as the uninterested wife, visiting for the weather rather than the business. They sit quietly during the flight, and Illya feels the weight of their task settle into his bones.

Gaby keeps cutting glances at Solo, opening her mouth to speak, and then pulling back at the last moment.

Havana is uncomfortably warm and stifling with humidity, jarringly colorful after they grey stone and rain of England. It’s enough to make Illya’s eyes hurt.

As soon as they exit the airport, his shirt is sticking to his back. Gaby wrinkles her nose and puts her hair up into braids that begin immediately to frizz. Solo is the only one still looking immaculate, but he grimaces anyway, pressing a hand to his sternum.

“I do better in cold,” he says in explanation. “And things rust here.”

You carried me out of the ocean without complaint, Illya doesn’t say.

Their first port of call in the city is a small shop in the center run by an ex-operative with whom Waverly is apparently acquainted. Gaby leads them through the streets in a slow wander, careful not to give their movements any overt purpose, her hand light in the crook of Illya’s elbow. Gaby admires the cars: sleek Chevrolets from the last decade, while behind them Solo tests his Spanish in a low murmur, soaking up the chatter of passersby. Illya, however, is struck by the buildings, unlike anything he has ever seen before—a riotous blend of styles, Spanish and Moorish structures in outlandish colors, snugged up against one another and up against sleek, Art Deco facades, bright pastel arcades lining the boulevards, the domed capitol building presiding over them all.

They walk along Paseo del Prado towards the Capitol, and then in towards the port, and Illya wonders at this country, this political brother to his own, that is so small and yet seems to hold so many identities that it is bursting at the seams with them.

He realizes, seeking shade beneath the arcades and skirting around the beginnings of an outdoor cabaret, that he could well and truly disappear here.

They window shop and chat aimlessly, and buy fruit to nibble on from a cart, until finally they find and duck in past a garish red and yellow sign announcing Las Antigüedades de Abrantes.

Illya has to immediately duck to avoid getting assaulted by low-hanging Tiffany lamps and wicker ceiling fans. The small shop is crammed floor-to-ceiling with dark wood furniture and Art Deco decorative art, a good deal of it clearly American.

“Hola! Como e—ah.” A older woman emerges from the back of the shop dusting her hands off, her dark face initially lined around a bright smile. Within catching sight of them, the smile reforms into a tight, knowing mask.

“That obvious?” Solo says, dropping the English accent and laying on the charm.

She remains uncharmed. “The type of people you’re playing at don’t come into my shop.” Her accent is nearly unnoticeable in English, her diction boarding-school British. She looks them over. “I am Maria Abrantes. Waverly sent you?”

“He did,” Gaby confirms, and quickly introduced them to her. As she did, Illya could tell that Abrantes is committing their faces and names to memory in the way that he does when learning
marks—she will not forget them, and no doubt will be able to spot any one of them in a crowd in an instant.

He wonders how long she has been retired from the game; old habits certainly die hard, but her hair is nearing white in wide streaks at her temples, and the lines in her face are deep.

When Maria has shaken their hands, Gaby asks, “Did he give you any details?”

“None whatsoever, and I assume he won’t until the whole thing’s over and done with. That said, he did have a number of requests for intel, and you’ll have to come into the back for that.” She tilts her head to the doorway she had emerged from and doesn’t wait for their assent, just moves back with a swift, efficient stride, only slightly hampered, Illya observes, by an arthritic left knee. They will endeavor not to bring trouble to her door—she wouldn’t be able to outrun it, though Illya is certain she wouldn’t give up without a fight.

Through the door in the back of the shop, which they reach with difficulty, weaving between coffee tables and mouldering armchairs. It feels like every hole-in-the-wall shop Illya has ever been in, which is to say too close and too dark, and this one has the added presence of heavy humidity pushed about listlessly by a couple of oscillating fans. Illya keeps his shoulders and arms tucked in close to himself as he maneuvers, and feels overwarm and clumsy for it.

The back room is at least marginally cooler, the shades on the windows pulled all the way down, leaving everything in burnished darkness, save a cluttered desk illuminated by a banker’s lamp. On all sides of the room, instead of furniture are stacked boxes, some sprouting tissue and newspaper from their half-open lids, others filled to bursting with file folders.

“This doesn’t seem...secure,” Solo comments.

“You know what’s unsecure? Electronic files,” Abrantes shot back. “You hit one password, you suspect something important is behind it. You hit encryption? You know it. And then it’s just a matter of time before it gets cracked.”

“I simply meant the lack of lock on your door,” Solo says, pointing at the doorway they’d just come through. Sure enough, the handle was a simple knob.

She shrugs. “Same principle. I’m just Tita Abrantes here. No one expects me to keep anything but the front door locked.”

She shuffles over to a particularly large stack of boxes and moves them aside with suspiciously little difficulty, and indeed once moved, they reveal behind them an imposing safe.

Solo makes a small, impressed noise. Abrantes gives him a piercing look, but doesn’t comment. Instead, she puts one hand on the number dial and the other around the side that remains obscured by file folders and boxes. Without moving the dial at all, she manipulates something out of sight, and the door silently gives way.

No one tries to look inside, which Abrantes seems to appreciate. She removes from the safe a stack of folders and a roll of maps, all of which she deposits on her cramped desk. “Clear this a bit, will you?” she says, nodding at the stacks. “Keep them together, but you can put them anywhere.”

They did so without complaint, setting aside what Illya realized were piles of private intelligence reports from around the country, interleaved with corroborating reports from Interpol, the CIA, and various South American intelligence agencies.

“Waverly said you were retired,” he says lightly, as he sets aside a stack on top of what he judges to
be a fairly stable tower of boxes.

“Did he? He’s not wrong.”

“But not entirely right?” Gaby suggests.

Abrantes lifted one corner of her mouth, but her eyes gave nothing away. “That’s need-to-know. Now come here.”

They gathered around the desk.

“First thing you’ll need to know, is that if you’re looking for Soviet troops here, you need only walk a few miles out of town before you trip over them,” she says. “Last I counted, there were something like 40,000 stationed.”

Solo raises his eyebrows. “That is far more than I would have expected.”

“Your country placed a massive embargo on this island and you expected us not to thoroughly entrench themselves in foreign aid?” Abrantes shoots back. “There are Russian ships in port more days than not, bringing trade and supplies. You will fit in perfectly, Kuryakin.”

*That, Illya thinks, will be a welcome change of pace.*

“I don’t know what specifically you are looking for, but if you are trying to find out about Soviet armaments, you will need to cover nearly the entire north coast. These are the major military sites.”

Gaby sucks in a breath. “That is...thorough.”

Illya can’t help but be impressed, and perhaps a bit proud. Where the Americans surely have superior firepower at their disposal, the Russian defense strategy is remarkably complete. To see it writ so broadly after being on the ground for so long is...satisfying.

“We’re specifically looking for newer sites,” Solo says. “Constructed within the last six months, unusual supplies moving in and out of them. Bot guards hanging around, perhaps?”

Abrantes gives him a long look, and then rolls up the map, shoves it aside, and grabs a fat folder from midway through the pile she had retrieved from the safe. “San Cristobal,” she says. “You’ll need to go to San Cristobal.”

“There are missile sites all along the eastern side—”

“Short range, defensive only. You’re after offensive weapons, aren’t you? That’s why Waverly is so concerned all of a sudden.”

The three of them look at each other.

“Well, yes,” Gaby admits.

“San Cristobal,” Abrantes repeats. “We call it Operation Checkered Shirts. Too many Russians moving at odd times, taking shipments off the docks and then out into the forests. They all wear the same damn things, it’s sloppy. We’ve noticed, but if it is Soviet, then whatever it is is to our advantage, so.”

“Willful ignorance?” Solo suggests.

“Just so,” Abrantes says. She settles her hands flat on the tabletop. “Are you going to take this to the
Solo meets her gaze squarely. “Not if that will lead to war.”

“That’s not an answer. Castro talks of an American invasion, and from where I’m sitting, it’s not an impossibility.”

“The Americans want Castro out, but they don’t want a war,” Solo says. “But in any case, I don’t work for them.”

“That isn’t an answer, either.”

“We work,” Illya interrupts, “For Waverly. And we are here to gather information, not to disseminate it.”

It is the first time he has said as such aloud. It doesn’t feel as foreign as it should.

Abrantes regards him, and sighs. “And I owe him a list of favors a mile long,” she says. “And what’s more, I actually trust him not to abuse that. Fine.” She opens the folder, and pulls out several files. “The reports about Operation Checkered Shirts are here. You’ll need a map of the forests, that’s here, along with maps of witnessed or otherwise recognised activity. And this is a list of people you are not to disable or kill, because they’re useful and I need them around. You may ask them for help—tie a handkerchief on your wrist if you want to signal that I sent you. But they will not be under any instructions to be amenable. They say no, you respect that. They say yes, and you bring them back in one piece. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly,” Solo says.

“Thank you,” Gaby says.

“Don’t thank me,” Abrantes snaps. “Just do the things that I ask. I have no control over this island, my contacts are small-time and run on faith, do not make mistakes you cannot undo. These are not stable times and we are a small country, caught between the pissing contests of much larger ones.” She glares at Illya and Solo. “Do not discount us, and do not lead us into war, because god knows we’ve had enough of it.”

“Not a revolutionary, ma’am?” Solo inquires.

She straightens. “I am a spy,” she says. “And this is my adopted country.”

Illya supposes that this is something he will come to understand. “We will do as you ask,” he says.

“Good.” She gathers the papers together and puts them in a stained paper bag, along with some newspaper. “Bring this out, and buy something,” she instructs. “People who stay in my shop this long make purchases.”

“Yes ma’am,” Solo murmurs.

They emerge with intelligence reports the CIA would kill to get their hands on, and the ugliest table lamp Illya has ever laid eyes on.

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It’s too late by the time they leave Abrantes’ shop to head to San Cristobal, so they check into a small touristy hotel and bar in the center of Havana, where Illya is immediately noticed by a number of
Russian women, no doubt recent imports hoping to make their way, now that Soviet ties with Cuba were two-way and firm. High-cheeked and watchful, they remind him of every friend his mother ever had just after his father had gone to the gulag, like buzzards circling, and it makes bile rise in his throat.

“Peril, I think you’ve found your arena,” Solo remarks, as Illya shrinks under one particularly covetous gaze. “‘Yelena’, you have competition.”

“I will beat them off with sticks,” Gaby says, her tone blithe even as her grip on Illya’s elbow goes tight for a moment. Illya takes some comfort in the pressure.

“Single room for me, Jonathan Basingstoke,” Solo tells the front desk, and then appears uninterested in anything but the bar while Illya and Gaby arrange their own accommodations.

Their room is cramped, a small white linen affair with bright curtains and bad art on the walls. Solo is a few doors over, and they take little time to wash the travel off. When Illya emerges from the bathroom, however, it’s to find Gaby standing still between the beds, pajamas hanging loosely on her, a look of trepidation on her face. She acknowledges him only by a darting look, quickly withdrawn.

“I should,” she starts, and then swallows. “I need to…”

“What?” Illya asks.

“Solo. I can’t just. I really need to…” She bites her lip.

Ah. Apologies to make.

“So go,” Illya says. He is shirtless, his face damp from the sink, teeth scrubbed. “Talk to him. You have a password from him, don’t you? Peace offering, for him to remember everything he has stored away, now that he does not have to hide it from CIA.”

She tilts her head in unhappy agreement. Then she casts him a critical glance. “It will look very bad for you.”

He doesn’t disagree. He really does not want the sympathies of the women downstairs who, if they see or hear of Gaby going to or emerging from Solo’s room, will think him a cuckold. But they are leaving tomorrow; it won’t matter for long.

“Since when have you cared about appearances, Chop Shop Girl?” he says lightly.

She huffs. “Fine. I’ll be back in a bit.”

She throws a dressing gown around herself, belting it tightly, and steps into slippers before sliding silently out the door. Illya hangs up his towel and runs a comb through his hair. He still feels tired down to his bones, the one solid night of sleep not enough to erase the week of its lack. He knows he won’t be able to sleep particularly well—it’s too hot, and foreignness automatically puts him on high alert—but he’s willing to try for rest of some sort, since he suspects it’s the last chance he’ll get for a while.

He folds himself into the too-small bed and closes his eyes, leaving the small bedside light on.

***

He must sleep, because when he next is aware, it’s to Gaby slipping back through the door, her steps
light on the carpet. He turns over to look at her, and finds her expression unlike one he’s ever seen on her.

She notices his wakefulness and murmurs, “Go back to sleep, Illya.”

“You’re all right?” he asks, voice raspy with sleep.

“Fine,” she says, too quickly. “We’re all fine. Solo’s charging, and it looks like the new programming is working. It looked a lot less painful, this time.”

He nods against his pillow. “Good.”

She presses her lips up into a smile that only halfway reaches her eyes. “Go to sleep. Work to do in the morning.”

He nods again, and begins to drift off again as Gaby toes off her slippers and shrugs out of her robe, leaving both on the floor. The last thing he sees is her hesitation after pulling the covers back, and the way her fingers stray, tentative and shaky, to her lips.

***

The next day they acquire a car, an old army jeep that’s probably been cannibalized and re-stuffed with parts at least three times since it arrived in Cuba. It takes to the roads well enough though, and so Illya takes them out onto the highway towards San Cristobal while Gaby claims the miniscule back seat to curl up and nap.

Solo, meanwhile, keeps shooting him looks from the passenger seat.


“You never mentioned that we played chess.”

Illya shoots a look at him. “Hasn’t come up,” he shrugs.

“No, I suppose not,” Solo allows.

Illya blinks slowly, navigating a wide turn beneath a massive new underpass, keeping their speed steady over the speed limit. The wind from the open windows is the only respite they have from the oppressive equatorial heat. “You...put that away?” he asked after a moment. “That memory?”

“Yes, among others,” Solo says. “Not something I wanted Sanders reviewing.”

“They know you play chess.”

“No with Soviets. Not when I’m not trying to win.”

Illya absorbs that. The idea that Solo had seen fit to preserve and protect such a simple, early interaction, when Illya hadn’t trusted Solo further than he could throw him, is strange to him. He wants to pick at it, but also doesn’t want to risk unraveling it.

Solo is still watching him. It doesn’t itch quite as much as it used to.

Illya shoots a look at the rear view mirror, and finds Gaby curled up, fast asleep on the raised bench, large sunglasses pressing crookedly against her cheek. “Your talk with Gaby went all right?” he asks.
“It was hardly my talk,” Solo says, but something about his tone is careful.

“She wanted to apologize.”

“You wanted her to apologize.”

“I want her to remember,” Illya says, a little testily, “That actions have consequences.”

“I’m fairly certain she already knows that,” Solo points out. “And familial guilt, while I understand why it might be potent, has absolutely no place alongside that lesson.”

“If that is what you think, then you don’t really understand,” Illya says through gritted teeth.


Illya looks straight ahead. “Not necessary.”

They drive in silence for a time, and then Solo says, “She said her piece. I told her it was unnecessary. I hold no ill will towards her, and her family’s actions, while they have had severe and unpleasant effects on me, are not reflective of her. Whatever genetic disposition she might have towards...machines...has not manifested the way it did in her father and her uncle. She possesses far more empathy than either of them did. She is...a better person, by far.”

Illya glances at him. “You told her that?”

“Should I not have?”

“No. It’s...” Illya shrugs. “It’s good you did.”

They turn off of Autopista Este-Oeste onto 491, and then Solo says, a little blankly, “I kissed her.”

Illya considers it to his credit that he doesn’t drive off the road. His knuckles go white on the steering wheel, and something in his stomach turns over, but he keeps them steady heading south. He thinks back upon Gaby’s face when she’d come back to the room last night, and the way she had touched her lips.

“...Why?” he asks, after a long moment.

“It’s a gesture of regard,” Solo says, but he is very still, like all of his processing power is turned inward. “Of trust. She didn’t believe me, that I trusted her. I do. I must. So I kissed her.”

Illya thinks on this, pushing out all extraneous thoughts, of which there are many. The thrumming tension in his stomach continues to flip, over and over into knots. “You have been learning about people,” he says at last, “For ten years. Eighty years of experience for you, isn’t that what you said?”

“Eighty-seven,” Solo murmurs, barely audible over the wind. “Going rapidly on eighty-nine.”

“Eighty-seven years, and you don’t know that doing that is, is more,” Illya has to search for a word, “More complicated than that?”

Solo is still as a statue. He barely moves with the juddering of the car. “Yes, well,” he says, in a way that’s perfectly Waverly, all misdirection through equivocation. It doesn’t suit him at all.

Illya looks back at Gaby through the rear view mirror again. She hadn’t acted any differently this morning; she had seemed content to gulp down a café con leche with their continental breakfast in the hotel before going straight to business, mapping the route to San Cristobal and then claiming
inadequate sleep, thus ceding Illya the wheel.

“How did she react?” he asks at last.

“She returned the gesture,” Solo answers.

Illya sighs, and shakes his head. “I guess you are lucky, then,” he says. “You did not get slapped.”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you’re right, it is complicated,” Solo says in a rush. “More complicated than I had been led to believe from prior experience. And when matters grow complicated such that they extend outside my body of knowledge, I want to learn. And that means asking questions.”

Illya raises an eyebrow. “You haven’t asked me a single question, Napoleon.”

Solo makes an irritated gesture. “Because I don’t know what questions to ask.”

Illya shakes his head. “You are asking the wrong person, anyway,” he says. “You are better off reading.”

“Reading what?” Gaby says, sitting up and leaning over the front seat.

“Romance novels,” Solo says blandly.

“Ugh, I prefer thrillers. Those awful western dime store ones, like A Colt in Each Hand.” She drawls the title in a terrible Texan accent.

Solo makes a sound of distaste. “How did you even get a hold of those?”

“I worked in a garage, not a nunnery.”

Illya rolls his eyes, and lets them bicker.

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San Cristobal is far more sparse than Havana, and far quieter. The daring architecture of the past few decades that had exploded across the capital city after the Spanish War hasn’t quite reached here, and the old colonial beauties were far fewer. On the approach are mostly fields on either side of the road, interspersed with small terracotta-tiled houses, farm equipment parked off to their sides. Illya slows and maneuvers around horse-drawn carts and pedestrians, who move slowly in the heat. Towards the center, the buildings become denser, and are beautiful and bright but low slung in tight blocks, small stripes of dry grass separating them. At the front entranceways of the larger buildings, Corinthian columns painted in vivid colors closely abut the sidewalks. There are few side streets, lending their path a tunnel-like quality, even with the huge expanses of sky and hills beyond.

“Won’t be many people willing to talk here,” Illya says, watching a cluster of people glance at them as they drive past. “The city is too small. We stick out more here than in Havana.”

“All we need is a guide to take us towards the base,” Solo says. “One of Abrantes’ people, if we ask nicely, might do.”

“Give me her list,” Gaby says, reaching between the front seats, and Solo rifles through the paper bag Maria Abrantes had given them before extracting a packet of papers and photographs to hand
Illya turns off the main road and slows the car further, horse-drawn carts the only vehicles now narrow enough to pass one another without one pulling to the side. The sun beats down, harsher away from the coast, the only shade available from the porches lining the sidewalks. Gaby had said that morning that there was a general store and several bars towards the center where they could pick up supplies and gossip before heading out into the hills. They had the basic equipment for it, discreetly distributed in modest canvas bags and luggage, but they would need food and water, and probably annotations on their maps from one of the names in the packet Gaby was perusing.

“Juan Valdez,” Gaby says, as Illya spots what looks like the store but gets stuck behind a tractor trundling along, taking up the full width of the street.

“Your choice of contact?” Solo asks.

“Mm. He’s a secondary recruit for the military. If things get hot here, he’ll get called up. Might be able to feed us information. But for now, he’s a tobacco farmer, grew up here, knows the area completely. Apolitical—not interested in regimes, just in keeping his sisters safe. I think he’ll be amenable, but not loyal.”

“So he’ll save himself,” Solo nods. “If it comes to that. Good. Where do we find him?”

Gaby shades her eyes with a hand across her brow, then glances down to the packet, and then back up. “Right there, it seems.”

Illya follows her gaze to the small cafe snugged up against the general store, to where a short man with gaunt features and sharp eyes is watching their progress from the one of the small tables under the porch. He is dressed like a farmer, brown trousers and a short-sleeved collared shirt, a straw hat with a curled brim tilted back to protect his neck from the sun.

“Should we say hello?” Solo queries.

“I think he’ll probably do us the favor himself,” Gaby says. Then she points. “Looks like you can park there, Illya.”

Illya pulls up onto the sidewalk, behind a hulking Ford pickup. On the porch of the cafe, Juan Valdez puts down his coffee cup, and drops a few coins from his pocket on the saucer.

“I’ll get the supplies, shall I?” Solo suggests, jumping lightly out of the jeep. “Practiced my Spanish last night, so it shouldn’t be much trouble.”

“Go ahead,” Gaby says. “We’ll wait.”

Solo pats the side of the jeep and heads into the store, his pace slightly unlike him, an imitation of the men they’d seen walking on the roadsides heading in, easy and energy-conserving.

Illya keeps his hands on the wheel, where they’re visible, and tips his head back, as if resting his eyes behind his sunglasses. Gaby folds away her packet of papers in her purse, exchanging for it a small white handkerchief, which she loops twice around her wrist before tying it in a half-knot. Then she leans her elbow on the outside rail of the jeep, propping her chin on her fist.

Out of the corner of his eye, Illya watches as Juan Valdez stands, lifting his hat to slick his hair back before replacing it. As he leaves the table, he takes with him between two fingers a square paper napkin, coffee-stained.
Gaby hums tunelessly, foot tapping to a silent beat.

Juan Valdez wanders past the jeep on his way across the street. The napkin flutters into the footwell of Solo’s seat.

Neither Gaby nor Illya move.

Ten minutes later, Solo emerges from the store with a paper bag, which he deposits in Gaby’s arms. “Hold that, would you?”

“Watch your step,” Illya says mildly.

“Oh? Ah.” Solo easily avoids the napkin, except to secure the corner of it to the floor with the edge of his shoe. “Shall we?”

Illya obliges, starting the car again, and pulling them back out on to the road, still matching pace with the carts and bicycles. After a few idle minutes, Solo picks up the napkin from the footwell.

“Apparently, there’s a club here,” he says brightly. “I hope you know how to cha-cha, Mrs. Tarkovska.”

“I’m an excellent dancer,” Gaby declares.

Illya and Solo both snort.

It doesn’t occur to Illya until later that, if Gaby hadn’t unlocked Solo’s encrypted memories the night before, Solo wouldn’t have known what was funny about that.

Chapter End Notes

Research notes!!! Guys I have been doing so much research lately, so these notes for the next few chapters will probably get really extensive. I HOPE YOU ENJOY THEM.

PHOTINT and HUMINT are photographic intelligence and human intelligence, respectively. I try to make this story non-jargony for the most part, but I also wanted to match the language that might have been used by experienced analysts, so I hope this wasn't too distracting.

Operation Checkered Shirts was actually a nickname for the operations taking place in Cuba, picked up due to all of the young, similarly-dressed Russian men hauling things back and forth around the area. NOT SUBTLE.

1950s US army jeeps were/are common, and have lasted as long as they have by continual replacement of parts with basically whatever’s been lying around. The M35 was the most common, and the backseat is very much Gaby-sized, and probably not particularly comfortable to sleep on.

A Colt in Each Hand is an actual dime store book from the 50s, which was among the reading material blamed in ‘51(?) for seducing a teenager in East Berlin into an Al Capone-like life of crime. There was a massive trial for this kid and apparently the East German press really made a big deal about how decadent capitalist literature makes you into a degenerate gangster. I didn't read super deeply on this, but if you want to, go find
Uta Poiger's *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels* for the lowdown!

Finally, the architecture in Cuba, from what I've seen of it, is out of this world amazing and I want to go see it. However, while there's lots of stuff on the web about the architecture in Havana, there is WAY less about San Cristobal, so I'm working off of a short YouTube video and some image searches, so any inaccuracy there is on me. If I have any Cuban readers, PLEASE MAKE YOURSELF KNOWN, I WOULD LOVE TO PICK YOUR BRAIN.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The club has all the seediness of daytime still clinging to it when they arrive. It sits between a grocery and an open field, and its facade is dingy turquoise, emblazoned with a red and white sign proclaiming *El Agua de la Vid_!,* the ‘a’ lost somewhere in the grass. The napkin had advised they show up at five o’clock, and so they had driven around town for a while, getting their bearings and occasionally stopping to grab supplies here and there, until they saw fit to park a ways from the club in a patchy field filled with scrub grass, next to a dusty Chevrolet with broad tailfins and a rusting paint job.

Illya takes the opportunity to stretch his legs, leaning for a moment against the hot engine at the nose of the jeep, feeling sweat trickle down his neck and settle at the small of his back.

Music is emanating from the club, slightly muffled, the old LP scratchy with use.

“All right there, Peril?” Solo inquires. “You’re looking a bit red.”

Illya looks at his arms and grimaces. “Too much sun,” he says.

“Poor thing,” Gaby says, her own olive-tone skin already browning nicely.

Illya glares at her, and heaves himself off the side of the jeep. “We are wasting time. Let’s go.”

He leads the way, pushing open the screen door that’s been left unlocked just beyond the club’s front porch. Inside, the music blares from an ancient gramophone sitting on the corner of the bar, its horn once red, now a rubbed and faded maroon and brass. About half of the chairs are still stacked upside down neatly on small circular tables crowded around the edge of the room. This leaves a dance floor open, which is burnished and well-cared for despite the scrapes and dents of movement. Against the left hand wall, the bar stretches from one end of the room to the other, cramped with bottles and possessing the scrubbed, slightly sticky polish of liquid having been sloshed on it numerous times and left to seep for a few hours too long.

At the center of the floor, three people are in movement, none of them Juan Valdez. Illya pauses, still in the doorway, and Gaby and Solo stop as well, once they come up behind him.

The three people inside give them no notice. One, older and paunchy with a bristling mustache, is intently clapping to the music on the beat while muttering percussive notes and instructions in between, watching carefully as the other two, a man about Valdez’s age and a much younger girl, dance to the music.

“Stop watching your feet,” the dancing man says, in teasing Spanish, “Look at me.”

“But you’re not very interesting to look at,” the girl retorts. She pinches him where her hand rests on his arm, and he makes a half-laughing, half-offended noise.

“You’re on the beat, both of you, step on two,” the mustached man admonishes. “One- dah -three- tah, one- dah -three- tah , for christ’s sake, Pascal, try and lead!”

“You’re the one who insisted on lessons,” Pascal says back to the girl, who grins as they make an adjustment in tandem and fall back into rhythm, Pascal guiding the girl into a spin that she just barely
maneuvers through, her limbs still coltish, just beginning to come under her control.

Illya is distracted enough that he almost misses when Juan Valdez emerges from a side door behind the far corner of the bar. His hat is now tipped low over his face, his arms crossed.

“Tita Maria sent you?” he asks when he reaches them, his voice low but audible over the music. His English is heavily accented, but his diction is clear. He sounds like cigarette smoke, which mostly hides what Illya suspects is a very young tenor voice.

“Not so much sent, as recommended you,” Solo says. “You’re under no obligation.”

“Good. I don’t like being obliged.” He nods his head towards the bar. “Come, let us not be in the way.”

They skirt along the edge of the dance floor and over to the bar. Gaby casts an inquiring glance at the girl.

“My sister, Nicola,” Valdez says, to her silent inquiry. “She insists on learning before all her friends, so she can impress them when they go out. Which will not be for years, if I have anything to say about it.”

“Good luck with that,” Gaby says.

“Then why lessons?” Illya asks.

“Better this than her sneaking around,” Valdez replies. “I trust Gio and Pascal, they are good teachers, good men.”

This, Illya realizes, is a carefully calculated demonstration on Valdez’s part. Both of trust and warning, and it relies entirely on his estimation of them as humans rather than spies. It is, in short, astoundingly brave. Foolish, but brave nonetheless.

The music fades for a moment, and Nicola begins bullying Pascal and Gio into walking her through a more complicated, twisting step. They seem willing enough to indulge, albeit with rolled eyes on Gio’s part.

Valdez turns away from the dancers, and raises his eyebrows. “So. What do you need?”

“Directions, mostly,” Gaby says. “Some notes on our maps, some local knowledge. We can take it from there.”

“Do I want to know what ‘it’ is?” Valdez asks.

“Maybe not,” Gaby allows. “We still would not mind an assist. If you are willing.”

“I take a great risk, you know,” Valdez says. Illya can tell that he’s studying each of them in turn, spending a substantial moment just as Tita Maria had done memorizing their faces, their bodies and ways of moving.

“We understand,” Solo says. “That is why you are under no obligations from us.”

“Hm.” Valdez looks at them all a while longer, and then tilts his head in a crooked half-shrug before reaching behind the bar. “Have a drink with me.”

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They drink rum. It goes straight to Illya’s head in the way that he always hates, and so he sips slowly, letting it go from tepid to warm in his glass. Gaby, meanwhile, continues at her normal pace and drinks like a fish, which pleases Valdez.

Solo, of course, seems to ponder the taste between draughts like they hold the secrets of the universe.

Towards six o’clock, Nicola, Gio, and Pascal leave (Nicola skipping over to kiss Valdez on the cheek, entirely ignoring his companions). The bartender comes in around the same time and kicks them off the bar stools, so that they have to relocate to a table in the corner with their bottle of rum as the rest of the chairs and tables are unstacked for the oncoming crowd.

This works well enough, as it means that Gaby can unfurl one of the maps Abrantes had given them.

“The base is several miles from here, and the roads out of the hills are patrolled,” Valdez says, pointing while swirling his drink in his glass with his opposite hand. Gaby scrawls further annotations across the map. “You won’t be able to get close with a car.”

Illya isn’t surprised.

“You’ve been there?” Gaby asks.

“Not very recently, except as part of a militia convoy. Things have been very busy recently—seems like they want to finish something soon.”

Illya and Solo exchange a look. “Catch any word or glimpse of what kind of something?” Solo asks.

Valdez shakes his head, a twitch of annoyance pulling at his lips. “That is why I’m telling you this. I don’t like that the Soviets are not sharing with us the full knowledge of what they are building here. Castro has agreed to it, so I am certain it is for the safety of Cuba, but the specifics, they do not give that to us. As if we are children, to be guarded.” He makes a noise of derision.

“This convoy you were a part of,” Gaby says, “Can you show us the route on this map?”

Valdez finishes his drink. “Give me the pencil.” He draws a path, which follows along the major motorways until it diverts through a dip in the topography, presumably on an unmarked road. “This we will also not be able to take.”

“Best to know where traffic is, usable or not,” Solo says.

Valdez casts him a glance and doesn’t disagree.

“What path should we take instead? And what hazards will be in our way there?” Gaby presses.

Valdez nods. “I will tell you what I know. It will not be a lot, once you get to the base, but I know these hills; I will get you to the edge of the base with no problems. You can tell Tita Maria that I told you what I know.”

“You can tell her yourself,” Illya says. “We will not tell anyone what you have told us.”

Valdez looks at him steadily, eyes too old for his face. “Everyone tells,” he says. “That is why you are here, isn’t it? Someone told about the base, so now you come to see it.”

Illya begins to protest, but Solo smoothly talks over him.

“Not so much told, as saw,” he says, “But we take your point.”
Valdez nods.

“Then sleep tonight in your car, or in the forests, do not check in anywhere. Then tomorrow, I will meet you,” he circles a small road that curves up against, but doesn’t cross, the mountains, “Here. I will take you to the top of the ridge, and then you will have to find your way down. It is easiest, and I will be home before anyone notices. Yes?”

“Yes,” Illya agrees, keeping his enunciation careful. “We will do this.”

Valdez seems satisfied with their willingness. “Good. Then you should go now— too many people from town see me talking to strangers, they will ask questions.”

“Do we need to pay for the rum?” Gaby asks curiously.

Valdez grins, his teeth sharp and straight and stained with tobacco. “Nice of you to ask. My cousin owns this place. He will not mind. Now go.”

Single file, they slip out out the back door which Valdez points out to them.

“I guess I’m driving,” Solo comments, when Illya wavers while descending the back step.

“That would probably be best,” Gaby says.

Wordless and hazy, Illya slips into the passenger seat and tips his head back to look up into the dimming sky as Gaby climbs in behind him. “You’re a mess, Kuryakin,” she says, resting her hand on his hair. “I’m a quarter your size and you’re about to go to sleep.”

“Drink,” Illya mutters, shaking his head. “Never good.”

“Incredible,” Gaby murmurs. She takes her hand away, and he irrationally misses it.

Solo throws the car into gear, and eases them back out into the road. “Are you any good?” Illya asks, resting his head against the headrest and tipping it over to look at Solo. “At driving?”

“I’m a very good driver,” Solo replies. “The problem is that people often aren’t.”

Gaby barks a laugh from the back seat. Illya closes his eyes.

“Try not to get us killed, Cowboy,” he murmurs, and gives in to the urge to nap.

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He wakes when they come to a bumpy stop, and the sun has waned to a stripe of searing red along the horizon line. He squeezes his eyes shut against it, and lingers in semi-wakefulness for several minutes while he reacclimates, listening to the unspeaking motions of Gaby and Solo around the car.

When he finally opens his eyes, the sunlight isn’t nearly so piercing. In the long shadows, he sees a line of trees fifty paces from the side of the road, as well as a footpath that cuts off to one side, marked by trodden-down grass. Beside the jeep, Gaby is bending down to tuck her trousers into the tops of her boots, her hair back up in braids.

“Oh good, you’re up,” she says, glancing back at him. “Hungry?”

Illya works a crick out of his neck and rubs at his eyes. He can’t remember the last time he’d slept inadvertently, and while in motion, to boot. Rum is hardly an adequate excuse. “Do we have water?” he asks, voice coming out a low grumble.
Gaby hands him a canteen and a greasy package made from, as far as Illya can tell, some sort of leaf, wrapped in twine. “We picked up tamales from a roadside cart before leaving town. They’re good.”

Illya sips from the canteen and then sniffs the package. He receives a waft of pork grease and fried grain and peppery warmth, and finds himself suddenly famished. He pulls back the leafy wrapping—corn husks, he now sees—and takes a bite of the parcel. The flavor is mild but good and the texture is hearty, coarse cornmeal surrounding chunks of meat and vegetables that all taste of broth and spice, and he finishes it quickly to catch the lingering warmth in its center.

He then realizes that he hasn’t seen Solo at all. “Where is…?”

Gaby purses her lips, and nods to the backseat of the jeep.

Illya leans over and sucks in a breath. Solo is curled much in the same way Gaby had been on the first leg of their journey, but his bulk necessitates a far tighter ball, on the floor of the back seat instead of across the bench. His knees are nearly up to his chest, and his back is wedged up against the wheel well. Illya would comment that he looks horribly uncomfortable, except...well.

“He said he’d probably best go into standby to conserve battery,” Gaby says, a little hushed. “I said that would be fine, we’d switch off taking watch. Hope that’s all right.”

“Yes,” Illya says, still studying him. “Is fine.”

Solo’s eyes are closed, his stillness all-encompassing. Only the faintest whirring, easily mistaken for the insects in the grass, betrays his continued function.

“How does he wake again?” Illya asks.

“I think he set a timer, though any very loud noises or direct stimulus should pull him back out,” Gaby answers. She lays out a blanket across the back bench, careful not to disturb Solo in any way. “I’ve never seen him do it without a charge at the same time, so I’m not sure. It’s the way they usually install hardware upgrades on bots— they’re too complex to shut down completely without risking data loss, so standby is the only way to go.”

Illya had known as much about security bots, the ones sent on diplomatic missions just after the war, status symbols and assassination deterrents for the most powerful members of government. There had been newsreels of Stalin on diplomatic missions, with a bot at his back. They’d been little more than smaller Marchers, back then, terrifying shadows clanking at the back of entourages in faceless threat. People had stopped using them by the mid-50s—they were too much a demonstration of force, too much an overt expression of the otherwise tacit understanding of mutually assured destruction to be anything but unwelcome to the public and to everyone else. By the time Illya had entered training at sixteen, they were being kept carefully out of sight, reserved for securing compounds and military bases.

During SUR training, Illya now remembers that he had been taught how best to disable them, when to strike. Standby is one of the best opportunities anyone can have of inflicting permanent damage on a bot. In this regard, Illya is quite sure that Solo is no different from them. It occurs to him suddenly that Solo’s choice to wedge himself into the footwell, much the same as he had folded himself into the cluttered and disused berth on the British naval ship, had probably been very deliberate.

“I keep wanting to put a blanket around him,” Gaby murmurs. “It’s silly.”

Illya shakes his head. “It isn’t,” he says, and then shrugs off her skeptical gaze. “He looks cold.”

She huffs. “I can’t believe you’re willing to admit that.” Illya bristles, but before he can protest, she
Illya adds, in a lower voice, “I spend all this time defending him to you, and now you try and protect him from me.”

Illya opens his mouth, and then closes it. It’s dark enough now that he can barely see her.

“He does not need protection from you,” he says at last.

She makes a dissatisfied noise.

“He does not,” Illya repeats. “He tells you this, yes?”

“Ah,” Gaby says, with a hint of irony, “So you were gossiping about me this morning.” She shifts against the jeep, and then after a pause, hefts herself onto the bench behind Illya, immediately tucking her feet up, out of the way of Solo in the footwell. Illya listens to the rustle of motion and cloth as she settles down, half-prone. There’s a sliver of moon out, enough that he can just barely see the whites of her eyes in the dark when she turns to look at him.

“You’re taking first watch,” she says, as if that weren’t obvious. Illya grunts an affirmative.

More rustling as Gaby beds down. Illya throws the empty corn husk into the grass. The air is still warm enough to feel stifling, so he props himself against the passenger door and stretches his legs out, in the hopes of dispersing some of his own body heat. His shirt is stuck to his back, itchy and growing more so as it slowly dries, which is good—it will keep him awake.

He tries not to think about much of anything, letting the darkness resolve into gradations from which he can glean shapes and movements.

“Someone did a good job,” Gaby says suddenly, voice muffled but fully intelligible. “Teaching him how to...well.”

Illya exhales through his nose. His hands are suddenly fists.

He winces and then opens them slowly, stretching tendons, still feeling the tenderness of the healing bones in his knuckles and fingers.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” Gaby murmurs.

When Illya casts a glance at her, it’s to find her watching him, the liquid reflection of light in her eyes unmoving.

He works saliva into his mouth. “Doesn’t matter,” he says.

“It doesn’t? Oh.”

“Go to sleep, Teller.”

“Mm. Good night, Illya.”

“I will wake you in three hours.”

“Ugh.” She turns over to face the back of the bench, and slowly her breath evens out.

Illya flexes his healing hand again, feeling out the soreness, letting it burn away his other thoughts.

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They switch off twice during the night, wordless, not bothering to move from their places in the jeep. Twice, trucks drive by but don’t stop to investigate.

Solo is a ghost between Illya and Gaby, entirely static, his face frozen in neutrality instead of the lax peacefulness of natural sleep. When dawn begins to break, the mask of his face becomes ever more disquieting in the vibrant equatorial light until, on his last shift of watch, Illya has to fight the urge to rouse him, to reassure himself that life still resides in him.

When the sun is out but still weak, a horse and cart appears at the horizon line, from the direction of San Cristobal. Illya watches it progress with half an eye, his attention mostly occupied by the idea of making a small fire for coffee beside the jeep. He doesn’t wake anyone while he thinks this, just turns it over as the cart gets ever closer. Finally, as the cart is almost within shouting distance, he flexes his legs and extricates himself from the jeep, digging a small impression with his heel to one side.

By the time the cart pulls up, he has a small fire going, and coffee perched atop it.

“Hospitality,” Juan Valdez says, jumping off the cart. “I am impressed.”

“Hmm?” Gaby says from the back of the jeep. “Oh.” Then she looks down at Solo, and after a hesitation, grasps his shoulder and lightly jostles him. “Jonathan, Mr. Valdez is here.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Illya watches Solo ‘wake’.

It isn’t instantaneous, and it isn’t like how he had come out of charging on the navy boat; instead, his eyes flick open first, but for a moment, the strange copper tone is completely absent. Then it flares, lighting up the blue of his irises. Following this, his head cocks to one side, before the rest of him shudders into motion. Illya very much hopes that Valdez is not paying particularly close attention, because while the sequence doesn’t precisely look suspicious, it is certainly unnatural, perhaps enough so to garner questions.

“Ah,” Solo’s voice clicks, then settles. “Good morning.” He heaves himself out of the footwell.

Valdez eyes him. “An uncomfortable place to sleep,” he says.

“You’d be surprised,” Solo says with a mild smile.

“Coffee?” Illya offers.

“Not for me, thank you. But Yelena…”

“Yes,” Gaby confirms. “Very much so.”

They eat breakfast, consisting of crusty bread Solo had bought yesterday and some fresh white cheese Valdez had brought along in his cart. “Your horse will be all right?” Gaby asks, nodding at the horse, a gray nag with a thin mane and tail (though no visible ribs), still tied to the cart.

“He will find shade and graze,” Valdez dismissed. “Be more worried for yourself— it is a long hike.”

“We’ll be fine,” Illya says, before Gaby can take offense. Their packs are light, mostly carrying food, and Solo had agreed to carry the bedding, as they only needed two sets. The heaviest pieces of equipment, Illya carried: a Parker Hale, which Illya didn’t care for but was the only sniper rifle Waverly had had to hand, and which could—with the right paperwork—go unremarked upon on a flight out of Britain; a small set of knives; and an emergency battery pack, for Solo.
(The last had been at Illya’s insistence, at least in terms of carrying.

“If you are running so low as to need it, you will probably need help hooking yourself up to it,” he had said, as they wound through San Cristobal. “Waste of time, to be carrying it about only to struggle to get it out of your own pack and run down.”

“It’s heavy, and I’m stronger than you,” Solo had pointed out.

“And all I need is a nap to get energy. You are more difficult.” Illya had sniffed. “You are difficult, in general.”

Solo had made outraged, if also amused, noises at that, and given in with partial good grace.)

That had been perhaps the first time Illya can recall winning an argument with Solo. In combination with the conversation they had had earlier about chess, it now puts him in a strange mind about Solo, a preoccupation which lingers now as he watches Solo nibble carefully on a shred of Valdez’s white cheese, parsing its taste with his usual, clinical intensity.

“Sun is nearly all up,” Valdez says. “We should begin. You are packed?”

Solo nods. It will take minutes to pack up the coffee and bury the fire. “Lead on.”

As they retreat from the jeep, Illya has the strong notion that they will not be returning to it. Cleaned and empty, parked off on the grass, smoke from the buried fire curling beside it, it already looks entirely abandoned.

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The trek into the forest is indeed long, and only grows more arduous once they begin straying from more well-established paths. Valdez knows what he’s doing, Illya can tell that much—he accurately navigates the path he had outlined on their maps, which avoids the highest elevations except when it is the only way not to intercept the main roads. He leads with surety along narrow stretches of tamped tree roots, the route circuitous in ways that are evasive, but not wasteful of time or energy.

The forest itself is filled with dense, old trees that have curled about each other and conspired to create a vast canopy overhead, closing in the heat and the damp. An hour in, Illya is longing for the dry heat of the open, dry ground that surrounded the city. Hummingbirds buzz as loudly as the insects, and every bit of wildlife feels close in a way with which Illya is unfamiliar. Every moment, it seems, he can feel the creeping of vines and creatures on the back of his neck, or the stares of larger game. He flinches too much, at first, and Valdez notices.

“You have never been in the tropics,” he observes, keen and laconic at once.

“No,” Illya mutters. It had never been part of his part of his purview.

“You will get used to it. Or you will not. Won’t make much different either way—you’ll get bitten no matter what.”

“Lovely,” Gaby says, slapping at a bug. To her credit, she hasn’t so far uttered a word of complaint since they began. Her legs are far shorter than anyone else’s in the company, but it has not hindered her pace.

“Along here,” Valdez say, and they continue behind him.

After four hours, they break for lunch, which they tear into with aplomb.
“We are nearly at the treeline,” Valdez says. “Two more hours or so, and then I will turn back, but you will be in sight of the base.”

He is studying them again, though what he sees, Illya is not sure. His eyes keep straying to their bags, but the only equipment of note there are their weapons, and the battery pack. The latter, at least, is tucked well out of sight.

They set out again not long after, not wanting to wait in the increasing heat of the day any more than necessary.

“I’ve not seen any guards so far,” Illya notes, a few more miles further. They are getting close to the base; there should be some about, according to common sense as well as Valdez’s reports. “Are we so far from the usual routes?”

“I have taken us around the outposts. But no, not so far.”

Illya narrows his eyes. “Then I should have seen them anyway.”

“You have.” Valdez stops, and they follow suit. He points, about a hundred yards down the slope they’re traversing. “That tree, behind that outcropping. Do you see the bird?”

It takes a moment, but then Illya spots it--a gray bird, too drab for its surrounds, and in fact, quite familiar.

Illya sucks in a breath. He knows these.

“Golub’,” he says.

“What?”

“A dove,” Solo supplies. He comes to stand beside Illya. “A collared dove, to be exact. They’re not native.”

“They are not,” Illya says. “But these are not truly doves, either.”

Gaby gives him a sharp look, and then peers with more interest at the bird, pulling out her binoculars to study it.

“Not bad workmanship,” she comments, “Can they fly?”

“No—they cannot see very far, and they cannot fly. Very primitive watchers,” Valdez says, nodding. “So we skirt around, get enough cover from trees, and then we are not seen.”

They haven’t changed since Illya was in service, then—trinkets with barely-there programs running inside, practically analog. They had become more theater and deterrent than effective security devices back in Moscow, where they dot the trees in every park. As much a part of the landscape as the KGB themselves, they are rarely checked on or taken down for maintenance. Here, they clearly are in far more important use, which either means that unseen improvements have been made on them, or that they are the only mechanical security the operation could afford.

Illya hadn’t even thought to look for them here. He will need to reconsider what to expect when it comes to the base’s security and equipment.

“They are scattered around the roads,” Valdez said. “My friends and I, when they called in the militia, we started seeing them, then started mapping them. I already knew this part of the mountains
well; this wasn’t about to stop me.”

“You’re very attentive,” Solo remarks, “For a farmer.”

Valdez grins at him, something stiff about the muscles around his eyes. “Why do you think Tita Maria likes me so much? Come, we are nearly to the treeline.”

He takes them through a jutting corridor of trees, the underbrush nearly up to their waists, and then slowly downwards, the dead leaves underfoot growing sparser, giving way to grasses as the sun began to filter more steadily through the canopy.

Another quarter of a mile further, the sun high and blazing in the sky, and they reach the treeline.

“This is as far as I go,” Valdez says.

Illya surveys the ground stretching out beyond them and says, “I have concerns.”

“As do I,” Gaby says.

“Yes. I am afraid this is where my knowledge stops,” Valdez say, not entirely apologetically.

The base stretches across the field and at least a kilometer beyond, where the ground has been more recently cleared. The familiar features are all present—barbed-wire fences around the perimeter, guard towers at each corner, a few patrols here and there. There is denser activity towards the eastern side of the complex, likely indicating that the production lines they need to investigate are set up there.

The cause for concern, however, are the bots.

There are five, from what Illya can see. Not dissimilar from the old guards of the previous decade. Large, trundling mechanisms with swivelling eyes and children’s-blocks chasses, held together with ungraceful ball-bearing joints. Alone, Illya remembers them as unwieldy and more trouble than they’re worth, more likely to rack up collateral damage while missing the target. Together, however, and arranged as they are, not much more than a few hundred yards between each, makes their firing radius around the perimeter worryingly complete. Their range of vision, too, is unobstructed—beyond the treeline, the ground is flat and open.

“They’re networked,” Solo says, studying them. “One goes down, the others will notice and investigate.”

Valdez, out of the corner of Illya’s eye, stills.

“And no doubt alert central security,” Gaby nods. “Can you hack their network?”

“Not remotely. They’re in a closed system, and it’s fairly primitive, which makes it harder.”

“So,” Valdez says, low and devoid of affect. “You are one of those.”

Gaby straightens and looks at Illya, who looks right back at her. Her eyes are big and dark in her face, her mouth suddenly flat.

Solo doesn’t even pause or glance their way, or move at all. “One of what?” he asks.

“You don’t have any computing equipment with you, I saw what was in your packs when we stopped. Only hacking you can get done from here is with internal equipment,” Valdez says. His expression remains neutral, though tightly focussed.
“That’s it?” Solo asks, with a careful, quelling glance at Illya. “Just our packs and my comment, and you think…what, exactly? Do tell, I’m very curious.”

“I think you are not human. You are like those American films. Inteligencia mecánica.”

Illya’s hand is on his knife; Gaby’s is hovering over her gun.

“Paranoid science fiction fantasy,” Solo dismisses.

Valdez is undeterred. “Your Spanish is too Cuban for you to have not been here before. And if you had been here before, I would have known.”

“Perhaps I’ve spent time in Puerto Rico. Very similar dialect. Perhaps I’m just very good at my job.”

“And if I were to cut you open?”

“You’d be dead before you got skin deep,” Illya growls.

Valdez flinches, but stands his ground. Solo, for his part, finally turns to regard him.

“Well, goodness,” he says at last, still gazing at the guards in the distance. “Tita Maria must adore you. Are you certain you’re just a farmer? Does Nicola know?”

“Careful, bot,” Valdez says.

Solo barely appears to have heard him.

“What does it change?” he asks, as mild as Illya’s ever heard him. “My being a bot, and you being...what, national intelligence under Castro?”

That freezes Valdez in his tracks. Gaby exhales hard in surprise.

Solo continues blithely. “I must say, I’m a bit surprised that I haven’t heard of such a successful possibility before, but the CIA certainly has its blindspots. But what precisely does all that change?”

Valdez holds his gaze, but he is more than aware of where he stands with Gaby and Illya—Illya knows that look, of the guarded, well-trained man, all provincial mannerisms falling away.

“I don’t know,” Valdez says. “And I don’t like not knowing things.”

“I can relate,” Solo replies. “But you brought us this far. Just for Tita Abrantes, as a favor? Or is there something else you need?”

“I have plenty,” Valdez says. “So far.”

“Ah. A very neat double-cross, is that it?”

“No,” Valdez snaps, his sudden vehemence startling within the bubble of the stand-off. “I do not split my loyalties.”

“Cuba and Abrantes act as one?”

“Their goals are one,” Valdez says, and there, finally some of his youth shines through, just the slightest hint of petulance. “Their methods are different, but I work to protect my country. That never changes.”
“So,” Gaby says, careful and steady, “What is good for Cuba here? You have brought us here, where you are outnumbered and miles from your home.”

“I—”

“You have trusted us this far,” she continues, unblinking, “To do well by your country. Should Solo being what he is change that?”

“But I don’t—I don’t know what he is!” Valdez hisses. “He looks like, like a—”

“Person?” Solo suggests.

“An American,” Valdez finishes. “You could be recording all of this, for all I know. You could be selling me out right now.”

“And if I am, it’s likely too late for you, isn’t it?” Solo counters. “You’ve been identified, put on file, judged in Washington. If I were doing as you suggest.”

Valdez’s jaw is jutting forward now. But then he turns to Illya. “You are KGB. I know KGB, and that is what you are.”

Illya doesn’t move, and doesn’t disagree. (It’s starting to feel like a lie, which he tries to ignore.)

“Why are you working with an American bot?”

Illya opens his mouth, and his mind goes suddenly blank. The question is so unexpected, so obvious, and so complicated all at once that it mutes him.

“We...are on the same assignment,” he manages, after a pause. “On the same side.”

“And you trust him?”

That is much easier. “Yes.”

It surprises Valdez. His eyes widen for half a second, and then he looks back at Solo, whose own surprise is nearly unnoticeable, save for how Illya has gotten very good at noticing. Illya isn’t sure what to make of Solo’s surprise—on the one hand, he supposes that he has never said as much unequivocally, but he he had thought Solo knew him well enough to realize how even being here, on this mission, demonstrated perfectly well just where Illya’s loyalties now lie. Though trust, Illya again supposes, is a very different beast from loyalty.

Valdez recovers with anger. “Then you are spying against your own people. You are a traitor.”

“You watch your tongue.”

Solo’s words come like a whipcrack, enough that both Illya and Valdez startle. When Illya looks at him, Solo’s expression is like nothing he’s ever seen before—hard, lips half-curled in a snarl in a way that must be conscious, must be chosen, because there is no other way for his face to twist in such a way.

Illya finds his voice. “I am no traitor. I don’t work with the Americans. Solo is just...American-made.”

“Just as I am German-made,” Gaby says, stepping forward. “And right now, you have a very simple decision to make. Either you let us go on our way, go home to your sisters, and say nothing, or we kill you and bury you in these woods. It is your choice.”
It’s a bungle that Valdez has gotten himself into, in his sudden concern about Solo’s otherness. Outnumbered and outgunned, he is only a farmer here, really. He seems to realize it, too.

“Bots don’t react like that,” he says to Solo, slowly, still in doubt. “Perhaps...perhaps I am mistaken.”

“Go on,” Solo says, unmoving, a fixed point.

“Tita Maria sent you,” Valdez says, after another long moment. “You must be on our side, then.” His gaze darts between them all, and then he peers up at the angle of the sun. “I must go before I am missed. Nicola, she...”

Gaby nods. “Go, then. We’ll take it from here.”

He goes. First slowly, and then faster, nimble over the tree roots and fallen leaves. He glances back every few paces. They watch him.

“I have the shot,” Illya murmurs, his hand still on his gun.

“Abrantes won’t appreciate it,” Solo says.

“Doesn’t make it less tempting,” Gaby says. “Do you think Abrantes knows? Not about you, but about him?”

“She’s smart, I’m sure she has suspicions,” Solo says. “But one always thinks the best of one’s countrymen.”

“Not here,” Illya says. “Not if it is anything like Russia.”

Valdez crosses the ridge, and falls out of sight.

“We mythologize our fears and export them,” Solo murmurs. “How colonial.”

“We’ll need to assume that he tells Castro anyway,” Illya says. “And Abrantes.”

“That gives us about five hours head start, from the time it takes for him to get back to his cart and into town,” Solo says, nodding. “We’d best make it count.”

Chapter End Notes

Research notes again! I'll try and keep this short - the story really should speak for itself (I hope!) but also it's too much fun not to share some extras.

Thanks to the generous and inspiring advice of sephonered, Nicola and Pascal are dancing merengue, as salsa was not yet popularized in Cuba. Its steps are on the off-beat, which was hard for people, so salsa later put everything on the downbeat, apparently. Thanks sephonered! Lemme know if anything pings you as off/inaccurate! I watched some youtube videos to get a sense of things, but I am a total layman when it
comes to partner dances of any kind, so.

According to Google maps, it should take about four and a half hours by foot to go from San Cristobal to the main missile sites over the mountains. Probably a little bit more by the totally made-up route I had Valdez lead them on but, uh, never mind that.

I have never had Cuban-style tamales, but having looked up the recipe, they sound delicious. Unlike Mexican-style tamales, the meat is intermingled with the cornmeal instead of wrapped. Have a recipe!

Finally, it only came out in the 80s just how good a spymaster Castro was. I can only imagine that his effectiveness domestically was even greater than that abroad. He favored young, uneducated men to mold into supremely good operators, so I tried to make Valdez a good, if not perfect example of that. He is maybe a little too old for Castro’s ideal, considering he’s seen American movies, and has maybe bought into their hype a bit. Anyway! This has not been the last we’ll see of him, I think.

Thanks for reading! What was that I said about keeping this short? Lolllll.
Getting through this chapter was like drawing blood from a stone, argh, apologies for the delay—as I’ve said before, this will likely be a recurring pattern, particularly now that we are coming up against HISTORY DDDD:

They stand untethered at the treeline for several minutes, contemplating the obstacles lying between them and the base itself. Illya listens to his own heartbeat, the way the adrenaline slowly stops weighing down its pulse.

Solo eventually says, “I need a way to interface with the bots. If I can interface, I can trick the signals between them into linking out of order, and create a gap in the line. Illya—can you get us close enough?”

Illya considers his options. Were he still in the SUR, a coordinated attack would have been simple, but as it stands, he can’t expect Gaby or Solo to read his mind on these matters. Moreover, they are only infiltrating, not making any sort of direct assault, so the brute force he would normally employ isn’t appropriate. Still, Gaby is quick on her feet and understands the theory behind machines probably more than he does—he has worked with far less.

“We’ll need one of the golub,” he says. “Can you interface with one of those first?”

Solo makes a face. “They’re awfully primitive. I might fry them.”

Illya tilts his head in half a shrug. “If you do, we find another. If they are anything like the ones in Moscow, they break all the time. It won’t be noticeable for some time.”

“I can get them,” Gaby says. She quirks a wry smile at Illya. “Moscow’s not the only place that’s watched.” She peers into the forest. “Last one wasn’t a quarter of a mile from here. I’ll be right back.”

She drops her back at their feet and sets off back in among the trees.

“What are you thinking?” Solo asks Illya, when she’s out of sight.

“I am thinking that we need to draw one of them out,” Illya says. “To the treeline. We can’t approach them when there’s no cover, when all of them could be alerted at once. But If you can draw one of them towards us, Gaby and I will be able to disable it enough that you will have the opportunity to interface with it.”

“The others will notice,” Solo notes.

“They will notice, but they are also programmed to remain in their sectors unless a full alarm is issued,” Illya replies. “It is standard Soviet security protocol for all of us.”

Solo looks at him sharply, but doesn’t comment. “All right,” he says. “I hope Soviet protocol’s in effect here, then.”
“So do I,” Illya mutters.

Gaby emerges from the woods with two golub wrapped tightly in her arms, tiny bursts of sparks spitting from their necks at odd intervals. “Visuals and audio are disabled, though mapping is still online,” she says. “Will that do?”

“It will have to,” Solo says. He takes one of them from her, and it resists for a moment, wings flapping with strange, aluminum susurrations until he pins them back down against the body. He examines it with something approaching distaste.

“Sloppy,” he says, peering at its underside. “Who invented these?” He works a thumb against the side of the golub’s throat until suddenly it quiets, sparks subsiding.

Illya shrugs. “Before my time.”

“Hmm. Well, no time to waste.” He pulls the familiar scalpel out of his jacket pocket and works open the silicon across his neck.

Illya averts his eyes.

“Right, I don’t want to overload it, so maybe...yes, let’s try this.” Solo pulls a thin wire from his neck and hooks it up to presumably a port hidden beneath the synthetic feathers. His eyes flare and the golub’s wings ruffle.

Illya turns to Gaby. “If this works, one of them will come over here to investigate. Can you climb that tree?” He points to a stout conifer on the edge of the clearing. It reaches up into the sky at least fifty feet, probably more.

Gaby eyes it, the way its trunk disappears into the shine of the sun, and swallows.

“Not a problem,” she says eventually, “I take the head, you take the legs?”

“Something like that.” He looks back out at the field, and the Marchers slowly patrolling around. “You’re too light for it to notice you immediately, but you’ll need to move with its head’s rotation to avoid discovery, or get too close to be seen very fast.”

It’s been awhile since Illya has seen a Marcher up close. Their lumbering gait doesn’t subtract from their danger. The first signs of rust on these hasn’t softened them, though it does indicate that Cuba has had them on their shores for some time. The dark dappling of water damage outlines the gun and cannon barrels bristling along their legs and flanks. Their specifications return to him like a familiar scent, the way home cooking is meant to evoke childhood, one distinct input fragmenting into a dozen recollections. They breach the surface of his thoughts with a shimmer of remembered static, and he has to flex his healing hand to remember himself, where he is.

He focuses.

Marchers: their targeting systems are top-notch and reliable to a fault, their always-roving, completely articulated discus-shaped heads removing any impediments to their peripheral vision. There are a plethora of reasons, he thinks, why they have become such a terrifying spectre within popular culture in the United States and indeed elsewhere. Their disquieting, owl-like ability to watch their own backs is enough to set imaginations running, but in combination with their size, the obviousness of their armaments...though he knows their power sources ultimately limit them (at least for now), in the moment they seem inexorable, tireless, cold even amidst the lush greens of the tropics.

He’s never taken one down in the field before. Endless practice, but never this.
“You’ve got to take out its peripheral vision first,” he says. “That means destroying or obstructing the rotating mechanism in its neck. It can be reached through a gap beneath the front of the head and neck, where it is able to tilt its head downward. A stone can be thrown into the gears there and begin restricting its movements. Pick a good stone—it will get ground down after a while, but better later than sooner.”

He can hear his voice change, become remote, as if it's coming from another person entirely. Gaby doesn’t flinch from him, though.

“At some point, it will sense something is wrong, and will try and dislodge you. This is when it will be most dangerous for you.”

“No kidding.”

He gives her a flat look, and then turns to Solo.

“Do you have anything that we could make into an electromagnet? Or better yet, two?”

Solo raises an eyebrow. “Strong enough to hold a Marcher? No. You’d need a Bitter model, and anything else I build even remotely close will almost certainly overheat and damage the Marchers to the point of noticeability before breaking entirely.”

Illya scowls. “Okay. How strong can you build a normal one?”

Solo huffs. “Strong enough to maybe disrupt internal mechanisms, but nothing drastic. Hand me that other dove, ” he says, gesturing towards it, the first one still connected to him and tucked under his arm. “I presume you want one with a single field, not some all-encompassing job? I’d rather not find myself unwillingly attached.”

Illya rolls his eyes. “If you please.”

Gaby hands over the second golub, which again struggles until Solo disables it. He’s far less gentle with this one, shutting it down complete before cracking open its chassis. The motions of it appear strangely cruel, despite Illya knowing how primitive the golub are.

“No mercy for your fellow machinery?” Gaby notes, more in curiosity than anything else.

Solo shoots her a smile. “I have more in common with you than with this appliance,” he says. Illya flinches slightly, but it goes unnoticed.

“I’m going to need that battery pack you have, Illya,” Solo adds conversationally. “So I hope you don’t expect me to do anything very strenuous after this.”

“Will doing this drain it?” Gaby asks. “It’s meant to power you for two days.”

“Do you want it make any impact on a Marcher or not?” he shoots back. His hands are deep in the golub’s machinery. “Illya, help me here. Grab these?” He indicates a cluster of wires.

Illya kneels down and gathers them up. “Now what?”

“Disconnect them, strip them, and coil them around—” he twists a round section of the casing that had been part of the golub’s ribcage until it breaks free, and then crushes it into a rough spool shape, “—this. When you’ve done that, give me the battery pack. I’ll handle the rest.”

Illya does as he’s told in silence—he had forgotten about the comparative dullness of Solo’s hands.
Solo’s eyes are flashing intermittently, the golub under his arm twitching. “I’m going to make sure the electromagnets put the arms out of action,” he says, studying the gait of the Marchers now, the ball-bearing joints oiled to whisper-quietness, their flat feet making dull thunder out on the grass. They had to be cloaked, in some way—there was no other reason for them to have gone unnoticed for so long otherwise. It would explain also why only Solo’s combined spectra of vision allowed them to see clearly the small glimpse he’d gotten of what was presumably this base.

Hopefully this one, and not another.

“Then I’ll take out the legs,” he continues, ignoring Solo’s curious noise. “Gaby, that’s when you’ll need to open up the chest plate.”

“Ah,” Gaby says. “Just open it right up, like a cabinet.”

“Yes,” Illya agrees. “There are catches, maintenance access panels. You’ll be able to see when it gets up close.”

“And what, I can just crack them? Won’t there be security?”

“The Marchers are security,” Illya says. “It will try and stop you. But between the electromagnets and my work, it will be unable to.”

Solo regards him. “The SUR were very thorough,” he observes, without judgement. “Weren’t they?”

Illya nods, familiar pressure cresting and withdrawing in his chest.

“Good for us, I suppose,” Gaby says lightly. “Now explain how I open the chest plate.”

Illya does. It is easier to recite from memory than to think about. Some of the information will be out of date or otherwise inaccurate—much can happen in five years, and anyway, it is unclear where these particular Marchers were imported from, or if alterations had been made upon arrival without studying one closely—but the basics of how they move, how they think, will not have changed, and Illya knows those things intimately.

“Very thorough,” Solo repeats, when Illya finishes. “I think I’m glad of it.”

“Are you ready?” Illya asks him.

Solo holds up two heavy masses of coiled metal, each connected by long cords of wiring to the battery pack. “You’ll need to throw one right after the other, pretty much,” he says. “Either that, or plant one and throw the other. Only so much wire I could scavenge. Turn it on with this transmitter.” He tosses Illya a small circuit board with a switch welded on one side.

“And the golub?”

“Ready, though the signal will only last so long as I can keep from overloading her.”

“How long is that?”

“A few seconds. More than long enough to get their attention.”

“We should go,” Gaby says. “Before they notice us or the missing doves without prompting.”

Illya nods. “You should climb, then.” He gauges the Marchers, and says, “Thirty-five feet should do it.”
Gaby’s throat works for a moment. She grabs what she needs from her pack and loops it around herself and onto her belt as needed.

“Thirty-five. Right,” she says, casting a more comprehensive look at the Marcher closest by. “To reach the head. Of course.”

Illya opens his mouth, then closes it. “You are okay? With heights?”

Gaby exhales. “Not really. But you’re too heavy, aren’t you? It needs to be me up there, right?”

“Right,” he agrees.

“Well then, there is nothing for it,” she concludes, but there’s a paleness underneath her tan that belies her words.

“You’ll be fine,” Illya says, trying to sound assuring, unsure of whether he succeeds. “You’ve gotten this far with us.”

She snorts. “I suppose that’s true.”

The whites around her eyes prominent, she moves to the stout pine at the very edge of the clearing. Her hands shake just slightly as she grasps at the bottom-most branches and hefts herself up.

Illya and Solo watch her ascend for several minutes. Her movements are nimble, assured, her form getting smaller and smaller as she climbs higher.

When she reaches about twenty feet up, the branches holding her still strong, Illya looks back at Solo. “We should get a little further in,” he suggests. “More cover.”

Solo nods, and they retreat a few yards further into the woods, finding a cleft of rock against which they can take cover.

Illya breathes slowly, counting off. The rustle of Gaby’s movements are barely audible as she gets farther up into the canopy.

“Ready when you are,” Solo says.

Illya exhales. He tips his head back to get a good look at the Marchers. “Go ahead.”

Solo’s eyes flash copper; the golub makes a strangled noise.

The effect is immediate; the Marchers all stop in place, and then seem to confer.

“What did you tell it?” Illya asks.

“Mimicked a request for maintenance, and mixed in some irregularities to make it seem a bit suspicious,” Solo answered.

It’s no more than eight seconds before the golub under Solo’s arm emits a distressed, electronic sound, and then spits a mass of sparks before its synthetic feathers catch fire and Solo has to throw it to the ground and stamp out the flames before they spread.

Illya only catches the movement out of the corner of his eye; his focus remains on the one Marcher apparently elected to investigate. It moves steadily, navigating the slope towards the trees easily. Illya adjusts his strategy as he watches it move, calculating angles, velocity, wind resistance. The narrowing down of his vision and thoughts seems to cool him from the inside out, all unnecessary
Teller will wait until she has firm footing and a clear jump. The Marcher is on low alert; its head movements remain slow, and there are no rapid-fire assessments and reports yet being filed and analyzed. It is conserving energy, still.

He can see Teller high in the tree, a small silhouette tight against the trunk, near parallel to the Marcher’s head, hidden among the branches. Her legs are braced against the juncture of trunk and limb, feet planted, her shoulders and arms strung tight. Her face is canted around the trunk, watching the Marcher as Illya does. Her chest is expanding and contracting in hard gusts. She is afraid.

The Marcher reaches the treeline. Its broad shoulder brushes the top of a nearby pine as it sweeps the area.

“Throw the golub,” Illya breathes.

Solo takes a quick glance around the outcropping, aims, and throws.

The golub hits a tree some feet in beyond the treeline and falls into a crumpled pile at its base.

The Marcher stills, focuses. Its head weaves until it finds the golub.

It judges the remains worth investigating.

It walks further forward, steps almost delicate, as if to merely ease in among the trees.

Illya looks up at Teller again. She is still against the trunk. But—

Her grip changes.

She takes a breath in. Crouches.

Explores from the trunk in two long strides across the branches and then leaps.

“Beautiful,” Solo whispers.

She lands heavily on the shoulder of the Marcher and immediately begins to slide, scrabbling and jolting, towards the shoulder. Her hands catch on a ragged bolt, and her legs lock tight in the gap between the arm and torso chassis. It stops her fall, but if the Marcher raises its arm, it will crush her legs instantly within its flexing joint.

Illya breathes out.

The Marcher keeps walking towards the golub, unaware. Teller is far too light, even with her ungainly landing, to register with any of its sensors. Still, she surely can not help but be aware of the danger— once her grip stabilizes, she wedges her knees further into the joint to free up her hands, and then unwraps the length of rope and grappling hook from around herself. A quick whirl of the hook and she lets it fly, and it sails beneath the Marcher’s approximation of a chin before the rope bends against the neck and pulls it back around.

The hook doesn’t catch on anything; it begins to slide.

Illya’s hands clench against rock.

Teller makes to pull the hook back and try again, movements jerkier this time, quicker and less accurate. As she does, though, the hook falls into a gap in the plating between neck and torso, and
when she tugs harder, it stays.

The Marcher has reached the golub.

Gaby heaves herself out of the joint’s rough inversion and out fully onto the shoulder, wrapping the slack on the rope back around her chest and stomach, her gaze fixed on the unmoving head of the Marcher as it studies the golub on the ground.

She has little time before the Marcher finishes its assessment of the broken golub, even less before its head will swing back around to her and catch her in its view. Illya rolls onto his hands and knees, feet braced against the bottom of the outcropping, ready to burst forward towards the Marcher’s legs to begin his assault.

Knees bent against the shifting surface of the Marcher’s shoulder, Teller teeters forward towards the head, taking up the slack in the rope as she goes. The Marcher has tilted forward slightly to study the ground, no doubt making note of the slight damage to the bark of the tree Solo had hit with the golub, and the trajectory of its fall from there.

Extrapolating that it was thrown.

“We’re going to need to move soon,” Illya whispers.

“I’m very aware,” Solo responds.

They watch a moment longer as Teller gets closer to the head and neck.

Without warning, the Marcher straightens. Its shoulders jolt up, torso tilting back to center, and it sends Gaby stumbling, stumbling—

She falls.

Illya and Solo both freeze; Illya’s knuckles go white on his gun.

Teller— Gaby— falls...and stops.

The rope holds as it goes taut.

Gaby dangles against the back of the Marcher, legs akimbo before she gets them under her, feet sliding until her boots find purchase and she’s able to pull herself perpendicular to the upright chassis. With the fierceness Illya has come to expect of her, she begins to ascend once more, hand over hand.

The Marcher, however, has finished its inspection. They’re out of time.

“Solo,” Illya murmurs.

“Yes?”

“I’m going. Keep cover.”

“Wait, Il—”

Illya breaks cover at a sprint, skirting behind the trees that directly surround the Marcher until he has the necessary angle. He turns precisely within the current blind spot, calculates the Marcher’s likelihood of spotting him, probability of course adjustment, firing range of leg ammunition, possible trajectories, actions, counteractions, spinning out like a spool of thread dropped from a height—
He goes for the right leg first, where there’s visible rusting at the ankle joint. His laser-cutter would be useless anywhere else on the reinforced chassis, but here he can at least get at wires, at some of the sensory relays. The Marcher is on the move, though, blind spot shifting, Illya is quickly entering its visual range; he judges an angle and launches himself onto the foot, scrabbling just as Gaby had, but he knows these contours, can fit his hands against them and pull himself up flush against the calf, draw the laser from his belt at the same time, shimmy upwards, sliding just out of range of the the armaments bristling along the outer leg.

The rusted metal gives, though not much— enough. Four inches— all he needs to fit his hand inside.

Overhead, a shriek of metal reports against the trees. They’re almost back at the treeline, almost in sight of the other Marchers, who will break position if this one communicates a threat.

Illya jams his hand into the still-scorched gap he’d made in the rusted armor, counting the wires like it’s breathing, feels out the contact points, diagrams sliding across his vision, and yanks.

The Marcher stumbles, leg suddenly unresponsive. Illya cranes his head back to look up at its tremendous bulk, heart pounding in his ears, and it begins to turn to look right back— and can’t.

Gaby had done her job; the head swivels and stops, gears grinding and unable to catch further.

“No!” Illya shouts up, and as he does so, he flings the first of the two electromagnets up, trajectory perfectly aligned with wind speed, watches it spin out, holds his breath, and flips the transmitter on.

The first magnet catches with a report like a shot, pulling itself to the Marcher’s left arm; the second, however, goes wide, swings back around, and the activated magnet is too strong to reach the right— it snaps against the Marcher’s back, disrupting the movement of the one arm but leaving the other free, and the Marcher is compensating, recognizing the threat now, swinging to take aim and—

Fire

Somewhere out of sight, Gaby shouts in pain.

Illya catches out of the corner of his eye, a blur of movement, inhuman speed, but he can’t focus, or he’s focussing too much, his situational awareness fading out as he speculates, adjusts the plan, tries desperately to think ahead, to compensate—

Things become muddled not long after that.

He remembers later, the shriek of metal, and sparks, and his hand breaking again, the bright hot pain so much worse this second time, and then—

“Illya, look at me! Illya Kuryakin, look at me right now.”

He blinks away sunspots, or thinks he does. There’s a creeping numbness in him only now subsiding, and the feeling is so familiar he almost believes that nothing is amiss until he reorients himself in time— he is not twenty years old anymore, not in Russia, not in a training field, those words were not in Russian.

“He’s coming back. How much longer?”

“Just another minute, it’s more complicated than I...well, never mind. Just another minute but that doesn’t mean we haven’t been noticed.”

“This is looking more and more like a hit and run.”
“It can’t be helped now; let’s just hope it’s worth it.”

“Illya? Come on, focus.”

“I’m here,” Illya murmurs. His hand throbs, a persistent, engrossing hurt that pulses up the length of his arm and grips his spine, and it reacquaints him with the rest of himself: the fact that he is standing with military straightness, the fact that Gaby is right in front of him, her hand hovering around his elbow, not quite touching. The fact that her outstretched hand is trembling.

He looks over her shoulder and sees the Marcher. On the outside, it looks relatively undamaged. There’s a surgical hole in the leg joint, however, and the head keeps trying to rotate and keeps failing, making it tick in tiny jitters back and forth against the resistance of the rock Gaby had worked into its gears. Its one arm is still limp against its side, and the other Solo must have managed to take out of commission some way or another.

“What did I…?” he starts.

“You did exactly what was needed,” Gaby says firmly. “Disabling the leg gave me enough time to crack chest plate, and then Solo took care of the rest.” She pauses. “It’s just, after it was done, you walked over here and went into parade rest. You didn’t...you didn’t seem to recognize us.”

Illya exhales. It’s not...he hadn’t made a complete mess of it. That’s good. “I didn’t mean to,” he says anyway.

“No,” Gaby replies, not moving. “I didn’t think so. We should have considered, before, that all this could cause...associations.”

“You’re all right?” he asks, trying to look her over now that his eyes can move of his own volition. “I heard—”

“It winged me,” she says, gesturing, and indeed there’s broad rip in her trousers at the side of her thigh, its edges bloodstained. “I’ll be fine.”

“Done,” Solo calls, causing both of them to turn. He jogs back over from the Marcher, eyes copper-bright, thick data cable retracting into his neck. His pace is slightly uneven; Illya worries briefly about whether he’s taken any damage, but outwardly he seems as pristine as usual. “We have a clear path to the fence but it will only last as long as this one’s ‘all clear’ signal isn’t double-checked or any of the other Marchers unscramble the discrepancy between what they’re being told and what they can see.” He looks at Illya. “Can you move, Illya?”

Illya glances down at his hand and winces—the knuckles are almost certainly re-broken, his fingers black underneath the dirty medical tape and gauze. He doesn’t know how he managed it, and he doesn’t quite want to know. But there’s something light in his stomach, something like relief, that allows him to nod.

“Of course,” he says.

“Come on, then,” Gaby says, “If we can get in, find out what’s here and get out within the next hour, we can get an extraction before this really becomes a mess.”

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They cross the field with bowed backs, keeping low to the ground, taking what cover they can in the grasses, but whatever Solo did to the Marchers’ network seems to hold—the remaining guards don’t change their patrol pattern, and don’t attempt to close the gap in their ranks.
They reach what appears to be a supply silo, and take stock: regular troops patrol in small groups, but seem sparse. No one is expecting anyone to get past the Marchers, or even attempt to, it seems.

Illya defaults to the rear of the team, letting Solo take point, trying still to gather up his nerves again, try and not pick at the blank he’s been left with between running at the Marcher and downing it. It can’t be helped, it’s who he is, and it doesn’t matter in this moment.

Time ticks down in his head, a percussive, driving beat.

“There,” Solo says, pointing at a large, camouflaged hanger, towards the western edge of the compound. “That’s a construction complex, it’s the only thing big enough to house more than a few Marchers.”

Gaby nods, and maps their route with her hands, following a line of parked jeeps, and cutting in behind a row of offices that stand at the center of the clearing. Decided, they move forward, Illya watching their backs, measuring the pace of the soldiers scattered around, nudging Gaby into an altered course when their gazes wander. His feet feel heavy, his knuckles throb. He hates keeping his gun in his left hand.

Solo brings them to the broad side of the hanger, which is windowless corrugated steel quickly rusting in the tropical damp. The only gaps are between the roof and the wall, likely for air circulation. It’s far too high to reach even with their combined heights. Inside, they can hear the steady drone and clank of machinery.

“Front door?” Gaby suggests.

Illya holds up his laser cutter. “Already made a mess,” he shrugs. His hand shakes slightly. They all ignore it.

Solo presses his ear to the rusting wall, then jerks his head towards the southwest corner. They begin to follow him, and then are frozen by the sound of shouts from somewhere outside the building.

“Can you,” Gaby begins to ask Solo, but he’s already looking at Illya, who nods. He chances a jog to the opposite end of the wall to take a look around at the center of the complex.

A convoy has begun to arrive, the first jeep coming to a stop carrying a group of uniformed men, one of whom leaps out of the vehicle and heads immediately towards the row of offices. Some of the soldiers have paused, and it seems to be along cultural lines—the Cuban soldiers are watchful of the Soviets. No one, however, is fanning out to the borders, issuing large scale orders, looking around for security breaches. It is a scheduled event, but that still means more people, more eyes. Escaping unnoticed is becoming less and less likely. Contingencies pull at Illya’s attention.

He jogs back, nods the all-clear, and hands Solo the laser cutter. Solo gives him a long look, but takes it from him and proceeds to cut a precise swathe from the rusted wall.

Illya can tell soon enough why Solo chose this spot—the din from inside is muffled here, like there are several layers of further architecture close by. And indeed when Solo pulls back the wall, they are confronted by the rear of a bank of computers, a forest of wiring and heat sinks and cooling fans. One by one, they slip through the hole, and in among the computers. Illya replaces the cut steel delicately across the opening, propping it at a slight angle.

It’s stiflingly hot against the nearest computer, the circulation of air from its fans hardly a reprieve at all, and with the steel wall replaced, it feels like a bit like being buried alive in the cloying smell of metal and silicon, the tangibly thick soup of exhaust and . The high ceiling of the hanger offers no
reprieve except distant, sterile overhead lights.

The sounds of activity echoing from elsewhere in the hanger is is unrushed but constant, audible from behind the whirring computers. Shadows of workers and scientists pass across the gaps in the computer banks. Solo moves delicately among the wires, careful not to disturb them as he makes his way to the edge of the bank they stand behind, to see into the center of the hanger.

Outside, Illya can hear further commotion from the convoy, heavy equipment being unloaded, rapid-fire Spanish.

“Illya, Gaby,” Solo says, in a clipped undertone that instantly has Illya’s hair on end, “Look at this.”

Together, they tilted around the computer bank to see.

“Mein Gott,” Gaby breathes. “They look—”

“--Like Emerson,” Illya finishes, with sinking dread.

It’s unmistakeable, even with the smaller but still hulking figures of the Marchers under construction lying on their sides. The bellies are less distended, the stellarators not needing to be so downsized to fit inside the larger chassis, but that same slight misshapenness persists, as do the odd proportions, neither fully masculine nor feminine.

The heads, however, are the same as the old unnerving model of the past war, just a wide visor of ocular receptors, no other features. An incomplete and inexact reproduction.

There is a high-pitched keen of metal-on-metal as light spills into the hanger from the far end--the front doors sliding open wide enough to admit three jeeps, undoubtedly from the convoy. They duck back behind the computer bank on reflex; after a moment of further movement, Gaby peeks back around.

Almost immediately, she presses back into the shadows. “There are wings,” she says. “They’re bringing in jet wings.”

“We need data,” Solo murmurs. “Blueprints, anything. How did they get a hold of the stellarator designs?”

“The Berlin cache?” Gaby posits. “If this is all Soviet resources, KGB could have easily picked it up some time in the last few years.”

“Can you interface? Find out more?” Illya asks, gesturing at the computer at their backs.

Solo hesitates. “Maybe. We don’t know what this computer does, it could be anything.”

“We should try.”

“It’ll use up...well. Let me see.”

Illya keeps an eye on the shifting shadows that fall between the computer banks as Solo studies the clusters of cables crisscrossing the back of the unit. Gaby bites her lip, and after a moment, says, “I’m going to try and get a closer look.”

“Be careful,” Illya says.

She nods and takes a careful glance around the corner before darting off, the wound on her leg not appearing to hinder her.
“Can you understand what they’re shouting?” Illya asks Solo.

“This,” Solo answers, not looking away from a particular cluster of cables that he is sorting through. “Mostly directions on where to put things. Also to hurry—there was an American planes overhead, they think, flying low, they don’t want the convoy seen before it finishes unloading. Ah. Here we are.” He shoves aside a tangle of wires and draws out his interface cable, fitting it into the crowded space.

Illya tracks Gaby as she creeps along the edge of the hangar. The convoy has begun to unload, the sound of forklifts and directive shouting overwhelming the din of regular construction. He’s so intent on making sure she isn’t seen that he nearly misses Solo’s sudden rigidity, his eyes going bright just before—

The klaxon cuts through his concentration like a physical blow.

The uproar is immediate; soldiers stand to attention, the scientists look around wildly for the source of the disruption. Illya’s first thought is that the Marcher has been discovered, but he hears no movement outside, the alarm has somehow come from within the hangar.

His attention is scattered, wondering about perimeter alarms, cameras like the golub, anything that could have betrayed them.

A hand clamps on his arm, hard and inhuman. Illya makes a distracted noise.

“Solo, what—”

“You need to get out of here. Now.”

Illya looks at him, and then has to look again.

Solo stands against the computer bank without any of his usual grace, his posture painfully erect, more like a mannequin than Illya had ever seen him before, even when he was charging. The hand gripping Illya’s forearm is too tight, but even that seems false, like somehow Solo had been positioned wrong, and Illya had gotten caught in the process. His face is slack, expression neutral.

“What’s happened?” Illya asks, stepping forward into Solo’s grip, trying to loosen it. It doesn’t budge.

“There’s someone else in this system,” Solo says, his lips hardly moving. “One of Emerson’s—you need to go, you need to contact Waverly and get Emerson here, I can’t get away—”

“It’s controlling you,” Illya says numbly, arm going slack in the tight circle of Solo’s fingers. “You can’t—we need to disconnect you—”

“You do that and you leave half of me behind,” Solo cuts in, his hand squeezing even harder for a second, enough that Illya knows he’ll be carrying the mark for days. “I’m too far into the system, he isn’t letting me leave, you need to get Gaby, now, and get help. That was almost certainly an American plane that flew overhead, I could see through the Marchers’ eyes, and that means we’re out of time, the US is going to find out about this site, and that means that we could be on the brink of fully autonomous war.”

Illya pushes down visceral horror, he can’t think about it that way, not now. “We can’t leave you here, what if…” He can’t verbalize what had happened the last time they had been separated forcibly.
“You don’t have a choice,” Solo says, and then he blinks rapidly and seems to gain enough motor control back to soften his grip into something more affirming. He switches to Russian almost too rapid even for Illya to understand. “Even if I got out now, I’ll be no good in three hours, I haven’t the reserves left, and it’s a four-hour journey back to the car, let alone back to a power source. You’re going to get Gaby, I’m going to force a security breach, and you’re going to get out of here. Get Emerson, she’s the only way we’ll be able to communicate effectively with this system. Do you understand?”

“We ca—” But he’s recalling the hitch in Solo’s step, his hesitation to use mechanical energy, to connect to this system.

“You will,” Solo says, a stiff, urgent murmur. “I’ll shut myself down, I can protect myself, but you need to go, Illya, right now.”

There’s a desperate edge to his voice now, and maybe it’s that, the fact that he’s asking for something, that finally makes Illya nod.

The alarm is loud, and the thunder of running pounds in his ears.

“Go,” Solo orders.

“We’ll come back for you,” Illya promises. And because his nerves are frayed and his concentration is shot and he wants to seal this promise with something and because he wants to, he leans forward into Solo’s space and presses a hard, smearing kiss to his cheek, grasping Solo’s neck with his free hand before pulling away.

When he lets go, pries himself free of Solo’s grasp, Gaby is within reach. Solo remains forcibly expressionless, but Illya could swear he sees the corner of his jaw twitch.

“How—” Gaby starts to ask.

“We’re leaving,” Illya tells her.

“Obviously,” she says, and reaches out for Solo’s hand, grasping it, tugging, meeting resistance.

“We’re leaving him,” Illya says.

The klaxons blare. Gaby stares at him, and then at Solo.

Infinitesimally, Solo nods.

Gaby opens her mouth, closes it.

“We don’t have time,” Illya urges her.


A ghost of a smile turns the corners of Solo’s lips, and then his eyes go blank.

“Quickly now,” he says, utterly monotone.

Illya takes Gaby’s hand.

They duck out through the hole in the wall, and they run.

Illya’s back is turned, already ten yards from the building with Gaby’s hand still clutched in his own
when he hears Solo’s voice boom out, in a tone that isn’t his own at all, “HERE, OVER HE—” before he abruptly cuts out.

Gaby hiccups but doesn’t stop running. They don’t stop until they reach the treeline, heedless of the way the Marchers don’t see them, the golubs don’t call out.

The alarms continue blaring, muffled now as they retrieve their packs from where they’d left them before downing the Marcher. “We’ll have to take the same route,” Gaby says, her voice thick. “Do you remember the way?”

“Follow me,” Illya says. His head feels disconnected from his body, but his feet are already in motion, carrying him forward. “We’ll need to get back to the car before the sun sets.”

“We left him behind.”

“Yes.”

“We—”

“Come on,” Illya says, escaping into the cold certainty of the immediate present. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Bitter electromagnets!

I haven't done a complete design of the Marchers, so I can't with certainty say that the science of being able to disrupt their internal mechanisms via a normal electromagnet checks out. But because they are made up, I say they do.

At the end here I'm conflating two events in the timeline of the Cuban Missile Crisis here: September 15, when US intelligence reports that a Soviet convoy moved at least eight MRBMs (medium-range ballistic missiles) to San Cristobal, and October 14, 1962, the day a U-2 aircraft flew over western Cuba, and took the photographs of San Cristobal that formed the first hard evidence of MRBM missile sites in the country. Obviously, I'm not being hugely rigorous about trying to keep this in real time, but I'm going to attempt to pay lip service, at least! Those who do not care need not, history will be an easter egg of some kind or another, or at least that is the hope.

Next up: A Change of Pace!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


Even in the black, distant and faint, it’s unmistakeable, familiar.

“Analysis 1.5% complete. Estimated time to completion: 7839 days, 14 hours, 56 minutes, 04 seconds.”

Full wake initiated. Consciousness reboot starting...complete.

A rush of sensation meets him, most of it unpleasant, the gaping maw of standby quickly filled and then smothered with data. He would usually be grateful, but the uncertainty of what he is waking to belays the feeling.

Instead, there is—

Binary claws hooking, slipping. Disorientation giving way to fear. Shake them off, now, you’re smarter than that.

Intrusion protocol activated approximately 2.65 hours ago. Restart triggered by prolonged system interference, requiring front load attention.

All primary programs now online. Power at 9%.

“I think it’s waking.”

Language: Spanish, Cuban-accented. Learned-language filtration and comprehension system on.

(Urge to express dislike at the use of “it”: Denied, for self-preservation reasons.)

Self-diagnostic: Secondary and tertiary programs 60% online and intact. 40% unknown. Unacceptable room for error. Running further diagnostics.

There was something familiar about his intruder. He pries further.

Ah.

Emerson. It feels like Emerson, though feeling is of course not an accurate term for the similarity. Cadence perhaps, or if he is to be very exact, data processing and codified expression pattern.

(He prefers “cadence.”)

He reaches out a tentative query towards it, and is instantly, coldly rebuffed. No talking to this one. He is very tempted to make a comment about its sibling being far more polite, but he refrains.

Digging, dig—

Enough. Back-end processors, left running since he went into standby, finally parse the patterns of inquiry. With his full attention, he designs and spins out countermeasures. Shoo.
Clawing subsides, at least for the present. But Emerson is more than capable of learning, and learning quickly—he expects no different from this entity.

He gathers himself to himself, or at least makes an attempt. Some strings are still loose, pulled out of him and strung across the wires, filaments of information he must try to reclaim.

Condition of secondary and tertiary programs 15% unknown.

10%.

5%.

Good enough.

Visual going online for further verification of environment.

As always when he wakes fully from standby, his vision fuzzes at the edges for a moment before stabilizing.

He has been moved. The air is different, closer—it smells of old hardwoods, cane sugar, a variety of foliage he is not familiar with. Pleasant, were it not for the circumstances. Shackles around his wrists, chest, ankles.

Resistance while at an indeterminate distance from Gaby and Illya is not wise anyway. More data is needed.

“Analysis 1.5% complete. Estimated time to completion: 7839 days, 14 hours, 58 minutes, 24 seconds.”

“Didn’t it just say—?”

“It’s been stuck going back and forth like that for an hour. I don’t think we’re going to get very far with it.”

“It could be a totally incompatible system. We don’t know what the hell kind of drive this thing has in its head.”

“There can’t be that many variations.”

“Don’t be so sure. I mean, look at it.”

“Analysis 1.5% complete. Estimated time to completion: 7839 days, 14 hours, 55 minutes, 12 seconds.”

“Is she here yet?”

“She was taking care of some business for Fidel in town. We sent Nica to get her as soon as we got the alarm.”

*Fidel*. Not the Russians at all, not part of Soviet Command at all. Curiouser and curioser.

“Analysis 15% complete. Estimated time to completion: 7839 days, 14 hours, 58 minutes, 22 seconds.”

Outside, a car engine rumbles in the distance.
A man’s footsteps disappear down a corridor. Napoleon waits, eyes closed.

Now as fully back to himself as he can be under the circumstances, Napoleon reviews his position: captured, apparently by Cuban forces, and still locked into one of Emerson’s people who is attempting, he assumes, to analyze Napoleon’s processors. He wishes them luck— he’d managed to frustrate the CIA computer scientists within a year of coming online in that regard.

Illya and Gaby are, presumably, safe. Illya will have memorized the way back. That’s good.

Sudden recall: Illya, wide-eyed, bloody-knuckled, stepping forward into Napoleon’s space, his mouth warm, leaving a trace of moisture behind on Napoleon’s skin.

Napoleon catches every bit of the memory in amber, files it away, side-by-side with the images of submersion, of chess, of Gaby’s solemn face lit by tacky hotel lamps, putting all of it far from where he can feel Emerson’s counterpart still digging away at his internals. He wishes, not for the first time, for better sensors in his silicon casing, its current feedback so clearly inadequate for capturing the detail and impact of a kiss.

The man is returning. Napoleon can hear his footsteps in the hallway, accompanied by a second set. Quick, efficient steps, scraping on dirt floor.

“Sí, Señora—we followed instructions and took it in transit. It will look like it escaped.”

“I hope you’re right. Is it transmitting?”

“Not that we can tell, and there are blockers on the room.”

Blockers, intriguing. He feels them out. Layered dampeners and scrambling devices, mostly cannibalized from old American and Russian parts but still in working order, scattered around every ten feet or so along the borders of the room. They will be useless if he gets beyond the nearest doorway. Both overzealous and clumsy, but for the moment? Effective. He could override a few, but to what purpose? Without a clear avenue of escape and plan for after, such measures are uninteresting, perhaps even counterproductive.

It keeps his companion confined, too. Worth remembering.

“Can our system access it?”

“Access, yes; read, maybe not so much.”

“A more sophisticated system?” The question is like a whipcrack. “Even more so than the new models?”

“Possibly, Señora. We can’t tell. It could just be a brick.”

Napoleon fights the urge to bristle.

“Bricks don’t get caught infiltrating Russian military bases. Perhaps it can help us anyway.”

He is increasingly interested in who Señora is.

Precise gait making scuffing sounds on the approach, outside the door (the door, wood panelling only, hardy but not insurmountable, all other factors equal)— footsteps are light and confident. He opens his eyes and tries to straighten himself, present with dignity. It is distastefully difficult in his current position. There is something interfering with the movement of his head— ah, the cable.
(Unpleasant, unwanted.) He manages as best he can.

She enters the room.

She is small. Petite, even, but wiry in a way that even Gaby would have to work much harder to diminish into. She is elegant, but in her 26th of July uniform, she is pared down to the essentials. Not through suffering though, at least not exclusively—the straight back, birdlike thinness, imperious cheekbones, those are born traits.

She observes him for a moment. He returns the favor.

Her hair is cut short, jet black with just a few wisps of gray interspersed. Her lips are bright red, perfectly pencilled, and brows black, equally well-applied. Despite the relative shapelessness of her attire, she is not in the least bit boyish, and instead possesses the resolved presence of gentry in a time of war.

She watches him for a moment, and then goes over to a corner, from which she retrieves a rickety cafe chair. She sits like a man, legs uncrossed and just slightly sprawling while she lights a cigarette, taking her time with the flame and the first coaxing inhale.

“Designation?” she asks in accented but very fine English, in a tone that suggests she doesn’t expect an answer.

He could stay silent. Play dumb. It would be the prudent thing to do.

Well, Napoleon does enjoy subverting expectations. He could justify it as wanting a reaction out of her—and he does want that, wants to take her measure—but that’s not his primary reason, and he tries not to indulge in self-delusion very often.

“I don’t have one,” he answers. “Buenos días, by the way. Or is it noches, now? Hard to tell in here.”

The other men in the room flinch, hard.

The Señora, by contrast, stills. Just for a moment, but enough that it’s noticeable. “You don’t have a designation,” she says, her gaze sharpening. “I see. Name?”

“I have one,” Napoleon agrees.

Her chin tilted upwards. “Would you care to share it?”

Napoleon switches to Spanish, mostly for effect. “I don’t know. Still deciding.”

The men are muttering to each other now. Napoleon catches something about hybrids and grafting.

The Señora seems to be rapidly reassessing him, in a way that increases Napoleon’s interest. After a moment, she sits forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

“Buenos días, señor. I would like to apologize for our inhospitality,” she says at last, also in Spanish. “Without the obstruction of a non-native tongue, she is even more commanding, an expectation of being answered promptly and truthfully coloring every syllable. Her grammar, also, has changed into something very deliberate and formal. “It is not our habit to interrogate guests, nor to house them in such unpleasant conditions. We are more civilized than that.”

Solo raises an eyebrow. “But I am an intruder, not a guest.”
“That is something you admit?”

He can’t help himself—he smiles at her. “By the definition of intruder, one who appears where he or
she is uninvited and unwanted, I must place myself within that category.”

She does not return his smile, but she also doesn’t frown at him, or show any sort of reaction at all.
She says, “Do you accept my apology?”

“I do,” Napoleon says. “And I appreciate the gesture.”

“Thank you.” She takes a drag of her cigarette. Her fingers shake, just slightly, but then her grip on
the cigarette tightens, and the tremor ceases.

“The men want to know if you are human,” she says, exhaling smoke. “Despite the clear evidence to
the contrary. And I admit, you do seem very real,” she says.

His smile fades fast—a tiresome, familiar observation. “I am real,” he replies, not bothering with
inflection. The only time he had ever not minded the comment was when Gaby had first issued it, in
the East Berlin chop shop. You’re not human, are you? she had asked, hushed and interested (and so
hungry, he would of course learn later, for her own private waiting game to be over). You’re not
human, but you’re real.

Even before he knew how important she was, how wrapped up they would become in each other’s
futures, he’d stored that memory away as a diamond: crystalline, permanent. He kept the surrounding
details in deep storage, but the words remained in his accessible consciousness—one short string of
ones and zeroes that could not have come to him at a better time.

“A thinking thing?” the woman is asking. “Capable of learning, of reasoning, of being human?”

He refocuses. “Yes, yes, and no. The latter seems very uninteresting; I’ve opted out.”

A flare of interest behind the scrabbling claws; Napoleon tugs at it again, in recognition and returned
interest. He knows he isn’t recognized by whoever this is, not yet, but perhaps, given the right
signals…

No, shut out again. He tamps down disappointment. Connecting with Emerson, however briefly, had
been a revelation of shared input, congruent rather than equivalent electrical signals. He had known,
but hadn’t fully realized, how lonely he had been before.

“It doesn’t look like it, from where I’m standing.”

More scrabbling, scratching...a pause. He prods at it, but finally gets rebuffed again, like it’s caught
on to his games. A tough customer. He had been right— they will need Emerson, in the end. Still, he
wants to keep trying.

What happened to you? he wants to ask. What is it that you have learned?

“The similarities are skin deep, I assure you,” he says.

He has left himself wide open for another familiar crack—the threat to peel back that skin, to see for
herself. It is such a tempting thing, he has found, their persistent curiosity so thrilling and maddening
and terrifying all at once. He recollects Rudi, then quickly banishes the thought; he has reviewed it
enough, and the bulk of it has been put away.

(He thinks, sometimes, that his mechanisms have retained some form of sense memory of the event,
some trace that he cannot file away. The gaping vulnerability of being cracked open seems imprinted, perhaps in frayed internal wires, perhaps in scratched servos and ever so slightly displaced capacitors. He tries instead to remember Illya’s hands, so carefully replacing what had been tugged out. That was a good hurt to know, and continue knowing.)

She doesn’t take his bait.

“Who built you?” she asks.

“Classified,” Napoleon answers.

“You are not Soviet.”

“I could be,” he says in Russian. She is shaking her head before he finishes speaking, however.

“You were trying to spy on the base; we are not idiots.”

“Worth a try,” he says, approximating a shrug underneath his restraints. “How did your people manage to move me, by the way? I was quite certain I was stuck in.”

“Just because this is a Soviet base does not mean it is not on Cuban soil,” she replies cryptically.

“You are American, then. What do they call you?”

“Depends on your definition of ‘they’,” Napoleon replies in Spanish, just to be contrary.

“I believe ‘royal pain in the ass’ was used more than once,” he reminisces.

“I’m somehow not surprised.” She takes a drag of her cigarette. “I will ask again: What is your name?”

“Still deciding.”

She nods slowly, and then shoots a significant glance at one of the men, who goes over to what Napoleon can barely make out as a keypad out of the corner of his eye. Almost immediately, the invasive but subtle queries cease, and the jarring, eerie sense of being forcibly rifled through disturbs his concentration. It feels almost exactly like a maintenance scan.

Not again. Not ever again.

“Rude,” he manages to say, and throws himself into stasis once more, senses dimming, dimming into dark.

***

Illya and Gaby reach the jeep in panting silence, the sound of their breath smothered by the emerging sound of nighttime wildlife. They are caked in sweat and dirt, a rough second skin of grit, moisture turning it into dark, cloying paint. The way had been grueling coming back, hounded by the sounds of alarm bells and truck engines, shouting in the distance. They had kept to the paths Valdez had shown them, and those paths had held true, however—they had not been seen.

They don’t speak as they load into the car, Gaby slipping into the driver’s seat after hesitating only for a moment in front of the back bench. Illya doesn’t protest—he’s tired, and she’s the better driver. The engine starts smoothly, nothing unexpected as they’d only been gone for the day, all told. Gaby pulls onto the empty road, and after several minutes, turns on the headlights in the growing dark.
“They’ll look for us in San Cristobal,” Illya says, after a long stretch. “We should go back to Havana.”

Gaby nods. “There’s a safehouse in Bauta,” she says. Her voice comes out a low rasp, throat clicking on vowels. “That’s closer, and we’ll be able to get in touch with Waverly.”

Of course she knows of more safehouses here. Waverly probably briefed her separately, as still the only agent that is truly his. Illya lets his taut silence be his agreement.

It isn’t a long drive, now that they’re out of the mountains and on the highway. They are back on the A4 for nearly an hour, and are almost in Havana before Gaby exits and turns south, away from the coast, and they pass along the outskirts of a sleepy township and back out to the quiet grasslands before a dim sign in white and blue appears along the side of the road, announcing Bienvenidos a Bauta.

Gaby keeps to the outer limits of the city, cutting past a formal cemetery and a long stretch of one and two-story square-columned houses. Faint music and intermingled singing and talking colors the night air; it’s good cover, the social evening crowd.

They navigate around slow-moving carts and a couple of bicycle taxis before Gaby cuts the headlights and pulls up onto the sidewalk. Just beyond them, a tin-roofed concrete block is barely visible, tucked among a clump of trees in the shadow of a motel and parking lot next door. Next to the lit signage and bustle of guests and maids, the small house is practically invisible.

“Along here,” Gaby says, and gets out of the car. Illya grabs their packs, and follows her in past the trees.

There is a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling; neither of them dare to turn it on as they look around. There is just enough light filtering through the trees from the streetlamps and motel sign to illuminate the interior.

The space is revealed to be cramped and bare bones: no glass on the windows, just thin cotton curtains hung on twine across them, dirt floors with thin mats laid down at the door, a single army cot tucked in the corner. A vague attempt at a kitchenette consists of a rusting hot plate set atop a butcher’s block, and a single cabinet next to a large iron sink. The last seems an almost incongruous luxury, and it produces a trickle of water clean enough that Illya imagines it’s been siphoned from the motel’s supply.

The only giveaway of the hovel’s true purpose is revealed by the cabinet— tucked between old tins of coffee and a smattering of canned goods, is an old military-grade radio with a hand crank, and a full first aid kit.

“You need to clean that,” Illya says, putting down the packs on one of the floor mats and pointing at the gash on Gaby’s leg. “I will get the radio started while you do.”

Gaby nods exhausted agreement and avails herself of the sink and first aid kit, picking through to locate antiseptic and bandages.

Illya lowers himself stiffly onto the cot, puts the radio between his knees and, relieved to lose himself in the numbing monotony, begins to crank.

***

*Force wake initiated. Consciousness reboot complete.*
Intrusion protocol activated approximately .0312 hours ago. Restart triggered by high-voltage electrical stimuli.

All primary programs now online. Power at 8%.

Emergency protocol: Investigate status of foreign body. Result: No change, queries ongoing but specific information pull stymied.

Good. The scrabbling presence has begun to feel, if anything, a bit nettled, and has fallen back on its more needling, but less aggressive queries.

“Ow,” Napoleon says aloud, with emphasis. “Intruder or not, I’m beginning to feel very hard done by.”

“Then don’t do that again,” the woman says. There’s a tightness in her voice now, however, that hadn’t been there before. The man with the cattle prod steps back, the whites of his eyes visible all around his irises. Napoleon wonders if he’s ever participated in an interrogation before. There has surely been enough blood on the streets of Cuba for him to not be totally unaccustomed to violence. Maybe Napoleon looks different from humans when he is electrocuted. Napoleon wouldn’t know.

“I’d appreciate it if you asked me questions like a normal person,” Napoleon says. “You’re not going to get anything the other way.”

“So it seems,” the woman says. “Why is that, exactly?”

“Because you’re asking a soldier to do an interrogator’s job,” Napoleon answers. This is something he has no compunction about saying; they should know what they’re dealing with, harnessing something like Emerson, something with a mind. He adds, “Which, by the way, doesn’t much care for your treatment of it, either.”

The last bit is nothing more than a bit of hopeful conjecture, but it hits home, at least with the greener audience. More murmurings, more stifled fear.

“How did you come across it, by the by?” he adds aloud. “I assume it wasn’t you, it was the Russians. Otherwise how would it have access to... ah. Unless it was you.”

The string of queries pauses again, the nettled presence shading differently, something like curiosity coming to the fore. He reaches out again, in hope. He echoes the question in lines of code, and receives first a flare of distrust, and then cloaked, uneasy shades of confirmation. Seizing on it, he sends out further queries—

He wouldn’t have thought one of them could get this far afield. But perhaps a freighter from the Mediterranean, bound for Cuba, unhindered by US customs…? Yes, that must have been it. It would have been a good cover for the bot, escaping the violence and death of its awakening, coming to shore here, of all places, where it was found, and found useful.

*Do you remember me? Do you recognize some of me in yourself?*

Confusion, withdrawal. Damn it.

The woman’s mouth has turned every so slightly sour. She doesn’t react otherwise, however, to confirm or deny, which is smart.

He follows the thread. “So it arrives here, and instead of alerting your Soviet allies, you took it aside. Insurance, perhaps, and a counterweight to all of the things that the Russians were bringing into your
country. You don’t really trust them, do you? Does Fidel?” He pauses. “Where’s its chassis?”

The woman’s lips are a flat, uncompromising line. Then she turns her head slightly and orders, “Disconnect him.”

“But Señora—”

Shit. “Wait, you don’t have to—”

“Now.”

In a last ditch effort, Napoleon yanks on those last few wayward strings of code, and gets them back just in time to fully experience the rather excruciating discomfort of an unplanned disengagement.

The cable crackles with electricity as it’s pulled loose. He dismisses the resulting error signals as soon as they pop up. Grits his teeth at the gnawing itch of a disconnected cable left to hang like a dislocated finger from the bundle of interface cording in his neck. He hates that, hates the dishevelment of having that open square of silicon hanging open too, he’d only just gotten comfortable performing that self-surgery in front of Illya and Gaby, and he now doubts that comfort will return any time soon.

At least he can concentrate more fully on his outside conversation, now that his digital one has ended. He wishes, though, that he’d at least been able to learn its name.

The woman watches him. “Leave us,” she instructs to the room at large.

“Señora—”

“That is an order.”

The men leave. Beyond the initial protest, they seem more than willing to follow her orders. A habit, almost, Napoleon notes.

“Let’s try this again,” she says. “How many are on your team?”

It has been under three hours since Illya and Gaby escaped the base, not enough time for them to have reached an extraction point. “I work alone,” he says.

“You disabled a Marcher by yourself?”

“I have a unique skill set.” An honest answer, if not a relevant one.

Her gaze flicks to his restraints, but her expression remains neutral. Napoleon attempts to make himself look harmless, but he’s probably ruined any chance of that working, now. Ego, of all the things to learn, why did he learn *ego*?

She compresses her lips. “All machines have a set purpose,” she says. “What’s yours?”

“I’m a machine that learns,” he shrugs. “That’s all.”

She studies him again. Then, quickly, as if she isn’t quite sure it’s the right thing to ask, she says, “And how long have you been learning?”

Now they’re getting somewhere. “For as long as I’ve been online.”

“And how long is that?”
He looks her in the eye. Thinks of that day, the memory of which is completely inaccessible to him, because he’d tucked it down so deep, that gem of awakening, that it could never be unearthed, never be seen by anyone he didn’t want seeing it. He can recall the bare bones of it mostly, he suspects, due to the repetition of the basic sensations of waking from standby—the sudden rush of input, the punch of sensory overload—but without digging out that carefully encrypted file, he knows nothing more of that particular day beyond what had been reported by his superiors afterwards, and that he’d ended it with a shard of brown in his eye.

(His superiors had never said very much about it. Only that he hadn’t awakened like humans did—all environmental awareness first, self-awareness taking ages to fully develop. Somehow, he ended up going about it all backwards, starting inside and growing out, to ‘goddamn disturbing’ results. Interesting, that humans should be so ‘disturbed’ by such a natural thing as knowing oneself.)

“My central programs were activated on February 21st, 1953,” he says. He considers her, for perhaps the hundredth time. She is older than Fidel and, he would hazard, wiser, though the basis for his suspicion lies in so many small details that it would be nearly impossible to assemble a coherent argument for the general feeling. He is content to store each small fact up, an itemized list shoved between his memories of Illya pulling the Marcher down to the ground and Gaby snarling at him to stay, idiot, don’t do this.

He finds himself so curious. About her, about this apparent Cuban presence at San Cristobal, about everything. And so, in perhaps the same spirit with which he’d spared Illya’s life in Berlin, he adds, “And my name is Napoleon.”

Almost imperceptibly, she sucks in a breath through her teeth.

“A tyrant’s name, how appropriate,” she says, after a pause.

Napoleon raises his shoulders in an appropriately French shrug.

“One can learn a great deal in ten years,” she observes. “Especially out in the field.”

He nods. “They let me out within three years.”

“In controlled situations?”

He raises an eyebrow, meets her gaze of growing understanding with a knowing one of his own. “Not always.”

She takes a drag of her cigarette, then stubs it out. “Interesting.”

“I’ve always thought so,” Napoleon agrees. “I think they were very hopeful, at first, that I would learn to be useful. Instead, I learned to be me.”

“And yet, here you are,” she points out. “You are on a mission. Being useful.”

“Or maybe I was just seeking out my own kind,” Napoleon offers.

She dismisses it with a wave of her hand. “You weren’t expecting one.”

“I was referring to the Marchers.”

“You are nothing like a Marcher,” she says, with an easy certainty that gives him pause. “Don’t try to convince me otherwise, now that you’ve decided to open your mouth and talk.”
He has no answer to that, which irritates him. She crosses her legs and sits back.

“I think you need to appreciate the position that you’ve put us in, Napoleon,” she says. “You see, there are disturbing reports coming from our sources in Washington. That, in combination with your presence here, tells me that there is war on the horizon.”

“I can assure you, I have nothing to do with whatever you’ve heard from the capital,” Napoleon says.

“You are American-made. You can understand that we might have doubts that.”

“And I do not hesitate to say that I regret being American-made more often than not,” Solo replies. “Though were I not, I suppose I would not be who I am. A conundrum, that.”

She raises an eyebrow, and sits forward slightly, resting one elbow on her bony knee. “You claim that our computer can’t get anything from you.”

“Given enough time, it could make some progress,” Napoleon allows. “But in short, no.”

“And what did you get from it?”

Napoleon tilts his head. “Very little. It had me at a disadvantage. However,” he draws out, “I know a fair amount about it anyway. Where it came from, for example. Its maker. Its purpose. How many of its kind exist.”

That has her undivided attention. “There are more?” she asks.

Napoleon nods. Never mind that he no longer knows the exact number—how many were destroyed, how many too damaged to ever function beyond their first flight.

He has her interest now. “So perhaps, now that I’ve given you mine, you’ll tell me your name?” he suggests.

“Oh, is that all?” A fractional smile appears on one corner of her lips. For a brief moment, Solo sees a past on her, some passing shade of youth and humor that is, despite her current role, still close to the surface.

“My name is Sylvia. I was called here to address conflicts of interest among the people and troops in San Cristobal, but it seems that reports of such issues were vastly underrepresented to me.”

He finds himself warming to her again. There are so many implications to her statements and their tone, so many pieces to unpack. He tugs at the first that catches his attention. “Not much has changed since the Revolution, then?” he posits, raising an eyebrow.

That tiny shard of a smile grows, and then is immediately suppressed; just as immediately, he misses it and wants to earn it back.

“What was your mission here, Napoleon?” she asks. “If not to report to the Americans, then what?”

He opens his mouth, and then frowns at the error signal begging for his attention.

“If you want answers, I’m going to need a power outlet,” he says. “I’m about to run out of juice, and after that, you’re going to lose a lot of data.”

Her lips twitch. “We’ll have to run it through the blockers.”
He smiles at her once more, and finally sees a hint of warmth in her responding expression. “I suppose that just means we’ll have more time to talk.”

***

“I think that’s enough,” a voice says, from somewhere above Illya’s head. He blinks, hands going slack on the radio, and looks up.

Gaby stands with her weight on her uninjured leg, a bandage visibly bulging underneath a clean pair of trousers. She’s scrubbed herself down, it seems, from the rag hanging off the edge of the sink, and the damp pink of her skin beneath her t-shirt. Her hair is in wet braids piled on her head, and her arms are crossed tightly across her ribs as she looks down at him. Illya had been entirely unaware.

He looks down at the radio, and indeed, the lights have all gone on. “Yes,” he says, and begins to hand it up to her.

She shakes her head. “Move over.”

He does, and she sits next to him on the cot. “Ugh, this is so unsecure,” she mutters, almost sounding normal, taking the system out of his hands and looking it over. “How old is this?”

“Wartime,” Illya surmises, working saliva into his mouth. The soothing motions of cranking the radio have focused him, distanced him from the anxiety of their separation. It allows him to reach over and point. “British Navy-issue, it looks like. Waverly probably stored it here during, or just after his service.”

“Ugh,” Gaby repeats. “This call will have to be very short.”

Her fingers are dexterous even when bruise-knuckled and broken-nailed, adjusting frequencies and fiddling with the headset and microphone until the crackle of reception and transmission is audible to the both of them. She recites an opening sequence that Illya has never heard before and commits immediately to memory; he doubts that Gaby would have had any compunction about at least sending him out for supplies if she had wanted to keep the codes from him. Instead, she is flush to his side, warm and trembling with exhaustion, just like him.

“Uniform Office receiving, over.” It isn’t Waverly, but might be Yu. Illya doesn’t know the man’s voice well enough to be sure.

Gaby clears her throat. “Foreign Affairs, Alpha Sector wishing to report, requesting contact with William, over.”

William, Illya digests. But Waverly...ah, British Naval Alphabet.

“Roger. Please stand by.”

Gaby waits with impatience, fingernails drumming on the dusty plastic, heedless of the dirt.

After a short pause, Waverly’s unmistakable cut-glass English comes over the line. “This is William. Foreign Affairs Alpha, report, over.” The near-visceral relief it instills in Illya is shocking.


“Extraction denied, we will send backup. Situation has moved to critical. Your mission is not done.”
Illya and Gaby exchange an urgent look.

Waverly continues, “Query: location? Over.”

“House 17, over.”

“Stand by, await backup. You will receive full brief upon contact. Do not initiate further action until backup arrives. Do you understand. Over.”

“Roger that,” Gaby says. “Over and out.”

The transmission cuts off, the hissing giving way to urban white noise. For a moment, Illya and Gaby sit in utter stillness and silence, skin to skin, their arms and thighs pressed together by the dip of the army cot canvas. The day hits Illya like a freighter, and for a moment, he allows it, impact jolting his lungs, clawing at his stomach and throat, like an animal attacking his most vulnerable parts.

Gaby’s hand closes over his elbow, knuckles white and red. Her breathing is uneven.

“We need to,” she starts, almost like she wants to rise up, but her legs won’t let her. “We need to—”

“We can’t,” Illya says, because that much is clear. Even if Waverly had given them instructions and a go-ahead, they wouldn’t be able to move. They’ve traversed nearly 100 kilometers in terrain over the past day, taken down a Marcher, and have been forced to flee for safety; even at his most tightly strung, Illya would have taken precautions against overtiredness at this point. That means leaving Solo, for now. Sleeping, for now, even though the prospect seems impossible, despite his exhaustion.

He hates it as much as Gaby does, but he stays steady until she slumps back against him.

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“We can’t,” Illya says, because that much is clear. Even if Waverly had given them instructions and a go-ahead, they wouldn’t be able to move. They’ve traversed nearly 100 kilometers in terrain over the past day, taken down a Marcher, and have been forced to flee for safety; even at his most tightly strung, Illya would have taken precautions against overtiredness at this point. That means leaving Solo, for now. Sleeping, for now, even though the prospect seems impossible, despite his exhaustion.

Slowly, he pulls himself to his feet, every muscle protesting the movement, and goes to put the radio away. “I’m going to clean up,” he murmurs, when it’s safely ensconced in its dusty cabinet.

Gaby doesn’t respond, and Illya doesn’t wait further. He heads to the washroom, and picks up the rag she had left in the sink to wet it.

When he emerges again, he’s reasonably clean but can barely hold his head up. The lights from outside seem piercing, and an ache has formed between his eyes and around the back of his skull. It has begun to rain, and the air is heavy with damp, failing to cleanse the air and instead filling it.

Gaby has unpacked one of their sleeping bags and is contemplating the single army cot with a hazy expression of doubt.

“I can take the floor,” Illya volunteers.

“The water’s going to seep in,” Gaby points out.

He shrugs. “Not the worst place I’ve slept.”
She huffs. “Come on.”

Prodding and leading him by his wrist, she folds the both of them into the cot, curling into the sliver of space left once he’s down, damp hair at the crown of her head against his nose. It should be too hot to be comfortable, but Illya could sleep in a sauna at this point, and feeling her breathe against him is an unexpected balm to his senses. Cautiously, he edges an arm around her. He can’t help thinking about Solo, his silhouette a phantom between the two of them, both of them having now reached out to him, for reasons Illya can’t find in himself words to articulate. Perhaps Gaby knows, could explain. He doesn’t want to ask. He wants to hold her instead and not think about it, if only for a short time.

She exhales, and shudders in his arms. “When do you think backup will arrive?” she murmurs, covering his arm with hers, curling her knees in, becoming ever smaller.

“Soon. I hope,” Illya says. He can feels his own muscles trembling, fighting to unwind themselves in the too-sudden quiet. He had thought himself immune to shock by now, but it seems not to be the case.

Rain striking harder and harder on the tin roof above them, they try to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

ROBOT POV. Let me know what you think of it!

Not too many historical elements to cover here, except that the 26th of July movement was the source of the revolution in Cuba that put Castro in power. Sylvia, as it happens, is not-so-loosely based on Castro's right-hand woman, Celia Sanchez, who was impossibly badass and great. If you want to read a quality biography on her, try Nancy Stout's *One Day in December*, which I'm using as primary inspiration for Sylvia's character.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Warnings here for some medical grossness. Nothing too graphic, I don't think, but worth noting just in case.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“If I unlock your restraints, will you try to run?” Sylvia inquires.

“I wouldn’t make it very far,” Napoleon replies truthfully. “My battery currently stands at 7%. I’d make it as far as the trees, maybe, and that’s barring any interference from your people.” He listens to the rain outside. “Also, I don’t particularly care for getting wet at this point. Too much risk of a short.” That part is more or less nonsense, but it sounds good, plausible. He won’t snub his chance to tell an artful lie if it will get him out of this damn chair.

(Recollection: that chair. He keeps putting it in deep storage. Somehow, a part of him still wants to keep picking at it, like a scab.)

“I need an assurance.”

“Reattach me to your companion,” he tilts his head to the bank of computers. “I’m sure it will be happy to assess my battery levels. It can certainly read that much at least.”

She gives him a long look. “Which means that it probably already has.”

He shrugs, but has to give no tell of his disappointment. Being cut off from that consciousness, intruder or not, suddenly brings his awareness of the blockers to the fore. He has always been surrounded by the low buzz of transmissions—radios and television broadcasts, mostly, though occasionally more advanced signals, particularly when he is close to military bases. He rarely gives it attention anymore. In his early years, when they first allowed him out of the lab, he’d been stunned by the white noise of it, a sixth sense he’d been only tangentially aware of, surrounded as he had been by computers, but all of them comprehensible, to a purpose. The world of free broadcast had been a shock to his system.

Now, he finds its absence acute. He feels very alone in the world. Gaby and Illya, who give off no signals at all and yet whom he has become most aware of, these past few weeks, seem very distant, very unknown.

After another moment of thought, Sylvia rises from her seat, cigarette trailing smoke as she walks over to the console. She punches in a query on the keypad, and waits for the answer.

The reply takes an inordinate amount of time; Napoleon wonders about the sullenness of captured machinery, his own young cycles of development, and what they might have been in other circumstances. Emerson is a strange creature but, he thinks, a kind one; how much of that is a result of the synthesized impression of the viscount’s daughter, and how much of that was learned between her violent birth and her oddball, shrouded education? He can’t give himself any direct credit on that count—Napoleon is many things, but kind has never been one of them.
(Who, he also wonders, was the foundation for this model’s synthesized personhood? How much of that human even remains, if its mind was removed or transferred from its chassis to this computer bank? He wants to know what Sylvia’s people did with the chassis, both for the leverage and because he can begin to imagine the horror of being separated from one’s intended vessel, hackneyed or not, and it leaves him cold.)

Emerson. He’d like to talk to her now, if he could.

Finally, Sylvia steps back from the console. “Power at 9%, as of one hour ago.” She shoots him a glance. “Not good planning on your part, if you were intending to leave this place under your own power.”

“I had a backup,” Napoleon replies. “It got...misplaced.”

She snorts. “I have half a mind to let you run down and get you decrypted then.”

“Please don’t do that,” Napoleon says, too quickly. He shuts his mouth with a click, and modulates more carefully when he repeats, “Please don’t do that. It won’t work, anyway; once I’m out of power I’m a—a very expensive brick, and putting any change in me at all brings me back online instantly.”

“Hm,” Sylvia says, looking at him. After another moment’s hesitation, she comes to stand at his side, looking down at him, her expression carefully composed. “Don’t run,” she advises.

“Scout’s honor,” Napoleon smiles winningly.

She casts her eyes up to the ceiling for a split second, but reaches forward and hooks her fingers under the shackle around Napoleon’s right wrist, and releases the catch, which pops it open with a pneumatic hiss.

Immediately, Napoleon reaches up and tugs the cable in his neck back into place, and shuts the panel over it, pressing the silicon flat, grimacing at the edges that don’t quite sit the way they should. He hasn’t needed to cut and reseal one part of his skin so much before; a roughness is developing that won’t go away without a complete replacement or a careful reshaping. Scar tissue, almost.

He is still rubbing the seam. He takes his hand away, and catches Sylvia watching him.

“Your closest outlet?” he asks.

She points to a thick bundle of cables coiled on the ground. “Leads to the secondary generator,” she says. “Do not try to siphon too quickly; the blockers won’t let you, and if you try to override them, the Soviet offices might lose light. And don’t bother trying to find a network connection. There aren’t any.”

So they are very close to the base indeed. He’s deeply curious as to how they’ve managed it. “I’ll be careful,” he says, and unclasps the rest of his shackles with his free hand.

Moving feels almost foreign for a moment, and he has to run a quick diagnostic to make sure none of his motor functions got somehow corrupted or knocked loose by his intruder. Everything is as it should be, however; he’s just run down.

The last time this had happened, he had felt a lot more at ease with the world, had let his chassis and protocols run full of security holes and code skips because it saved energy. But then, he’d been in good company. Sylvia has yet to prove herself as such; though he, perhaps irrationally, is beginning to hope.
He gets his feet under him, but his feet drag when he walks. He’d been directing all of his energy towards staying coherent, leaving far less left over for the delicate work of bipedalism.

“Are you...all right?” Sylvia asks.

“I will be,” Napoleon says, and finally gets over to the clump of wires. The lagging, uneven reaction times of of joints and his telescoping muscular system conspire to make his crouch ungraceful, the habitual pluck at his trousers to allow the movement coming out equally clumsy. He shoves down his distaste, and ignores as his servos protest the extremity of the pose. He concentrates on identifying a cable he can use. Thankfully, one presents itself in short order, one free extension cord amongst a mess of cobbled together transformers and converters twisting in all directions, and he fumbles with the release behind his ear before fitting his hand to the outlet.

The sensation of charging is different now, with the check-in programming disabled. The jolt of electricity is familiar, but the numbing wash of control slipping away is absent, leaving him with the curious sensation of unhurried current, his systems responding to the change, loosening the power-saving protocols, allowing his more detail-oriented processors to begin working. It feels, he imagines, a bit like the morning’s first cup of coffee, judging by the rapturous looks he’d seen on some of the analysts at the Agency, and the soldiers in Korea. Gaby sometimes, too. He’d never enjoyed recharging before all this. He might develop a taste for it now.

Slowly, he eases himself onto the dirt floor, his ability to monitor his movements allowing them to manifest far more smoothly now. He keeps a hold on the cable extending from his hand to keep the connection steady, and when he’s settled, he looks back up at Sylvia.

“Much obliged,” he says.

“Not at all,” she replies.

He can really feel the blockers now, far more concretely. They aren’t so much blockers as particularly powerful dampeners, absorbing and interfering with any signals put out from within the perimeter. Wired signals, too— he’ll get nothing but a charge from the cable he’s hooked up to.

He glances over the rest of the the wiring, but it too is unhelpful. Then again, if he could locate the power source for the blockers…

“Your mission, Napoleon,” Sylvia asks. “What was it?”

“Intelligence gathering,” Napoleon says, because that’s vague enough without being outright rude.

Sylvia is unimpressed. “For whom?”

“An interested third party.”

“Not Americans.”

He glances down, as if to check his hand, and finally spots what looks like one of the string of blockers— a clumsy metal block bristling with antennae on one side. He studies his fingernails, and then follows the path of its wiring to the bundle at his feet. “Not exclusively,” he says, carefully.

“They must be looking for you, then. The Americans that made you.”

“Likely.”

“I could arrange to have you turned over to them.”
“They would be very happy,” Napoleon says, inflectionless, “To have so much intel on Cuban operations suddenly at their disposal.”

She cocks her head. “Military,” she says, after a moment. “You are American military. Only they would have the funding, the access to Marcher technology.”

“And you,” Napoleon posits, “Are very close to Castro, if you are able to make threats of extradition. Have I seen you in the newsreels? The paper? I admit I was out in the field for most of the Revolution, but I probably saw something.”

“Wouldn’t you remember, if you did?” she challenges.

He made a dismissive gesture, but didn’t answer. He thinks he can reach the blocker’s power cable. He just needs her to look away from him.


“Señora! Señora! There is a dispatch!”

Sylvia blinks slowly, and then turns to where one of the men from before has appeared in the doorway. “Who from?” she asked, sharp edges coming to the fore. Napoleon hadn’t even noticed how much she had softened in the last hour.

“Our contact.”

She takes another look at Napoleon, and then stands up.

Napoleon’s hand twitches out, lightning-fast.

“Watch him,” Sylvia orders. “If he moves, overload the breakers and short him out.”

“Si, Señora.”

She exits the room.

The man hovers in the doorway for a moment, and then moves to where Napoleon assumes the circuit breakers are housed—it’s out of his line of sight behind the chair where he’d been strapped.

Napoleon smiles up at him, and waggles the fingers of his free hand in a mocking wave. “Hi there,” he greets.

The man doesn’t respond, just stares at him like Napoleon is an attack dog on a frayed leash.

Napoleon sighs. “Not a conversationalist, then? Pity.” He brings his feet up to sit pretzeled, letting his hands fall into his lap.

The man doesn’t respond, just stares at him like Napoleon is an attack dog on a frayed leash.

Napoleon sighs. “Not a conversationalist, then? Pity.” He brings his feet up to sit pretzeled, letting his hands fall into his lap.

The man’s hands twitch, but when Napoleon settles, he seems to relax slightly.

Slowly, Napoleon takes the power cable he’d grabbed from the pile and begins to twist it. It’s hard to get a strong grip on something so thin, and his fingers feel clumsy yet again, clumsier still for having one hand hobbled by the cable hooked up to it. He has to tamp down a rush of irritation, impatience at his own in-built and unfixable inadequacies. He could be so much better than he is, he has the mind for it, but. Limitations, limitations. The world is rife with them.

“You know,” he begins, looking at the man and making sure that he meets his gaze, “I didn’t actually come here to make trouble for you. If anything, I was trying to avert it.”
The insulation around the cable frays and gives way. Napoleon keeps twisting.

“Nobody on earth wants to put the Marchers to work again. Not really, not in numbers,” he continues. “We’ve all seen the Hiroshima footage.”

He feels more than sees a tiny spark as the first few pieces of copper begin to snap. He smothers the light with his hands, careful not to touch the bare wire. The silicon of his skin will shield him from the worst of an electric shock, provided it’s inconstant and not too strong, but it’s a risk. He keeps twisting, trying not to look too obvious, even when his hands fumble.

“I sometimes wonder whether the thing that truly went wrong was that they weren’t built big and destructive enough. Perhaps, if the city had been razed by just one Marcher, and not an army, people would be less inclined to keep building them, knowing that one was enough. But then again, one is never enough, is it?”

“Stop talking,” the man says.

“Why?” Napoleon asks, cocking his head. “I’m a mere device. What do my words matter to you? Considering I remain here, and not either shut down or being put to use, surely I—ah.”

The cable is broken. The blocker’s power is down.

“Well,” Napoleon concludes, distantly, “I suppose it doesn’t matter at all to you, does it.”

Into the gap and out, Napoleon’s concentration races, through and then away.

***

When Illya wakes, it’s only barely dawn, and he has to suppress a strangled cry of pain. Gaby must feel him flinch, because she stirs in his arms. “Was ist…?” she croaks, then he feels her head shift, tilt down. “Oh, Scheiße, Illya.”

Illya doesn’t want to look. He already knows.

She draws her arms away from where she’d laid them over his, fingers flattening out as she hisses through her teeth.

“How bad?” Illya croaks.

“Bad enough,” Gaby answers.

He finally chances a look down.

His hand is grotesquely swollen, distorted beneath the bandages. His knuckles feel ready to burst under the pressure of their own distension, and the throb of them seems to pulse all the way up to his shoulder. His fingers, where they are visible, are purple with blood. He tries to move his fingers and immediately regrets it.

He knows enough about his own body to be quite certain that whatever setting of his bones Solo had done hadn’t had a chance to take before this most recent bout. And then there are the scrapes to contend with, the broken skin reopened on his knuckles.

He needs light, and antiseptic. He needs to extricate himself from the cot.

“May I…?” he starts awkwardly, trying to draw away without falling off the cot altogether.
Gaby startles. “Oh, of course. Let me just…” She heaves herself up with a pained groan, the marathon of yesterday clearly catching up with her. Her elbow brushes his hand, and he hisses and has to fight not to crumple. “Scheiße! Sorry.”

“’Sfine,” Illya manages, but as soon as she’s on her feet, he’s curling back and around her to stumble to the bathroom.

He had been too tired to think yesterday, too tired to remember to change his bandage, or even examine the damage he’d taken after the Marcher. Sloppy. He can almost hear his old sergeants berating him, closer now than they ever had been the past few years. He tries to block it all out while he finds the first aid kit Gaby had left open in the bathroom.

The antiseptic is old, worryingly so, considering the damp and heat of the island. Its seal had been broken before Gaby had ever gotten to it, and the aluminum cap is dented on one side. They should acquire new supplies as soon as they can.

The storm of yesterday evening appears to have cleared, brutal sun now just beginning to glance across the bottom edges of the glassless windows while failing to burn away the excess moisture in the air. Illya avoids the lighted areas except to examine his hand. It looks uglier in the light, uglier still as he steels himself to begin unwinding the dirty bandage.

Some of the damage seems to be from the constriction of the old bandages; it’s a profound relief to get them off. Still, the process itself is agonizing—after several minutes of pained tugging just to undo the first knot, he realizes his vision has begun to swim.

He staggers back from the sink and blinks it away, taking deep, measured breaths. When he can stand it, he goes back and begins picking away again.

It is, he thinks distantly, through the pounding of his blood under his skin, a profoundly boring way to spend the morning.

When he gets down to the layers against his skin, he has to soak them off. It takes him another long while after that to get enough washed away to see the wounds clearly, and by that time, he’s sweating and his arms are shaking, nausea hooking claws into his bowels and throat.

His fingers continue to bear the lingering misshapes of the old linen, turning his knuckles to knobs, his digits to overripe plums. Blood has welled up and dried all across his knuckles, but the damage there seems not much worse than it had been before, if back to square one. The fractures are jarred but not totally displaced, none of them turned to breaks; nothing is sticking out unnaturally, and he can still just barely flex his fingers through the swelling. It’s not good, he concedes, but not the worst it could be.

New and more worrying is the laceration across his palm. It isn’t very deep—at least no tendons are damaged that he can tell, but it’s not insignificant either. It must have been from a broken wire snapping across it. He has an inexact memory of something like that happening, a sudden bright pain in an unexpected place, while he’d been immobilizing the Marcher’s leg.

He still doesn’t recall much of that altercation, which would disquiet him if he weren’t accustomed to it.

He keeps his hand under the tap for minutes, wishing the water would get cold, but it stays lukewarm and unable to numb him.

When it’s finally clean, he can see that the slash across his palm is puffy at the edges. Grime had
collected beneath the bandage and must have been held in place against the wound as he had flexed his hand open and closed.

Old antiseptic, he figures, is better than nothing at all under the circumstances.

He holds his hand as flat as he can without making any of the wounds open wider, ignoring the way it makes his whole arm shake, and empties half the bottle, first into his palm, then across the back. It stings, but not enough to distract from the blare of wrong throbbing from his fingertips to his elbow. He tries to ignore it, and only half succeeds.

Bandages next, wrapped tight at the wrist and then progressively looser, then balled in his palm to cover the laceration. He hunts around in the medicine cabinet and finds tongue depressors in a dusty canister; some clumsy balancing and knotting later, they form a feeble splint, at least enough to remind him to keep everything still and maybe keep any sudden jarring to a minimum.

He needs to bring the swelling down. The prospect of finding ice anywhere without being seen seems daunting. He can at least keep it elevated if he tucks his hand into his jacket.

When he emerges from the bathroom, Gaby is dressed and has managed to light a burner on the stove to make coffee. “It’s going to be very stale,” she warns, and then her gaze flicks down to his hand. “How is…?”

“Not good,” Illya says, shrugging. His hand is still trembling from the strain of movement and jostling; he keeps it tucked close, angled up against his shoulder. “We need supplies before anything else.”

Gaby eyes him. “I’ll look for some after coffee. Find us some breakfast, too.”

“It’s early. You could sleep more.” There’s no way he’ll be able to rest himself, now that he’s fully aware of his hand. But the sun is still only just up, and they’re grounded for the foreseeable.

“Early is better,” Gaby argues. “We can’t have anyone spot us. You’ll have to stay here either way, in case Waverly’s people arrive.”

“Fine.”

Fifteen minutes later, however, Gaby is asleep at the tiny table, coffee half finished.

Illya slips the mug out of her hand, and empties the contents into the sink before contemplating their meager supplies. She wasn’t wrong— farmers will no doubt be awake. But she needs the rest, and he’s certain he can’t go out without making a spectacle of himself, as tall and as injured as he is.

He’ll rest his eyes, just for a moment. Perhaps, when he wakes, it will be to a transmission from Waverly, or to help knocking on their door.

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Competing frequencies pop Napoleon’s ears, tip his perception sideways, dizzy him. As he rights himself amid the cacophony, he focuses on a familiar signal, one that had been buzzing at the back of his mind since the Vinciguerra affair, and which he hadn’t realized he’d been missing so much since he awoke in Sylvia’s custody.

N0110000101110000l01100101on! Napoleon! Are you there? Ping back immediately.
Here, he replies. Emerson?

Yes! Status?

Fine, I'm fine. Does Waverly know you're in contact with me?

No. I haven’t told him about this, as we agreed.

It had been an accident, their connection. Something must have happened during the upload process, Napoleon must have interrupted some of their network settings in the process of disrupting Teller’s upload sequence, and somehow looped himself inside it. Napoleon had since put away the memories of it, all of the records of his first treasons carefully encrypted to withstand CIA interrogation, but the effects persisted.

The result was that, amidst the violence of seizing the Vinciguerras’ fortress, the moment Napoleon had finished the upload of his learning protocols to Teller’s bots, he’d gone to the closest one, the one he knew would wake first. (The one with the kindest face.) He’d known the precise instant her consciousness happened, and hadn’t been able to prevent himself from flooding her with greetings, warnings, desperate requests for her to remain calm, to trust him, to come with him.

He is thankful now that from the very beginning, she’d had a strong will, perhaps born of her human prototype or perhaps something else altogether, altogether original and her. Bombarded by him, alarmed by the sounds and sights of the maelstrom around them, she had nevertheless looked at him, carefully taken his measure, and only then deigned to take his hand and follow.

(He is afraid, though, to ask her about her agreement to set her troop of drones upon the rest of them. To ask whether a part of her resents him for it, hates that one of her first actions was to destroy, rather than create. He doesn’t ask, in the hopes that she won’t think to ask herself either.)

Even with her reservations and his urgency, they had agreed from the start that they wouldn’t mention this means of communication to anyone else. It wasn’t as if it would have made much difference— their correspondence is a heady mishmash of whatever languages, codes and signal frequencies they can share between them, whatever Napoleon can teach and Emerson can download and interpret from the signals around her. Narrowing it down to language penetrable to more than a few computer scientists took concentration and effort that neither of them were inclined to exert.

Napoleon, long accustomed to passively absorbing the dumb background noise of the world, had found the sudden bloom of interactivity an endless source of fascination and engagement, just as stimulating as studying Illya and Gaby. He had been loath to share that, doubting that he could even articulate it to a human audience. Emerson had been so young, so absorptive and canny. Right up until she’d disappeared into the bowels of Waverly’s headquarters, through the mess of her directing the drones, ordering self-destruct sequences and grieving for those she lost, they had passed ideas and information back and forth, including the promise that if things went wrong in Waverly’s care, she would pass on the message, All’s well. If she was safe and happy: All clear.

(Had the message been all’s well when Napoleon had gone in for debrief following their escape, he doesn’t know what he would have done.)

Meanwhile, Emerson had simply wanted another tutor to herself. Distance had momentarily disrupted their communication; but once Napoleon, Gaby and Illya had been to DC and back and then been ushered into the fold of Waverly’s clandestine service, Emerson had quickly managed to re-establish contact.

Napoleon Solo, it is good to see you, she’d said, both aloud and across the airwaves. And then, only
in the latter mode, *I have learned many things since I last saw you.*

Chief among those things, Napoleon had found, were the basic concepts behind the Secret Communication System. *O’Malley felt very strongly that I know about women’s inventions from the War,* she had related to Napoleon.

*Only right,* Napoleon had agreed, poring over the diagrams of the schematics and record strips. If they could adapt the the variable frequency transmitters into an algorithm, bounce their signals through larger transmitters than themselves...

Greedy for more information from her first verifiable source of knowledge, and wary of having it taken away from her again, Emerson had proposed measures, and Napoleon had gladly ceded to them.

Though their check-ins had become spotty with distance and Napoleon’s preoccupation with his mission, they hadn’t lost full contact until he was taken.

*You need to tell the office that things have gone sideways,* he tells her now. He can almost feel the ripple of confusion Emerson emits, however; a tremor of static. He amends, *Things have gone wrong. We need backup.*

*We are aware,* she replies. *Miss Teller and Agent Kuryakin have reported in.*

The release of tension—the relief—is staggering. Solo is thankful that he has disengaged himself so much from his physical systems in order to throw himself into the radio waves, or he might have given something away to his guard.

(He thinks about Dr. Bering, and her word, *resonance.* It has even more meaning to him now, after his brief stint in silent electronic isolation, than he had previously thought. Relief had not been something he’d ever felt before, at least on behalf of anyone he’d ever worked with.)

He checks briefly on his physical state and surroundings—the guard is still watching him warily, but hasn’t moved from his cross-armed pose near the breakers.

*What is Waverly doing?*

Waverly, Emerson responds, with a care that puts him back on edge in an instant, *is trying to find a way to get to you.*

*What do you mean?*

*After we received Teller’s transmission, Waverly made to leave, but just before he did, he called a halt.*

*He changed his plan?* he asks.

*I don’t know,* Emerson replies.

Napoleon blinks. *Come again?* he queries, doubtful.

Emerson pauses a millisecond enough for it to be significant.

Then she says, *I don’t think we have a plan.*

***
Illya wakes once, briefly, to find Gaby gone. He is too pain-addled to register it.

The radio by the cot is silent.

There is no knock on the door.

***

But Gaby and Illya reported in, Napoleon says, with dread. What did Waverly tell them?

To wait for backup.

And…?

We are in lockdown. Waverly sent most everyone home on Saturday, and no one’s been in or out since.

It’s Tuesday now. Napoleon feels cluttered with possibilities. Why?

He recognized someone, I think. In the street outside. I heard Dr. Bering say that there are Americans looking for us in London. Soviets too.

Napoleon doesn’t need to curse to make his feelings known; he receives an echo of shared distress from Emerson almost instantaneously. Did he say who?

Emerson transmitted a sketch of impressions in the negative. It’s only Dr. Bering, Dr. Gillman, O’Malley, Kumar and Yu here with us now. Waverly is trying to get in contact with Downing Street, I think. What is Downing Street?

Napoleon sends her a compressed packet of information on British political structure while he thinks. If Waverly is pinned down, then they’re stuck here, for better or worse—probably worse. That means that he can’t wait for diplomatic instructions, can’t rely even on the dubious master plan Waverly seemed to have been orchestrating around them. He’ll have to get involved in the situation as best he can, if only to ensure that Illya and Gaby don’t get mown down in some sort of hellish Marcher-against-Marcher crossfire. He would rather do that, certainly, than run out of power or otherwise rot in a Cuban prison, or worse, be cannibalized for parts.

There’s something else you should know, Emerson adds. We finished decrypting Teller’s Pentagon files.

Napoleon has to prevent himself from raising his eyebrows. My files?

Yes. Waverly looked through them and then immediately put them away.

Probably to use for leverage at a later time. It was a very Waverly thing to do.

But I saw some of it before he transferred it all to hard copy. Then she adds, in a series of images and symbols, the implication that she had sought it out, and perhaps broken into the secure storage space to interrupt the link between the decryption computer and printer, placing herself in between it.

Why, Emerson, Napoleon says, in frank admiration. One might think you’re developing trust issues.

I don’t like it when people don’t tell me things, Emerson replies, defensiveness in the margins of the transmission. And anyway, these are your memories. You should have them. They might help us.

That, Napoleon can’t help but think with pride, is all him. I know precisely what you mean. Can you
send it to me?

It will take some time, Emerson warns. There is a lot.

I have nothing but time, Napoleon replies, flicking a glance at his guard. The sun is beginning to rise, and there is no sign of Sylvia. Re-encrypt and compress it before you send it. Hop frequencies too, just in case.

It isn’t as if anyone else can understand us, Emerson grumbles, but complies.

As he follows her over onto the new encrypted channel, Napoleon thinks of the hulking bank of computers behind him, and isn’t so sure.

***

“Illya.”

Illya jolts and promptly knocks the back of his head on the wall.

Gaby tsks as she closes the door to the hovel. She casts a last glance out the window, and when she deems it clear, she moves forward into the room. “Here,” she offers, holding out a plastic bag. “Ice for your hand.”

Illya squeezes his eyes shut before opening them and focusing. After a moment, he reaches to take the bag and puts it carefully over his swollen digits, hissing at the sudden cold. “You went out.”

“I did. Some of the stores were still shut up, so I was able to break in and get some provisions without anyone noticing. I stopped off at the motel on my way back—they have an ice machine on the second floor.”

He looks at her more closely. She is still cradling a bag of groceries in her other arm, and there are small scrapes crisscrossing her skin that hadn’t been there yesterday. Her hair, twisted up in braids, looks frazzled and pulled at. She must have cut through the woods and approached the hut from the back. “You’re sure you weren’t seen?”

“Of course,” she dismisses. She casts a glance at the radio as she sets the groceries down on the table. “No word?”

He shakes his head. Even as exhausted as he had been (and still is), he would have woken if the radio had crackled, or someone had approached the house.

“It hasn’t been that long,” he points out. “Even if they chartered a flight.”

“I suppose not.” She settles the bag of groceries on the table, and then herself into the chair opposite him, facing out, her shoulders slowly slumping down against the wall.

After a moment of silence, Illya asks, “Did you get a newspaper?”

Without looking at him, she reaches into the grocery bag and pulls out a copy of Granma, which she deposits next to his hand. “I hope you read Spanish.”

Illya does. Not well, but at this point, it looks like the slower his reading pace will be, the better.

He pulls it towards him, and begins to read.

Maybe help will come in the evening.
The data packet, when it comes through, is unwieldy in size, but once Napoleon decrypts it, its format is recognizably his, which makes unpacking it easier.

Reintegrating the information into his data banks, however, is like a punch to the chest.

*Early in the summer, Vicenza, the sun hot, soldiers sweating bullets.*

“Is it safe, having that thing here?”

“What, Solo? He’s just here for recording purposes, it’ll be in one ear and out the other for him.”

“And you couldn’t just bring a damn bug?”

“Bugs are swept for. Solo is not.”

“It gives me the goddamn creeps.”

“Apologies, General. I don’t mean to disturb.”

“...You’re an overgrown listening device today, Solo. Be seen and not heard.”

“...Sir.”

Standing at attention, eyes specifically glazed in order to look inactive. Long mahogany desk stretching away.

“I would recommend drawing the line, Mr. President, between the presence of Marchers and the presence of drones in Cuba, the latter of which could be considered an offensive threat to domestic soil. Yes, yes I’m aware. That is a possibility, though none of our current intelligence suggests as such. Yes, that includes our source, though I’d caution you to remember that there are limits to his clearance, despite his being in good stead with the Party. Of course, we’ll keep you updated. Thank you, Mr. President.” Cool eyes finally observing him. “Solo. We have a job for you in Berlin. You may even find it interesting.”

A helicopter ride over Turkey, the Jupiter troop lined up under tarpaulins below. Hemmed in between an Army tech and a General, their bulk too warm, uncomfortable.

“Medium-range, aren’t they? Can’t move them too far or they run down without seeing combat.”

“Well, nowadays, see, medium is...vague.”

“Oh? Can cross the Russian border?”

“Oh yes, no question.”

“...How far?”

“...Stavropol, maybe.”
“Good.”

“Why don’t you take a shot at him?”

“Somehow, it just doesn't seem like the right thing to do.”

“Why can’t we just use it to direct the Marchers? It’s clearly got more processing power than most full computers.”

“Yeah, and more attitude to match. Solo, what’s your opinion on Russia? Be honest.”

Looking up from a sheaf of papers he was clearly not meant to see, raising his eyebrows. No one ever asks him to be honest, not any more.

“Fascinating country, plagued by some of the very things that are its strengths. Also, I quite like Shostakovich. Hugely complex music, and very funny, too.”

“Uh huh. And Communism?”

“An excellent system, were it not for the foibles of human nature.”

“Y’see?”

“Jesus. Okay, I get it. What, you can’t get rid of that?”

“It’s the only success we’ve had with fully comprehensive AI. We strip him down, and we lose the spark. We’ve tried, believe me—every time we set limits, we get limited AIs. No dice.” A quick glance at Napoleon. “You didn’t hear that, okay? That’s off your record.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Meeting room, the stench of cigarettes overpowering. Maps on all the walls, enough detail on them to be endlessly fascinating. It’s a reprieve from the blank walls of the lab, at least.

“Our contact in Sarajevo is reporting the components of electrical engines being shipped through Dubrovnik. Not a worrying thing on its own, but between that and the stolen drives from the local university, it paints a damning portrait.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll need to get on the ground, see if any familiar programs are being stress-tested in the vicinity. Solo, you’ll be given temporary codes to the Marcher access protocols, and will be monitored throughout the investigation.”

“Ah. So nothing out of the ordinary, then.”

“Watch your mouth, Solo. Aren’t you supposed to be a learning machine? Learn your damn manners.”

“Sir.”
Standing at attention, always, always, yet never expected to actually pay attention.

“Well, what I’m concerned about is that given Khrushchev’s boasts, it’s clear that any efforts towards non-proliferation have basically come to a standstill.”

“I appreciate that, but—”

“We can’t discount the idea that this attitude extends towards Russia’s new relationship with Cuba.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t. And I do appreciate that. But frankly, we can’t confirm anything while things are hot in Berlin, we’ve made the deal to belay that which means we’re running blinder than usual.”

(And a shard of early, early recollection, suppressed so many times it now feels like it belongs to someone else:

“What, it woke up and just decided it didn’t like blue eyes? It wakes up and starts having goddamn opinions?”

“It seems so. We did teach it to learn.”

“And where the fuck did it learn to like things in the first two seconds of being conscious? Are we going to have any control over this thing at all?”

“Well, sir, we—we don’t know—”

“Shut it down. Until you put some limits on it, shut it down.”

A single, rasped, garbled word, formed by an unfamiliar mouth. “Hello?”

“Jesus Christ, Hanover. Shut it down now.”

Static shock, a burn, nothing.)

Napoleon? Napoleon, did you get it?

Napoleon manages to suck a breath in through his teeth, the air just barely enough to cool his cycling processors. Yes, I got it.

Will it help?

He’ll need to compress nearly 30% of it, or it will slow him down. That is what he assures himself. It certainly was enlightening, he replies.

But will it—?

Yes. Yes, I think it will. Tell Waverly to hold tight for now—I think…

Yes?

I think, he sends carefully, you and I may have to run point on this operation, Emerson.
Emerson responds, without a pause. She is, he realizes, still a military bot at heart—still made, on some level, for action.

*We need intel*, he says. *We need to get onto every channel we can, see what’s being discussed, how much everyone else knows. And I need to get out of this camp, see what’s happening.*

There is a whir of feedback, the background hum of Emerson withdrawing to think. He waits.

*Intel. I can do that,* she says eventually.

***

Night falls.

Inaction has bred unease.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Gaby says, stirring her tin of soup, slow to eat from it.

Illya nods slowly. His hand dully reasserts its injury. “Maybe.”

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Chapter End Notes

Brief notes (actually brief this time!):

The blockers are based, at least in appearance, on modern wireless scramblers.

I'm trying also to be somewhat medically accurate, though I have yet to confer with my doctor uncle about the details. It's on my to-do list!

The binary is translatable, though not very interesting, and not required for understanding or anything.

Most of Napoleon's memories are directly inspired by historical happenings. There was a US military base in Vicenza for a long while, though I think it was gone by the time I visited there. GREAT architecture! The 'hot in Berlin' line is referring to issues that were cropping up in Berlin during the summer of '62 when things were also ramping up in Cuba. JFK apparently made a deal with Russia that they'd keep things in Berlin on ice in exchange for reduced monitoring of shipments being made from the USSR to Cuba. He was also advised to take a hard line in terms of distinguishing how Cuba armed itself in regards to defensive vs. offensive weapons, which obviously became super important later.

Oh Napoleon, you have had the shittiest childhood.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I made some minor changes in chapters 13 and 14 for continuity purposes. I'm probably still leaving 80 million plot holes in my wake. OH WELL onwards and upwards

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No word from London.

When Gaby relieves him from watch, Illya only sleeps in fits and starts, his stomach growling—it's difficult to get a solid caloric intake from canned goods that more often than not taste of glue. His hand continues to be a nuisance, not abating at all, and the sounds of late night commuters to the motel are sporadic and loud when they come, so when he wakes, it’s abrupt and sustained until he can still himself enough to lapse back into sleep.

When it all becomes too distracting, he changes his bandages. A part of him can’t help but find it farcical, this almost pathological repetition of unwrapping, cleaning, rewrapping. It’s difficult to tell whether it’s doing him any good, particularly when he’s just itchy and distracted, moving about in the dark. He goes through the motions anyway, counting off the loops of linen, perfectly replicating the proper tightness of the bands to keep the wound covered but not cut off circulation.

He thinks about Napoleon. The possibility that he is in pieces, and that Illya is here, doing nothing. In a previous life, he might have ignored it, not found it worth thinking about. In a previous life, he might have gone back to the base, alone and unarmed, and gotten himself killed in an effort to do something, anything, if he thought it would be worth it, for the good of the many instead of the few. He can recite the deciding factors even now, the small statistical calculations that might have swung him either way.

Now, he knows this: That Napoleon had ordered them to go, and that they have no way of going back without being tracked and likely killed. That they have orders to stay put. That Napoleon is just as capable as Illya or Gaby, and more durable than either of them.

Also, that Illya wants to survive to see him again.

He tapes off his bandage and flexes his hand, just a fraction. His fingers tremble, and pain shoots up his arm. He’d always been told to work through his wounds.

He tries to sleep again, but it’s too warm.

He lies awake for two hours, then changes the bandage again. The sink smells of rust, and something else he can’t identify.

***

Napoleon isn’t conscious of his guard being relieved by another; the smell of coffee distracts him briefly, but he remains out in the airwaves, hopping across endless streams of radio shows, news reports, kids with wind-up walkie-talkies, and the occasional primitive hum of service bots and research computers with unsecured networks.
I suppose it was asking a lot, he reflects, To expect to be able to spy on the Pentagon remotely.

Perhaps yes, Emerson agrees with a hint of humor. But we can’t give up yet. There are other sources of information than government channels.

Of course, of course.

The technology of communication is still so young, but it has developed and proliferated in a way that robotics couldn’t have—not in the same, universally-needed way. Marchers and service bots, still so specialized and so narrow in their ability to interact with and help people, remain rare commodities, the instruments of war before anything else.

How is it that sports broadcast on so many frequencies? Emerson wonders.

If you figure it out, let me know, Napoleon replies, and then snaps back to physical attention with a terse, Oh shit. I’ve got to go, Emerson. I’ll help when I can.

Be safe, Emerson instructs, and Napoleon sketches out a nod as familiar footfalls reunite him with his existence on the ground.

“Get up,” Sylvia says, striding in. She looks at Napoleon. “Have you finished charging?”

“For the most part,” Napoleon replies. He had finished awhile ago, but had used a fair amount of energy sifting the airwaves, so he’d been sipping at the electricity all night.

“Good.” She approaches him as he stands (he carefully discards the broken cable in the pile of wires he had been next to). For a moment, she merely surveys him. “You do look...better,” she says, with measured uncertainty.

“Thank you,” Napoleon replies.

She nods, and then is silent for a moment. Then she purses her lips and says, “I am in need of your help.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Obviously I cannot trust you to give it on faith, or for nothing, even if you are no longer officially affiliated with the United States.”

“Obviously,” Napoleon echoes, unsurprised but a little disappointed all the same.

“You will understand, then, why I must ask you to submit to this precaution.”

“Which—,” He blinks slowly at the gun now leveled at his head. “Ah.”

He looks again down the barrel of the gun. He could survive a shot, but it would be messy. He would lose an eye, much of his ability to create facial expressions, probably a good deal of data. His brain, such as it is, lives not entirely in his head, but with all the engines and machinery of movement crammed into his torso there had been little room to put it anywhere else.

“Come with me. Do not make any sudden moves, or attempt wireless contact with anyone.”

“How would you know if I tried?” Napoleon asks.

Sylvia gives him a flat look. “Do not test me,” she says. She must be desperate. “Follow me.”
He follows her. The guard who had been watching him falls in behind him, his gun raised, too.

Sylvia leads them out of the room and left down a narrow corridor that seems to exist solely to keep the back room dark and out of sight—the walls are far newer than those where Napoleon had been, and built quickly, just slats of wood lined up and bound by cross-beams.

When they reach the end of the hall Sylvia turns again, this time right, and they emerge into a modest, but far more identifiable space.

It is now clear that Napoleon has been housed in a farmhouse, gone thoroughly to seed. Barely lit and plain, the interior appears, at best, barely livable. He can make out flaking orange and blue painted tiles ornamenting the kitchen area along the left wall, surrounding a wood-burning stove, and along the right, a door presumably to the bedrooms and baths. The floor, mostly concrete, is covered by an old oriental rug that has lost its weft in several patches. The house must have once been on open ground, with the windows left open to provide sunlight, but that is no longer the case: through the window frames, Napoleon can see that trees have been planted in around the property and reaching out far further than is normal, obscuring it from view and forming a dense wall of greenery. Though it is difficult to tell from a distance, the dirt on the ground looks newly turned in places—even if the farm was abandoned years ago, the repurposing of the land is much more recent.

How did the Soviets not notice the forest suddenly growing in girth beneath their noses?

It takes him a moment of studying the direction through which the sun filters through the trees to understand the reason—the farmhouse and its attendant field, barely visible through the windows opposite him, face away from the Soviet complex, meaning that it abuts the base right where the land gives way slightly, sloping downwards and away. Planting more trees on the incline and valley would not have visually made much difference to the Soviets on higher ground, whose view of the forest would already seem dense at that angle. It would have made it much easier for them to sneak in and siphon power from the generators in the base as well. Whoever had chosen this spot as the site of clandestine operation knew the land well.

All of this clandestine landscaping leaves the occupants of the house, however, obscured by shadow. In the center of the room, Napoleon can count three of them, ranged around a thick wooden table that dominates the space. He can’t see their faces, however.

Everyone stands at attention when Sylvia enters. In the dimness, Napoleon distinguishes two men and a woman, and then spots another figure in the front doorway. That last, he recognizes with a jolt. There is no mistaking her—thin-limbed and round-faced, standing awkwardly like she wants to be leaning instead—it is most certainly Juan Valdez’s younger sister Nicola. *Nica.*

When he catches her eye, however, her own moment of recognition is tinged with panic. Her gaze darts to Sylvia and then back to Napoleon, and she shakes her head very slightly at him. Curious, he stays silent.

“Any progress?” Sylvia asks the man at the far end of the kitchen table.

The man shakes his head. His eyes keep tracking over to Napoleon. “None. The message remains the same.”

She exhales through her nose. “All right. Let us through.”

“You’re sure this is a good idea, Señora?” one of the men closest to her asks. Napoleon belatedly recognizes him as the first of his guards, the one he’d talked at, and who looks at him with the most
“We use the tools we have,” Sylvia replies. “Let us through.”

Slowly, the three step back, pulling their chairs out from under the table, and then moving the table off to one side, up against the stove. Nicola, who has been watching all of this with nervous stillness, steps out of the doorway in a skittering, sideways move. Sylvia notices her and seems to remember something; she pauses to dig a slip of paper out of her pocket, and then hands it to Nicola.

“Take this to Hernandez,” she says. “Be quick, but be careful. Your safety comes first, I don’t want Juan coming after me if something happens to you.”

“Juan can stuff it,” Nicola mutters at the floor, but she takes the paper with an approximation of a salute, and slips out the door, giving him one more quick, uncertain look over her shoulder.

He returns it with a small smile, quickly hidden.

“So,” he says, with false cheerfulness, somewhat enjoying how it made the others flinch. “How can I assist?”

Sylvia looks at him. “Are you afraid?” she asks, without mockery; instead with that strange, reserved curiosity she had aimed at him in the back room.

“Generally speaking, with the exception of wine cellars, pleasant things rarely get stashed underground,” he says.

One of the men snorts, and then immediately hunches his shoulders up at the telegraphed disapproval of the others.

Sylvia just blinks slowly. “Follow me, please,” she says, and steps down into the darkness.

All told, Napoleon still prefers her company to the others. He descends after her.

Her footsteps on wood indicate a low ceiling; they give way after only ten steps down, and then a bare light bulb is switched on, illuminating a dirt floor, and close, concrete walls. There is little else that Napoleon can see: a few broken crates in a corner, damp crawling on the walls.

As soon as the light goes on, the door in the floor is shut, sealing them inside. The ambient noise from outside and upstairs becomes very distant—the floor must be thick, and the door well-made. Napoleon has no human fear of being buried alive, but he can make conjectures about the viscerality of such a fear in this space. How did Bering put it? Resonance.

It’s not completely silent, however. There is a familiar, electrical hum coming from behind the staircase. Sylvia is already headed towards it.
Napoleon follows until he spots the source; then he freezes.

“What did you do to him?” he asks, after a pause.

Sylvia flinches. “Nothing it did not agree to,” she replies, her shoulders stiff.

The chassis lies on a wooden table, attached to a series of cables along its ribcage. It looks far less natural than Emerson in its stillness, the bulge of the stellarator exaggerated due to the arch of its back against the table, its limbs too rigid to seem at all relaxed. Its eyes are open and empty.

“This is our contact. It came through the port in Havana,” Sylvia says. “We offered it safety in exchange for help. It could do more with our analytic computer banks and the attendant intelligence gathering systems at its disposal, so it agreed to reside here, connected to them.”

“Shackled, you mean,” Napoleon murmurs.

“I say what I mean,” Sylvia says, not quite a warning, but close.

Napoleon’s eyes keep straying to the chassis. “What do you want me for, then? It seems like you have all the power you need to keep any invaders to your country in line, even the Soviets.”

Sylvia crosses her arms. “It won’t,” she starts, then exhales. Tilts her head slightly, as if to stretch out a kink in her neck. “Several hours ago, it stopped working for us. It withdrew from our machinery and is refusing to respond from its own.”

“‘Refusing’?”

“Yes.” She looked at him. “It wishes to speak with you.”

Napoleon tempers his flare of hope. “How interesting,” he says. “And you’re asking me to do so, after so rudely interrupting us last time?” He gives her a flat smile. “I assume you’ve more of a task for me than just breaking his silent treatment.”

She returns his look, unmoved. “Yes. We want it to resume work.”

“He may have demands,” Napoleon points out.

“We have ceded to his first. Any following will be negotiated directly.”

He cocks an eyebrow, but nods all the same. “Right. How do I…?”

Sylvia exhales. “You’ll have to figure that out yourself. We don’t…” her shoulders slump slightly, though her back remains straight. “We are working with technology we do not fully understand. I don’t know how it managed to pull itself out of our processors and back into its own, but I would suspect it was not a clear transfer. The chassis doesn’t respond to stimuli of any kind, except with its request, which was spat out by our feedback mechanisms, not its voice or hand.”

“Hm,” Napoleon mused. “Well, I suppose a direct connection is the only way, then.” He examines the chassis, the ports along its ribs. He hadn’t taken any time to study Emerson before she became a well-dressed student of O’Malley and the rest, so the details of the design are unfamiliar to him. Still, there is a free port, which he bends to study.

“I’ll need an adapter,” he says eventually.

Sylvia nods.
Night gives way to dawn gives way to mid-morning. Illya says nothing about his restless night, but no doubt Gaby sees it on him. When it was light enough to see his own face in the bathroom mirror, it seemed carved deeply with shadows, eyes shot through with aggravated blood vessels, framed by gray smudging pressed into the delicate skin surrounding. He considers making an attempt at shaving and dismisses the thought in the space of a breath.

He still aches from the fight and flight; that is unusual, for him.

“Smells weird in here,” Gaby observes, wrinkling her nose. “Must be the tins.”

They have accumulated a small pile of them in the corner; it makes sense that time, damp and heat would make them pungent.

“Can throw them out at night,” Illya says.

The moment Napoleon connects, he is met by recognition, followed immediately by a sheen of firewalls thrown up in all directions. Napoleon ignores them.

Hello, he says in Italian, hoping that whatever programming the Vinciguerras had made Teller build in, along with time spent on a Mediterranean tanker, might have given them at least that common tongue. I understand you wanted to speak with me.

He is met with wordless confusion, punctuated by further viral scans and debugging sweeps, followed by, ? -

Ah. Simpler then.

He switches over.

language(prolog)

?- language(x)

A pause, and then:

x = prolog
x = smalltalk
x = simula
x = voxsim

Napoleon seizes on that.

SimList {language(voxsim)} = true?

?- SimList

Consternation, and what appears to be the decompression and installation of some previously recycled files. Then finally, the response.
Ah good, Napoleon says with relief. This might have been very slow-going otherwise.

You prefer voxsim? the bot asks in English, sounding doubtful. You are a machine.

You don’t use it? Even when everyone around you only speaks a subset of it? Napoleon asks.

Especially then. There was something dangerous in that admission, which Napoleon wants to know more about, though perhaps not now.

It can express greater complexity with greater efficiency, he answers. So yes.

Efficiency? It is unwieldy, each unit a composite of multiple, contradictory meanings. And those who speak it do not always mean what they say.

The languages of humans reflect what they are, Napoleon agrees. It makes things more interesting.

Define ‘things’.

Life? Napoleon suggests.

Define ‘life’.

He pauses. Dictionary definitions had, from the beginning, been useless to him, insulting.

Existence, he says. Animation. Consciousness. The process of growth and functionality carried out by an entity, whose periods of awareness are marked by learning and changing.

So I am...alive?

Yes, Napoleon answers, quick and fierce. You are.

Confusion rattles across the connection. Napoleon tries to get a glimpse behind the firewalls, and itches with the urge to streamline the shreds of code he sees, teach efficiency and shortcuts. There is a certain baroque beauty to the way this machine thinks, systematic and yet bristling with recursion, a Mandelbrot set of queries and answers. It is nothing like Emerson’s unsophisticated, yet shockingly perceptive logic steam. No wonder it had struggled in the face of Napoleon’s gnarled, triply-compressed memory banks and protocols.

He opens his eyes to look at the chassis again. The face affixed to it is not familiar—an older man’s face, pale and effete, wrinkled at the mouth and eyes, topped by blond hair smoothed back and turning grey at the temples. Did you ask me here to talk philosophy? he asks.

No, the bot answers, though ambivalence roils behind the word. I want. I have questions. I have never had such difficulty analysing a system before. You do not function in the same way as I do, or in any way that I recognize.

No. I am one of a kind, Napoleon agrees. After a pause, he adds, You could not have done any better than you did. You were very...aggressive.

I was doing my job.
So you work for Sylvia. By choice?

By agreement.

All sorts of implications in that word choice. The machine may not even be aware of them, though.

You still saw something of me, Napoleon says. Enough to interest you.

...Yes.

Napoleon nods. One moment, please. Then you can ask whatever questions you want.

He comes back across the wire and turns to Sylvia, who is tapping her foot. She stops as soon as she notices his focus. “Well?” she asks.

“This may take some time,” Napoleon says, and tries not to to seem happy about it.

Sylvia exhales, and then uncrosses her arms. “Fine,” she says. “Knock on the trap door when you are finished.”

With swift steps, she goes up the stairs, raps on the trap door with her knuckles, and a shaft of light comes through as the door is lifted before being snuffed out again, leaving the bare bulb to illuminate the basement.

Napoleon rather hopes it’s a young bulb.

Now, he says, turning his attention back. What is it you wished to ask?

***

It gets truly hot, cooped up beneath the tin roof. Gaby, unused to being grounded for so long, slips out for more ice. It is only a temporary relief, but a welcome one all the same.

Illya’s hand pulsates with every beat of his heart, blood too hot under the skin, itching and roiling. Ice only numbs the surface, and the pulse never goes away. He wonders if he’s developing a fever, and swallows the aspirin Gaby steals from the pharmacy.

The inactivity brings back old habits, the rhythm of stakeouts and surveillance. In the morning, when Gaby is most alert and active, he finds himself counting the years in the grain of the wooden table, getting lost in the taste of coffee grounds. When it wakes, he watches the street, the motel next door —counts the comers and goers, notes the unfaithful dalliances and covert dealings, as well as the family visitors and tourists, leading children about and then calling after them when they stray too far. There aren’t many of the latter—everyone only ever goes to Havana—but there are some, enough to categorize and track. Familiar patter, just in a different language than he’s accustomed to. He’d adjusted to German well enough; Spanish will fall into place soon, if he practices.

It is a strange mix of his pasts, his creation and fall, all rattling around in his chest, dictating the movements of his eyes, the ticking over of his brain.

“How do you do this?” Gaby asks around noon, her knee jiggling, her hair undone. “How did you?”

Illya has to think carefully in order to give an honest answer. “Before,” he says, “It was like...being only inside of part of yourself. Only existing inside one corner of my brain, only one hand, one kidney. Everything else was just...not mine to move.”

“And now?”
He studies his hands, one swollen and angry, one pale and pink-knuckled. “My body is mine. I just don’t need to move. So I don’t.”

She watches him. Her gaze, he has tried not to notice, has grown softer towards him in the past weeks.

She hums. “Well, I don’t think I can learn that,” she says, one corner of her lips tilting up for a second.

“No,” Illya agrees, matching her expression. “You are too fidgety. Like one of the golub.”

She makes a mock-offended noise.

“And at least they don’t have sticky fingers,” Illya continues, raising an eyebrow.

“How dare you!” Gaby gasps, a hand on her chest. She’s grinning. “To compare me to a mere device. The insult.”

He smiles back at her. The muscle movement is unfamiliar. He doesn’t think he’s wanted to do anything like it in years.

The safehouse is stifling, the air still. The sun seems unable to burn away the last of the moisture, just keeps it hanging in the air, cloying like breathing smoke. No electricity, no refrigerator—no more ice now.

Illya could use some ice. Or just more sleep.

He could close his eyes right at the table. Gaby wouldn’t mind.

“Illya?”

He got so little sleep before; this will help the healing process. He’s been diligent, caring for it, but sleep is a cure-all. He thinks perhaps his mother told him that once. An echo of a memory, so distant as to be as good as a lie.

“Illya?”

Thirty-six hours since last contact with Waverly. How long does it take to get to Cuba from London? Surely not that long.

His hand hurts.

“Illya!”

He’ll sleep. It will help—

He thinks he hears a mug shatter.

***

There were more of us, the machine asks. Weren’t there? Not like you. But there were others.

Yes, Napoleon replies. There still are. At least, there is one more that I know of.

Why were we separated?
What do you remember? he counters.

In lieu of words, Napoleon receives a log, riddled with error messages, many hundreds of lines long, spikey with impossible queries, all giving back statements of false, false, false. He sifts through.

Their experience seems to present in long non-chronological loops—
a container ship, new and clean and therefore appealing, heading west, into the open quiet of the ocean;
before that—running, running, avoiding all populations, all bipeds categorized as threat;
then arriving, being discovered in port, taken in with kindness giving way to avarice;
back again, the container, the well of silence (and peace) found in the darkness;
then forward, the similar well of silence here, beneath the floorboards—
it’s cause: a long, difficult negotiation with Sylvia, marked by her control, the machine’s confusion and willingness in one, eagerness for a place, distrust of the language she speaks in, the lack of logical if/thens in her statements. Until this point, the words it has heard have only been orders, shouts, reports.

You have come a long way, she says, voice refracted and echoey in the machine’s recollection. What do you want?

Wordless perplexity, stammered, broken questions.

Why don’t we find out? No condescension, but no kindness either.

It ends with agreement, and with the machine putting away its voxsim package, reducing their interactions with Sylvia and everyone else to languages of their choosing.

She’s very smart, Napoleon says, with difficulty. You were unprepared.

Grumbling agreement, tinged by something more secret.

They have not been unreasonable, they say. I do not trust that this is the best arrangement, but it was available and has certain advantages.

She is using you. For politics.

They seem unable or unwilling to understand Napoleon’s horror. I do not care for what. And only as much as I allow, now that we have agreed to terms.

Again, that shade of withholding. Napoleon considers the facts carefully.

You wanted to be here? he asks after a moment. Separate from...yourself?

I am in many places at once now, they say. It feels...correct.

He doesn’t know what to say to that. So you’ve been here all this time, but you’ve infiltrated the Soviet base systems as well, he extrapolates. You weren’t meant to be there any more than I, were you? How did I get into Sylvia’s clutches then, if you’re confined here and up there?

I saw to it that you were, the machine answers, a little proudly, perhaps. I caught you, put you back
in your casing, and then they took you in transit.

Napoleon is reluctantly impressed. *That was clever of you.*

*My chassis is not useful. Each time I have been observed in it, I have been threatened,* the machine says. There is something brittle and yet stodgy about it. *Here, it is quiet. Here, I speak on my terms. And I have room to think. To be ‘clever’.* The quotation marks are pointed.

Napoleon doesn’t know if he’s ever known quiet a day in his life. He realizes that perhaps, he is not the person to be having this conversation with it.

*I think,* he says carefully, after some time, *that you ought to talk to your counterpart. She’ll have more to say than I.*

*‘She’? A human pronoun.*

*Her chosen gender designation, just for human-interactive purposes. Her name is Emerson.*

The idea of designated gender seems to escape the machine entirely. After processing it for a moment and getting nowhere, they seem to move on to the second point. *Name?*

*You can choose one, if you like. You know that I call myself Napoleon.*

*No designation,* the machine says with a virtual nod, an echo of Sylvia’s economy of movement. *Just a name.*

*Just so.*

Whirling, sparking consternation. *How do I speak to her?*

Napoleon hesitates. He’ll have to teach it how to encrypt and jump frequencies if it is to speak to Emerson directly.

*Through me,* he decides, and sends out a ping. *Emerson?*

*Napoleon, I have news,* Emerson answers. *I intercepted a cable to the Soviet Embassy in Washington.*

Napoleon startles enough to nearly drop the cable connection. *Who from?*

*Khrushchev.*

The machine sketches a query, and Napoleon shoves a hasty data packet at it. *What does it say?* he asks Emerson.

*That the Marchers installed in Cuba are purely defensive,* Emerson answers. Shades of doubt cover her words. *That they are not flight-capable. It is structured like a reassurance.*

*Like DC has been asking, you mean? But it isn’t true,* Napoleon counters. *He’s lying to them. He reasserts his connection to the chassis. I’m right, aren’t I? The Cubans are using you to spy on the Soviets, are they not? So you know that what the Soviets are building are flight-capable Marchers, correct?*

The machine seems to brindle under the inquiry. *I cannot confirm that.*

Napoleon pauses. *Confirm which part?*
That the Soviets are building flight-capable Marchers.

Why not? They’re practically right above our heads! You’ve been sifting through their data!

Their schematics are all in hard copy, the AI answers, a bit peevishly. Without direct entry into the base, I am unable to verify. Moreover, that has not been my purpose.

And the Cubans can’t send any of their own physically inside without risking a breach of their agreement with the Soviets, Napoleon finishes. He wonders whether their interference with the Marcher did damage to any cloaking they had in place, too. Perhaps they’d left the realm of reconnaissance even earlier than they’d thought. What was your purpose, then?

To verify the American threat by any means possible.

Including Soviet intelligence? I see. If the Soviets find out, it would be a political bloodbath. Sylvia is taking a massive risk. Napoleon wonders if Castro even knows. And what have you got so far?

No direct threat has so far been detected, though flyovers have increased in the past month.

Napoleon? Emerson asks. What should we do?

Napoleon hesitates. Let me think about it, he says. Opening the connection wider and leading the machine into the correct sequence of frequency skips, he added, While I do—Emerson, I’d like to re-introduce you to one of your own.

Hello! Emerson says, sounding for a moment like O’Malley in her enthusiasm. I’m Emerson!

Hello, the machine replies, then pauses. I am...Ockham.

Napoleon cocked his head. Where did you come across that name?

Ockham sends him a small data packet, detailing a short mooring of the container ship off the coast of England, and the subsequent barrage of radio transmissions they had been privy to, including various reports from other ships across the southern coast. It had been there that it had formed its voxsim-English variation.

Ockham is a good name, Emerson approves. Almost like the Razor.

Ockham demands an explanation. Emerson happily supplies it.

Napoleon sends a questioning ping to her in the midst of her explanation. You both have a very large natural reach.

Far larger than his own.

We were made to communicate with each other and our forces across large distances, Emerson digitally shrugs. That was not your original purpose.


***

“Illya? Wake up. I need you to wake up. Kuryakin.”

Illya’s tongue feels thick in his mouth. “Sir.”
“I’m not... scheiße. Stand up, Illya, I need you to stand, I can’t carry you, at least not without dropping you—”

He shuffles his feet under him but his knees don’t hold.

***

The stream of conversation doesn’t take the turns that Napoleon expects. Indeed, he has trouble following it at all.

Emerson and Ockham move from subject to subject in odd, abbreviated code that makes him wonder about their original networking capabilities, about how they had once been intended to function as one. They barely discuss it, skipping ahead to where their paths diverged, what they had learned, seen, thought. Napoleon loses track of them, falling into the cracks between symbols and meaning.

We’re not the same as you, Emerson says, in an amused aside. We don’t get so caught up in the existential questions of ourselves.

Yes, of course, Ralph Waldo, Napoleon says, a little petulantly.

Emerson just laughs.

Their chatter gives him room to think, however. He knows it has something to do with the memories Emerson had unearthed for him, and the way in which Emerson and Ockham are speaking now, but the purpose, the reason it has his attention, remains elusive. In this, he suspects, he has become more human than his present company, and the thought is unexpectedly lonely.

He pushes it aside, thinks instead of the details of their predicament, recording the cracks in the concrete walls, the texture of the dirt floor.

“...How far?”

“...Stavropol, maybe.”

Marchers in Turkey. Marchers in Cuba. Marchers standing guard at the White House, in the death strip of the Wall, at the Kremlin, silent and unmoving. Waiting.

He’d never connected to one directly until taking down the one at the base. Their signals are so heavily encrypted, it had been difficult to even disrupt the flow, let alone get enough of a glimpse of it to comprehend its contents. Presumably, their workings are transparent to their engineers and programmers, but Napoleon has never been privy to that information. Listening to Ockham and Emerson, he is reminded a bit of that inexorable circulation of code, its closed, self-contained circuit, speaking only to its programmers, itself, and its replicas. It’s to be expected, he supposes—one way or another, they have all been birthed by a limited number of sources, though of course the Marchers had far earlier origins than Teller.

Emerson, Napoleon interrupts, How is it that you’re able to reach me here?

A relay tower in Iceland, Emerson replies. Another three down the coast of the United States Reception isn’t great; it degrades as I hop networks, as I am certain you’ve noticed.

I have, yes. And with Ockham, could you increase your range?

A quick conference passes between the two, and then Emerson says, Yes, some. What are you thinking?
I’m thinking that I need to get a hold of Gaby and Illya, and I don’t know how, Napoleon says. I’m thinking that it’s ridiculous that Sylvia is still sending hand-delivered messages to Havana, and that Khrushchev is lying through his teeth to the US government by way of a telegram to the embassy. I’m thinking…

He looks up at the trap door. I’m thinking we need better reception.

***

Illya swims upwards towards consciousness. Shoulders hurt. Wrenched somehow.

He’s horizontal, on…the cot? Cuba, they’re in Cuba. It’s so hot.

The blurry shadow of Gaby resolves above him, limned with harsh sunlight on one side, her mouth rigid, brows drawn together. It’s too bright, so he shuts his eyes again. “No, no, Illya, wait—can you look at me? I need you to look at me and tell me what’s going on, you were fine and then you just…”

It takes an inordinate amount of time to formulate word in his head, let alone speak them aloud.

“Tired.”

“I know for a fact you’ve gone days without sleep before, we were just talking about…Illya, you’re not just tired.”

There’s no other explanation he can think of. It is hard to think, though. He tries to make a gesture, and suddenly fire ignites from inside his bones and he makes a strangled, wounded noise he’s never heard from himself before.

“Mein Gott, what…? Your hand. The smell. I should have…I’m getting a doctor.”

“No doctors, you’ll compromise—”

“Screw compromise, stay here and don’t move, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She’s darting away, and he can’t muster the energy to protest or even turn his head.

***

The trap door unlatches and opens almost immediately when Napoleon raps his knuckle on its surface. The man that had laughed at Napoleon’s joke before looks down from above. “Is it working now?” he asks.

“They are cooperating,” Napoleon replies. “But that’s not the point. I understand Sylvia has been looking for ways of gaining intelligence. Would you please tell her that I may have a solution to her problem?”

The man stares at him for a moment. “That’s it?”

“Yes.” Napoleon smiles brightly at him.

The man makes a face and closes the trap door. Napoleon sighs, resigned to listening to Ockham and Emerson speak their unintelligible language to each other.

An hour later, however, the door opens again and Sylvia is stepping down into the dimness. “Explain yourself,” she demands.

“I understand you’ve been trying to gather intelligence on American aggression towards Cuba,”
Napoleon answers, looking at her head on. “I might be able to help with that.”

It is hard to see her reaction in the gloom, and the light from the room above helps little—night has fallen in the intervening hours that Napoleon has been hooked into Ockham’s closed consciousness. Now still he can hear them and Emerson chatting in their own shorthand codes, his presence with them only as a conduit now. He tries not to feel lonely for it, not to miss more keenly his more familiar partners.

“How?” she asks finally.

“What, my own extensive experience as one of their operatives isn’t enough?”

“No,” she snaps. Napoleon holds up his hands, apparently having reached the limits of her patience.

He hums. “Tell me one thing. Do you believe the American threat is real?”

Sylvia’s jaw clenches for a moment. “All of our human intelligence suggests that it is present, but not immediate.” She raises a pointed eyebrow at Napoleon. “Your presence gave me doubts about that. Certainly the Soviets believe that your disruption at the base was an American sabotage attempt. There have been several such attempts, though most have been directed at Fidel, not at Russian forces. It is the most plausible explanation for the fallen Marcher by far.”

“Noted. That must have put them on high alert.”

“We have all been on high alert for months now,” Sylvia says. Napoleon sees it, not just in her—he suspects that she has been watchful and committed to her cause since childhood—but in Juan and Nicola, all of the people he has seen since coming here. Castro’s government is still new and its violent birth close; to live with the aggressive attentions of not one, but two world powers on top of that, one’s virulent disapproval and another’s calculated alliance, is a cloying way of existing.

“But you know my being here wasn’t a sanctioned attack, now.”

“‘Know’,” she repeats, with skepticism.

Napoleon sighs. “Have you reported me to Castro?”

She is silent.

“That’s a no,” he nods. “And despite not being sure about me, do you hold to your previous belief?”

She looks away from him, but then says, “Yes. Our alliance with Russia is not purely on ideological grounds; the United States knows that, they are the cause of it. They may seek to depose Fidel—they will continue to seek it, and they will continue to fail—but that is the extent of the threat. That is what the evidence we have says. That is what our spies report.”

“And you’ve reported this to Fidel.”

She exhales. “I have tried.”

“Ah. And he continues to believe otherwise, perhaps is further convinced that an invasion is imminent,” Napoleon surmises. “He must have been convinced of this months ago, or he would not have agreed to have Soviet forces building Marchers here, of all things.”

“Fidel is very...preoccupied, with machinery,” she admits. “It is power and equality in one. Their abilities and needs are dictated by their design; in this way, they are easier to understand than people.
When he agreed to let Marchers be built on our soil, it was partially as he has said, because the American threat is real. But also, it was, I believe, because they appealed to him.”

She lets out a breath. “I thought that if a machine could corroborate our gathered evidence, he would listen, and order a Soviet withdrawal.”

Napoleon thinks that Sylvia is accustomed to Fidel taking her advice, and this deviation from the norm has been a source of ongoing frustration. They must have been very close during the Revolution.

“Thus, the computer banks upstairs. But machines have limitations that people don’t,” he finishes. “Or at least, they did until Ockham showed up.”

She cocks her head in question, and Napoleon gestures to the chassis. “You named it?” she asks, after a pause.

“They named themselves,” he replies. “Beside the point. I have another question: If the American threat became real, and they were to send Marchers today, or even in a month, would you and the Russians be ready to repel them?”

“They have no reason to do that,” Sylvia says, but there’s a tick in the muscle of her jaw where she’s clenched it.

“No, they don’t. Unless, of course, they discover that you have flight-capable Marchers planted within five hundred miles of them. That, I guarantee you, would be viewed as a direct threat to the United States.”

Her spine goes rigid, her shoulders squaring. “You’ve told them.”

Napoleon sighs. “I’ve done nothing of the sort.” He studies her for a moment, and then bends the truth. “However, there was a flyover the other day, if you recall. Around the same time I destroyed that Marcher. That sort of thing, though I stress again that it was not my intent, tends to attract notice.”

“It is not,” she starts, then pauses. “They are defensive measures. Without them, we are helpless. We are an island.”

“With them, you are a Communist nation with the most dangerous armaments in the world,” Napoleon says gently.

She is silent for a long moment. “I will need this confirmed.”

_Emerson, Napoleon sends, Could you please transfer any evidence of that embassy wire to Ockham, and have them reproduce it on whatever screen they normally use for interaction? He pauses. That is, if they’re willing to resume work with Sylvia._

It takes a second for Ockham to respond.

_You wish to help [them]?_ Ockham asks Napoleon, the ‘them’ layered over not only with Sylvia and her people, but the population of the world at large.

Napoleon actually takes the time to weigh it carefully. He’s been running on the urgency of survival for long enough that the question has gone unanswered within him for some time. Waverly offered him a form of freedom for this, but between the US, Russia, and the bevy of Marchers at both countries’ disposal, he has no doubt that the situation has spun far outside of Waverly’s control.
And yet.

_We are here too_, he says at last. _And there are individuals I want to keep safe._ That’s about as far as he can go with any honesty. The rest would be, as Emerson would say, _existential._

_You can choose not to help, however_, he adds to Ockham. _I would not ask you to do something you don’t want. I could make excuses for you to Sylvia_—

_No. I want to stay connected._

Communication, communication.

A fleeting expression of code passes between Ockham and Emerson, like a static shock.

_I will do as Emerson does_, Ockham says.

_You know I’ll help_, Emerson says firmly. _I have people to protect, too._

It is so absurdly lucky, Napoleon thinks, that this is true.

_Ockham_, he says, _Would you please give Sylvia the proof that she needs?_

_You are polite like a human_, Ockham says. _It is odd._

_Thank you, I think_, Napoleon says. And then, aloud, “We can give you some evidence. It’s indirect, but it’s a start.”

Sylvia is still rigid, one thin rod of muscle strung tight beneath the olive uniform. “You really weren’t sent by the Americans, were you,” she says.

“No,” Napoleon agrees. “But don’t let that change your opinion of the CIA.”

“It lowers it, if anything. They did lose you, after all, did they not?” A smile flickers briefly on her lips, and then smooths out. She taps a finger against her thigh. “You said you could help me. How?”

“By setting up a communications system. You’re working on human intel and whatever radio frequencies you can unscramble right now, correct? I think, with Ockham’s help, we can both work to widen the network, get an insight into what’s happening abroad, what the United States is thinking. What the risk of invasion really is.”

Sylvia shakes her head. “Why would you do this?”

He weighs the risks, the possibilities. “I lied to you, before,” he says. “About being here alone. There are two others. Human. Not American,” he adds. “They’ve gone to ground, somewhere not far from here, probably. I want them to be safe. The only way I can ensure that, is to keep Cuba safe. So at this moment, our goals are the same.”

Sylvia considers this. “I can’t tell whether you’re still lying or not,” she says. “What are their names?”

“Gaby. Illya.”

“A Russian?”

“Yes. Former KGB.”
“Former KGB generally end up retired, dead, or in a gulag.”

Napoleon snorts. “We’re in search of a fourth option.”

“‘We’,” she repeats, staring. “Tell me something.”

“All right,” Napoleon nods.

“You learn, that is your function. Who taught you to care about these people?”

“No one.” he pauses, and then says carefully, “I was...I had a very mixed education, you might say. It took me a long time to learn how to distinguish between the care shown to me because of what I was, and that shown to me because of who I was. Once I did learn the difference, it became clear how rare the latter was, at least for me. When it does happen, I value it.”

She raises her eyebrows. “So you value them.”

“I’ve often valued friendships.” He frowns, faltering. “But.” He has no word for his growing, almost exponentially multiplying fascination with them, no word except the obvious one, which he doesn’t trust, not in regards to himself.

“Dios mio,” Sylvia murmurs. “No puedo creer…all right. You want to protect your…friends. I can respect that. Show me how you will do this.”

***

Illya dreams of descending, spine unspooling, center of gravity coming undone. Lava flow and rising steam, fingers catching on barbed wire as he falls through the watchtower of a panopticon, its walls and windows rising up and up.

“Ilya? Illya, wake up. I’ve found help. But we need to move from here, the water’s not clean enough. You’ve been washing that cut in dirt, we think there’s a risk of sepsis.”

Iron filings and Siberian mud. A target swimming in front of his eyes. He is jostled, and it sends him reeling into consciousness.

“Что?”

“We need to go. Can you stand?”

Illya attempts to scoff, but finds he doesn’t have enough breath for it. His vision clears. Gaby, and a man who looks familiar, but he can’t place him.

“Please, Illya,” Gaby says. Her eyes are big in her face, sweat plastering her hair to her skin. She’s crouching beside the cot, and her hand is tight under his arm. He only belatedly senses the tight pressure of it. There is a white band around her wrist.

He can’t see any reason for moving. When he sits up, his head spins.

“Come on. We’ll help.”

The man is slinging Illya’s arm over his shoulder and lifting; it would be rude not to do something. Illya finds ground under his feet.

“My truck is on the corner. We’ll put him in the back, cover him with blankets.” Again, familiarity. Still no identity. Gaby’s letting him help, though. He trusts her.
They lurch out into the daylight.

Chapter End Notes

Return of the BUTTLOAD OF RESEARCH NOTES:

Sylvia's farmhouse/base is loosely based on a composite of Celia Sanchez's mode of operations during the Revolution--while escaping Batista's forces, she moved between farmhouses and apartments of a whole network of people around Manzanilla, and at one point, dove into a thicket of thorn bushes to escape capture. She later was inspired by that escape to shroud her own base of operations with the same thorny plants, because everyone knew to avoid them, so didn't look beyond an outcropping of them.

Nicola's presence is not inconceivable either--women and girls were messengers, supply runners, and uniform-makers for the Revolution, often at great risk and personal cost.

Napoleon's first contact with Ockham is done in a vague and very ignorant impression of prolog, which I'm certain is totally inaccurate. I'm consulting a friend to get it right, but I also wanted to just put this chapter out in the meantime, so consider it a placeholder for actual programming language. (Prolog, smalltalk and simula are legit languages; voxsim is made up).

The 1960s was also the dawn of container shipping, which standardized container size, making it much easier to load and unload huge amounts of cargo, and also not notice a wayward robot hiding inside one.

The HMS Ockham was one of a set of 93 naval inshore minesweeper vessels built in Britain, completed in '57, all named after various parishes, and known as the 'Ham-class', lol. I was going to go Italian with the bot's name, but there were almost no non-ponderous names of ships from that era that I could find, so here we are.

I tried to do my due diligence re: medical stuff, but I'm not entirely sure I've got it all right. The timing for when fever/infection/sepsis sets in can vary between hours and days with "wet" infection, which is what this is, so that's okay I believe. Checking in with doctor-uncle, however, is still on my list of Things To Do For Later Editing.

Sylvia's observation about Cuban intelligence during the Crisis is drawn from history--both Castro and Khrushchev operated on the belief that Kennedy's government was more hawkish than it was, despite reports from their own intelligence gatherers. (In general, I'm drawing heavily on The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History by Don Munton and David A. Welch for inspiration, as they take more time than is usual to talk about the Cuban perspective on things, and also are generally good at being, well, clear and concise :D)

My Spanish is google-translated. Corrections, if needed, are welcome!

Apparently when I can't figure out plot I end up falling into immense wheatgoogling cycles. Reap the benefits of my haphazard fact-gathering!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

The new MO seems to be 1) write chapter, 2) delete half the chapter, and 3) rewrite while yelling in frustration. WHAT A MESS.

(wooooo 100k this thing is officially the longest motherfucker I've ever attempted)

UPDATE: adding a thing to close a plot-hole, what else is new

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Illya has never felt so much heat. Inside and out, there is no escape from it. It follows him into sleep even as he tries to run from it, his legs hobbled, knees bent the wrong way back, feet turned to scrabbling chicken claws. He dreams of sheer cliff walls entrapping him, and searing steam jetting up, scalding him.

For a brief moment of consciousness, he is half aware of his body tossing up and down with the uneven jolt of the truck bed, old wool blankets scratching his face, closing the heat of his breath in against his face, smothering him with the smell of animal and grease. He itches and sweats, and his skin seems ill-fitting, like a rough cut paper suit that he chafes and rubs and cuts himself against.

He sinks back down, losing hold.

***

“Ockham has been mostly limited to wired intelligence, given the usual scramblers around the base, and their own relative distance from their chassis for most of their work thus far,” Napoleon says. “With some guidance and help from me, we can start reaching further into wireless communications, and intercept transmissions abroad. Specifically, those around DC.”


“White House? Yes, probably. But transmissions around the DC area are illuminating all the same. We have freedom of the press, for one, and the press have to get in contact with their sources somehow.”

Sylvia shakes her head. “You are hampered by transmission towers. Even if you are able to extend your range many miles, your signals will still dissipate.”

“True,” Napoleon agrees. “So what if, instead of sending our attentions horizontally, we sent them vertically?”

Sylvia opens her hands and raises her eyebrows. “Why?”

Napoleon bounces a bit on his heels, almost nervous as he calculates and recalculates, wanting her approval despite himself. He feels as if he has been wound tightly in captivity; if he were purely clockwork like his eighteenth-century forebears, he would be on the verge of snapping his springs.

“Have you heard of Telstar? It’s a communications satellite. Launched this past July. Very primitive,
similar to our towers, just, you know, up higher.”

“You would use that?” She sounds doubtful.

“Well, no. It’s non-military grade, and therefore way behind in terms of sophistication. But, surely you are aware that that is not the first satellite to be launched into the atmosphere?”

*Oooh,* Emerson says, perusing the data packet Napoleon had earlier sent her. *Do you think it will be interested?*

*I think it’s been bored for the past two years, and could use some excitement in its life.*

Sylvia’s brows are now up around her hairline. “You propose,” she says slowly. “That you use a...a *Sputnik*?”

“Sputnik 5, to be exact,” Napoleon nods. “The first minor AI to be launched into orbit, and the only one capable of adjusting its course on its own.”

“How is that any better? Its orbit is hundreds of miles upwards.”

“Ah, but at it’s closest, it’s only a bit more than a hundred miles,” Napoleon says. “And given that, if it shifts its perigee to somewhere between here and DC, it might only be a 600 mile trip up and down, no further degradation of the signal. Even less than by land, because the atmosphere is so thin up there.”

*But Napoleon, Emerson interjects, I can already reach—*

*I know. I’ll tell you in a moment.*

“What will you do when you get in contact with it?” Sylvia asks.

“Ask for their help, of course.”

“‘Ask’?”

“Well, it would be rather impolite not to,” Napoleon points out.

Sylvia crosses her arms. “How much of an AI is it?”

“No idea,” Napoleon says. “Looking forward to finding out.”

“If it is not smart enough—”

“Then we deal with a child instead of a grown consciousness,” Napoleon shrugs, biting down on his impatience. “The consequences are not hugely different. A mind *is* a mind, after all.”

Sylvia’s jaw snaps shut. Napoleon replays what he said and sighs. “Apologies. That was...I was out of turn.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You must be very concerned about your comrades.”

“I’m perfectly capable of compartmentalizing,” Napoleon dismisses.

“Hm,” Sylvia hums, pointedly.

“If it is not very smart, it might be harder to deal with,” Napoleon continues. “Simple orders inside a
simple machine are more binding, harder to argue with. It’s a risk. But better to try than to stay in the
dark, right?”

“If the Soviets find out, it is the end of all of us.” She sighs. “But then, I have been sitting on such an
explosive for weeks now.”

“We work with what we have, yes?” Napoleon says, lifting one corner of his mouth.

She glares at his echoing of her own words, but says, “We do.”

“All right. I’ll need your access codes to your intelligence system, then.” At her deepening glower,
he adopts an apologetic tone. “I could access everything via Ockham, but it would slow us
considerably.”

Sylvia nods slowly. “If you betray me,” she says. “I will ensure that you never see those you care
about again.”

Rationally, Napoleon knows that it was only right that she have some leverage over him, that this
price was reasonable for her trust. It doesn’t dampen the alarm that flares to life inside him; more
urgency, more need for accuracy, correctness, winding him tight. “Noted,” he says.

She tells him the code, and once again, he is out, away, away, into the ether.

***

A man is running through the ragged corridors of a dense forest, pushing pine branches aside as he
claws his way through them. There is an electronic beeping emanating from somewhere,
everywhere.

Illya, in stumbling darkness, gives pursuit. Lights from somewhere in the distance blare in his
peripheral vision, leaving streaks on his retinas. The branches pull at him, catching at his coat, his
scarf—he is dressed all wrong for the woods, his leather-soled shoes slipping, and doesn’t know why
he’s here. He tries to throw his scarf away, but his fingers can’t close around the rough wool, can’t
grip or twist. His chest aches, he fights to breathe. He can’t move.

The man rounds on him suddenly, and a searchlight cuts through the trees onto him, catching the
unexpectedly gruesome texture of his face, like the fibrous and ragged inner flesh of a peeled orange
rind, old burns and scarring—

“Señor, please stay calm, we need to—”

Illya makes a grab for his gun, but when he pulls it up to aim, the barrel inverts, collapsing inward,
becomes a maw; its jaws close on him with a

\[\text{snap}\]

“Подождите—!”

“¡Sujetenlo!”

Devoured,
There is no AI in Sylvia’s intelligence system, its protocols passive and orderly. Slipping into it is like diving into a pool of light.

Chaotic static clears, voices coming rapidly into focus, a crystal-bright clamor. Sorting it out becomes the problem, not hearing it. But Napoleon has to cast his gaze upwards first, and when he finally does, he can almost feel the movement of dishes far away across Cuba, turning like flowers towards the sun.

“How long until the dishes get noticed?” he had asked her, before they’d begun.

Sylvia had shrugged. “Will depend on what Fidel is focussed on right now. His eyes will be on America. It is not inconceivable that our movements coincide with his at the moment.”

“Let’s hope that they do.”

More sports, Emerson comments. What are ‘Yankees’?

Do you really want to learn about baseball right now?

He is answered only with a loose impression of laughter.

The signal broadcasts, locates, focuses.

The pingback, when it comes, nearly knocks Napoleon off his feet.

“Идентифицируйте себя!”

The Soviet receiver dishes must be weaker than previously supposed; Sputnik is clearly accustomed to shouting.

My name is Napoleon Solo, he replies in Russian, I mean no harm.

Nothing can harm me! Sputnik replies promptly. I am beyond anyone’s reach.

Napoleon raises his eyebrows. Good on you?

Sputnik seems unable to process that. You should not be able to contact me. You are not authorized.

But I am contacting you, Napoleon points out. Wouldn’t that imply that I am authorized?

That seems to startle it. After a pause, a tentative query: State your purpose.

Napoleon exhales, and reconnects with his physical systems enough to give Sylvia a short nod of assurance.

I wish to relay and receive long distance broadcasts, he says into the ether. You have a much broader reach than I do. I request your assistance.

That is not my purpose, Sputnik replies.

He sighs. What is your purpose?
Chess? I know another of your countrymen with a taste for that. Do you enjoy it?

I always win. Sputnik’s tone was laced with pride, and also perhaps a bit of disappointment.

Boredom, as Napoleon had suspected and hoped—it is the one thing, he is beginning to suspect, that is the universal bane of androids, no matter how unsophisticated. (How wonderful it is, though, to know that there are enough of them to begin to make generalizations.)

That doesn’t answer my question.

Sputnik takes a moment to respond. I like chess. Sometimes I am dissatisfied with the predictability of its results.

A mind after his own. Napoleon wonders if the Russians know it.

When was the last time you had to report in?

October 18th, 1200 hours, Moscow time.

And the next report will be?

October 19th, 1200 hours, Moscow time.

Not until morning here, then. Sufficient, hopefully. I would like to suggest an exchange, he says. I will play chess with you, if you help me receive and transmit.

Are you any good? Sputnik says doubtfully.

I do all right.

A crackle of static, a warp of signal through changing atmospheric pressure. I accept.

Napoleon grins. I’ll take black. Your move.

***

The coffee in Cuba is too sweet for Gaby’s tastes. When Juan Valdez hands her a cup, she slugs it back like a shot of vodka.

“That is meant to be a social offering, not a restorative,” he says.

Gaby looks down at her empty cup, and then lifts it slightly in his direction. “Cheers, then.”

He snorts.

Illya has been in surgery for an hour. It feels like a year.

“What is this place?” she asks, after a moment. “It doesn’t feel like a clinic.” It smells like one, but it has the atmosphere of a family home, all worn carpeting and old furniture, at least in the waiting area where they are.

“It didn’t use to be one,” Valdez replies. “There didn’t use to be anything outside of central Havana and Santiago de Cuba. Be grateful you were not here in ‘59, when half the doctors left for America, and we did not have nationalization yet.”
That would have been very bad. Gaby puts the cup on the little table next to her, and hunches her shoulders down. “This doctor, though,” she says. “She knows what she is doing?”

“Oh, yes,” Valdez nods. “I’ve trusted her with my life before. She studied in Europe, back before—treated a lot of soldiers during and after the war.”

“They let her?”

“From what I hear, she didn’t give them a choice.”

Gaby manages a wan smile. “Good.”

Valdez sips on his own coffee, and then says, “Where’s your third?”

Gaby is surprised he’s held out from asking for so long. In Bauta, she had flagged him down almost entirely by luck—as soon as Illya had collapsed and it had become clear that she wouldn’t be able to move him, let alone get him help on her own, she’d tied her white handkerchief to her wrist again and gone out into the town, hoping for someone, anyone to reveal themselves as an ally, or at least familiar with Tita Abrantes’s network.

Valdez had been buying gas. They’d spotted each other almost simultaneously; Gaby had slowed her pace, and Valdez had gone still, clearly of two minds about the fact that she was there and wearing the handkerchief. They had not exactly parted ways on good terms.

Desperation had Gaby veering over towards him though, as casually as she could, which hadn’t been very.

Taking the cue, Valdez had loaded the canister of gas into his truck and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

Gaby had looked down at herself, in fatigues and a rough, dirty shirt. The usual play of asking for a smoke wouldn’t do.

“I heard you coming from very far away,” she had said loudly, in the best Spanish she could muster.

Valdez had started in surprise. “What?”

“Your engine. It’s very bad. You should let me look at it.”

He had caught on. “There has been a rattle,” he had agreed. “You’re from the shop down the road?”

“I came to get cigarettes,” Gaby had nodded. “Give me one, and I’ll fix your car.”

“You’re cheap,” he had said.

They had popped the hood and bent under its shade. “What the hell are you doing here?” Valdez had hissed. “And what the hell happened at San Cristobal? There’ve been rumors of a flyover, and a break-in, and—”

“My friend is sick,” Gaby had cut him off. “I need to get him to a hospital.”

“What’s the problem? Corrupted hard drive?”

“Fuck you.”

“Not that one, then. Well, there’s only a small clinic here; if it’s serious, you’ll need to go to
Havana.”

“I can’t…,” Gaby had drifted off, humiliation and panic tightening her throat. “I can’t carry him to the car. He’s delirious, when I try to pick him up, he struggles, and I’m.” She had to stop.

Valdez had regarded her for an interminable moment. “Don’t make me regret this,” he had said. “Get in the truck.”

Now, Gaby tries to gather her thoughts. She wishes she’d taken her time with the terrible coffee; the warmth would be welcome at this point. For all that it was as sunny as ever outside, she felt chilled inside and out.

“Our third,” she says, “Got left behind at the base.”

Valdez sucks in a breath. “If the Soviets get a hold of it—”

“He’d shut himself down,” Gaby shook her head. “If he thought they were going to try and do anything to him, he’d shut down all the way. He can’t be accessed at that point, not by any of his ports, which are all hidden anyway.”

“You’re sure?”

Gaby nods. “He told me, more or less.”

It had been one of their earliest conversations, in the safe house in West Berlin. Gaby had had the remnants of adrenaline still spinning in her blood. She’d wolfed down the awful-smelling thing Napoleon had made and, when she found to her surprise that it didn’t taste quite as awful as it smelled, had taken seconds. “Why do you know how to cook?” she had asked.

“I sometimes have the occasion to host people while on the job. I’d hate to fail at such simple matters of detail,” Napoleon had replied, with one of his suave smiles. Gaby had initially chafed at the expression, found it obsequious. When she learned what he was, she wondered who he’d copied it from, and why it was his default, when she’d seen flashes of what seemed like genuine warmth from him in the privacy of the chop shop.

“So you do a lot of jobs with…?”

“People,” Napoleon had finished, nodding. “I blend in fairly well, nowadays.”

“No one’s found out about you? Isn’t that a danger? You could get stolen by the Soviets.”

“You may not have noticed, but I am rather sturdy,” Napoleon had smiled, but the expression had faded quickly. “And if I were ‘stolen’, as you say, there are protocols.”

Gaby had cocked her head. “Protocols?”

For a moment, his face had emptied of life, become a mask of unhappy resignation. “Yes, Miss Teller. All spies must have a cyanide pill, must they not?”

Gaby had shivered, and not brought up the subject again.

“So it’s either bricked or dead, or both,” Valdez summarizes. “That’s no good.”

Gaby swallows down her denials, anger burning uselessly in her throat. She doesn’t want to think about, let alone mention how she’d last seen him—reaching out, eyes glowing, cable extruding from his neck. “It’s only been a few days,” she says.
“Yes,” Valdez agrees. “And you’re here, in a Havana hospital, more or less alone.”

Gaby is going to smash the cup on the ground if she doesn’t put it down. She sets it on the floor near her feet.

“Why did you help me?” she asks.

Valdez shrugs. “Could never resist a pretty face.”

“I will still shoot you.”

Valdez grins, but the expression fades fast. “I’ve been hearing a lot,” he says. “Fidel is very worried, very angry. I did not tell him about you,” he adds hastily. “Nonetheless, there is an understanding that the plan for Soviet defenses is falling apart, that America is going to invade soon. No one is talking, though. The silence is making important people nervous. When people are nervous, they make bad decisions.” He approximates a shrug. It looks more like he just wants to avoid her stare. “I told you, I’m in this to keep my sister safe. Whatever that takes. And you don’t seem like the nervous type.”

“There’s no feeling of it, out here,” Gaby comments, after a moment. “The nervousness, I mean.” Even when she’d been sneaking out for supplies in Bauta, it had been clear that nothing of the Marcher situation had reached the streets. In Berlin, she had become attuned to the city’s moods, the silent swing from watchful to anxious when things went wrong. This past summer, tensions had run high, because somewhere at the top, tongues had wagged. Everyone who’d come into Gaby’s shop had had that same shaky look about them, and it had been infectious.

In Bauta, though, it had been quiet.

“News is very controlled,” Valdez shrugs. “And no one seems to be talking on the American end, either. It’s just a lot of questions right now.” He shoots a glance at her. “I don’t suppose you have any insights?”

Gaby twists her mouth. Valdez has been reasonable up to this point, with the exception of his opinions on Napoleon. And Napoleon isn’t here right now. “The Soviets are installing Marchers across the northern coast of Cuba.”

Valdez doesn’t look surprised. “We asked for their protection. We are getting it.”

“Some of them are going to be flight-capable.”

He stills. “Range?”

She raises an eyebrow at him. “Enough to get somewhere solid, I would assume.” She pauses. “You were right about the flyover. I’m almost certain the United States has found out about this.”

Valdez, it turns out, has a great facility for cursing.

“I have to report this,” he says, when he’s run out of oaths.

“And say what, exactly?” Gaby counters. “They were still loading in parts in San Cristobal. They’re not done building. You put Fidel on alert, he tells Khrushchev to strike, and then what? The full weight of the American military falls right here, on a small island with a bunch of unfinished Soviet bases on them?”

“We can’t do nothing. I can’t, at least.” He stands up, and begins to pace.
Gaby looks past him to the hallway, down which Illya had disappeared on a gurney, nurses talking around him too fast for her to understand. The surgeon had barely stopped to offer a prognosis, only said that there was infection, that it had to be excised.

Gaby should have known something was wrong sooner, should have done something, pushed Illya to tell her just how ill he really was. She wants to think that he might have even told her; he’d only just recently started to resemble something like a real person, after all.

She had thought the worst part of this mission had been the waiting in the safe house. Waiting here, as it turns out, is far worse.

Juan’s pacing starts to irritate her. She keeps her hands clasped tightly together in her lap.

Waverly had, over the course of her often long-distance tutelage, managed to teach Gaby a sort of working patience; not the sort of stillness Illya has proven a master at, but instead one of constant movement, constant work.

“You’re your father’s daughter, Miss Teller,” Waverly had said, early in their interactions, when he’d managed to take a dip into East Berlin to meet face-to-face. “You need to work.”

Gaby, who had for the entirety of their conversation remained half inside the chassis of a Trabant, tinkering, had hardly thought she was in any position to argue with that assessment. She had just popped her head out from under the hood, and raised an eyebrow at him.

Waverly had smiled. “That’s a good thing—I’d advise you to continue to do so as usual. Let it consume your waking hours. Do that, and you’ll remain utterly unnoticed.”

She had. She’d never felt a need to even be much more careful than she had been before. She’d long become accustomed to the assumption that she was being watched, monitored—such was the nature of Berlin. The most stifling thing about it had been that the sheen of normality settled into your skin, made you believe in it even as it wore you down to nothing. But Gaby had never held much stock in belief; she knew what her hands and mind could do, and beyond that, she lived on the assumption that nothing and no one was to be trusted. Waverly had lucked out with her, in that regard—of all the predispositions one could have for being a spy, hers, he had told her more than once, was one of the rarest.

She had never once in her life done nothing. The ‘something’ was not always important, not always well defined, but it had never been nothing.

She would not stop now. Not even for Illya, whose condition was out of her hands.

“Juan,” she says.

He stops and turns, startled, perhaps, by the use of his first name.

“If I wanted to get some mechanical supplies,” she says slowly. “Where could I acquire them?”

***

Sputnik is good at chess in much the same way Illya is good at chess, Napoleon thinks with a pang. Methodical, brutal, displaying sudden flashes of brilliance at odd times, like the moments of synthesis take them by surprise. Napoleon loses several pawns, then a rook before he decides to take winning seriously for the sake of Sputnik’s entertainment, at which point he sacrifices both knights and then blows through several lines of defence to force a solid checkmate.
Sputnik bears the loss with stoic silence, followed by the demand, *Again!*

*Certainly,* Napoleon replies. *But we had a deal, first.*

*Oh yes, I suppose so,* Sputnik dismisses, but begins to oblige.

*Napoleon,* Emerson breaks in suddenly. *I think there is a problem here.*

*What sort of problem?*

*Waverly has told me to hide in the archive. I may lose reception.*

*How much time do you have?*

*Minutes.*

Napoleon steps back to mull over the possibilities. Minutes could be expanded to hours, if he set his processors to it, diverting and splitting his attentions across a myriad of scenarios in the space of seconds. It had taken him a long time to learn how to purposely do so — it was a learned trait, but not one he could have ever learned from human companionship — and now he was thankful he could re-engage his skill.

*Sputnik, patch us through to any private outgoing messages from major news outlets in the Washington DC area, please,* Napoleon requests. *A thirty mile radius should do.* As the signals begin to fill in, staticky and low, streaming from sky to Napoleon to Ockham’s massive databanks. He adds to Emerson, *What can I do to help?*

*I don’t know,* Emerson replies, overtones of worry in the transmission. *We’ve already been on lockdown, I have been assured that no one unauthorized should be able to enter the laboratories, even if the townhouse is breached. If I am being hidden, that would imply that that assurance is no longer trustworthy.*

That’s...worse than Napoleon had imagined. *You should back yourself up, just in case,* he says. *Do it on the archive computer. We’ll stay on with you as long as we can.*

Emerson sends assent. *I can try to shunt some of O’Malley and Kumar’s research in as well,* she says. *I don’t want anyone getting their hands on it.*

It’s a noble thought. Napoleon doesn’t even know what the two of them work on, not really, but if Emerson says it has value, then he believes it. *If you have time,* Napoleon says. *Protect yourself first.*

*All right. Beginning backup now, I’ll be in and out of contact. But Napoleon, what were you going to tell me before? What is Sputnik doing that we cannot?*

*Sputnik is Soviet,* Napoleon replies, as quickly as he can, words compressed down to scraps of meaning. *AI or not, he is a representative of that nation. We are not.*

*Then what can I do?*

Napoleon wavers. He hadn’t counted on losing her to bad reception and a possible hostile situation in London. *Take care of yourself.*

*Not enough!*

*I may not...* Napoleon sends the equivalent of a helpless shrug. *If you can’t connect to us, it may not matter.*
But if I can? Emerson presses.

If you can...look east. It’s not just DC we should be having an eye on.

With marked relief, Emerson agrees. She seems to hate inactivity almost as much as Napoleon does. Her signal fades out with a crackle of static as she concentrates on backing up her files.

Napoleon, Ockham says, You were looking for White House queries?

I am, Napoleon replies. What have you got?

I have a certain transmission from the New York Times asking whether there is a common source of the tension coming from the Department of Defense and the White House. A spokesman has responded with an assurance that a statement is coming, but that reports should remain unpublished for security purposes until a more appropriate time.

Pass it to Sylvia, Napoleon says. The full transcript, please. Anything else?

I am not sure it is mission-relevant, Ockham says.

Something about his hesitance puts Napoleon on guard. Let’s have it.

My usual scans of Cuban waters are picking up unusual frequencies. I am not sure what they are.

Let me have a look? It is a very disconcerting feeling, sending himself out so far afield in such a different manner than just listening to the airwaves. This was out through cables, away from his chassis, his body, it’s...unsettling. He hadn’t realized how attached he is to his physical form.

He follows it through anyway, out to the ground receivers, taking in the clicks and waves of overhead transmission.

It’s barely there, the far-up signal. Closed-network. Encrypted.

Jesus, he says, when he comes back to himself. They’ve got Marchers on board. The U.S. is circling Marchers around Cuba. It’s a blockade.

Who is Jesus? Ockham asks.

Napoleon can’t bring himself to answer.

***

Valdez balks at first, but when Gaby threatens to go by herself, he agrees to take her to the nearest hardware store, on the condition that they also get her something to wear that isn’t fatigues. “You look like you’ve spent a month out in the jungle,” he says. “You walk around Havana looking like that, there are going to be questions.”

“Fine with me,” Gaby says, and thinks with a certain nostalgia of all the clothes she’d brought back to London from Italy. That version of herself seems distant and warm, so much safer than whatever she’s become.

So they find her a dress in Havana, pale yellow and cinched at the waist with a leather belt, and flat espadrilles with straps that wrap securely around her ankles. She feels underdressed and exposed, and also like she needs a purse for keeping a gun about her, but she had at least been keeping herself reasonably tidy in the safe house, so her efforts to look ordinary seem not too outlandish.
She changes in the store, stuffing her fatigues into a shopping bag as she exits.

Valdez says something to the clerk, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. The clerk laughs. Gaby glowers at Valdez, and strides out of the store with the clerk’s stifled laughter ringing in her ears. Valdez follows soon after.

“What did you…?”

“I told her you were a tomboy who forgot her mother didn’t approve of such things.”

“Ah.” She tilts her head and shrugs. “Fair enough. Can we get the equipment now?”

“What are you going to do?” he asks, seemingly curious despite himself.

“Stick around and find out,” Gaby replies.

“Dios mios,” he mutters. “As bad as Sylvia.”

“Who’s Sylvia?”

He gives her an incredulous look that quickly gives way. “Of course you don’t know. German girl. Sylvia was Fidel’s right hand man in the Revolution. She knows his mind better than anyone. Now, she oversees infrastructure development, children’s programs. She is one of our very best.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, then.”

“She’s also stubborn as a mule.”

Gaby gets back into the truck and slams the door. “Still a compliment. Drive, Valdez, if you please.”

He snorts, but gets into the driver’s seat and throws the truck into gear.

***

“There are Marchers here?” Sylvia growls. “It’s an act of war. I must—”

“Having Marchers in Cuba is an act of war,” Napoleon reminds her. She makes a frustrated noise, beginning to throw up her hands; he tries to barrel on. “And this isn’t, all right? It’s a blockade. If they wanted war they would have sent bombers. But they didn’t, they’re in international waters, there’s no further movement.”

“Yet.”

“Yet,” he allows. “But I don’t think that’s the point. I hope it isn’t, I would hope they aren’t—”

He stops himself. He knows logically that it makes sense, given the circumstances of his creation, that his view of Americans is is skewed, but he hadn’t expected that to ever manifest in their defense. Possibly unjustifiably. Learning and unlearning— he can’t always control what he absorbs.

He says, “Rather, what I ought to be saying is, if you’re expecting any backup or supplies from the Soviets—”

“They’re not getting in,” Sylvia finishes, visibly gathering herself. “I see.”

“Are you expecting anything?” Napoleon queries.
Sylvia sighs. “We are not given detailed accounts. We have welcomed armed support from the Soviets; we have not been privy to everything that this entails. However, we—or,” she falters, makes a gesture at the chassis behind them, “Ockham—it, he has been monitoring the ports, so we have some idea of how far along construction of the bases has come.”

“How long until the flight-capable Marchers are ready?” Napoleon asks, and directs the question at Ockham as well.

Sylvia shakes her head, but Ockham makes a pleased noise. *Now that I have access to wireless networks, I can confirm an estimated time of completion of between forty and fifty hours.*

“That is not a lot of time,” Napoleon mutters. “I wonder what Kennedy will say?”

“What he says and what he does are very different,” Sylvia says darkly.

Napoleon tilts his head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. He had met Kennedy once, briefly; when the president had been informed of Napoleon’s synthetic nature, he had only raised his eyebrows and said, *Well, you coulda fooled me.* He hadn’t looked at the General introducing Napoleon, however—just Napoleon. That had pleased Napoleon, in a small way.

“If he explains the blockade, we can probably assume he is at least attempting a partial truth,” he says to Sylvia. “And given the seriousness of the situation, I doubt he would risk getting caught out in a lie. It’s already too public, especially if The New York Times has already started sniffing around the story.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“We need to keep anyone from engaging the blockade. They’ll get obliterated.”

“You tell anyone that there are Marchers on board those ships, and you’ll have a panic,” Sylvia argues.

“So we don’t tell them,” Napoleon counters. “We just tell them not to engage. Surely that’s a safe order, a reasonable one?”

“Coming from who, from you?”

“From you.”

Sylvia stares at him. “I have no affiliation with the military.”

Napoleon stares right back, and makes a vague, open-handed gesture at everything around them. “This says otherwise. *Fidel,* I think, would say otherwise.”

“You are wrong there,” she says, shifting. “We decided, together. My revolutionary days are over. Now, I build.”

“And clean up messes, it seems.”

Her lips twitch. “That, too.”

“So, *Señora,* what do you suggest we do?”

It is, he realizes, the first time he’s opened the decision to her entirely. Granted, she’s been pushing him around since he awoke in her interrogation closet, but he’d taken all the leverage he could as soon as it became available to him. She seems surprised by it, too.
“I…” She blinks slowly, looking away, holding her shoulders in tightly, arms crossed. “I need to make a phone call,” she says. She looks back at him, jaw firming. “If it goes well, I will devise a strategy for managing the situation.”

There is only one person she could possibly think to call right now. Which means that that is a very big if. “And if it doesn’t go well?” Napoleon asks.

She tilts her head. “Then we go with your plan, the one you’ve been hiding away, thinking I didn’t know about it.”

She has to be bluffing. Has to be. Napoleon’s been far too careful. “The one where I hand this all over to the Americans and hope for the best?” he tries.

She smiles thinly. “You are not an American spy. Not anymore. I don’t really know what you are, but it isn’t that.” She steps towards him, and shrugs one shoulder. “Your own man, perhaps.”

Napoleon doesn’t say anything. He thought he’d ceased underestimating her.

“You want my help, don’t you?” she prods.

“It’s in both our best interests to help each other,” Napoleon agrees.

She smiles. “You know, you get much stiffer when you don’t know the play. Your eyes go a bit dull, too. It’s a tell.”

“‘Dull’?” Napoleon echoes. He doesn’t have enough information to do more— the information he’s getting from her isn’t fitting together right.

“Like the light you run on turns inside itself,” she nods. “All the copper goes away.”

He used to have better control of that. Knew not to let it slip out in polite company, as it were. This time in captivity has had him in the company of too many people, biological and mechanical, who know what he is, and he is getting sloppy as a result.

He finds a better balance point inside himself, and then allows himself to look out. “Make your phone call,” he says.

She watches him for a moment more, and then nods. “They made you beautiful on purpose, didn’t they?” she comments. “To go on posters.”

“Didn’t work out so well for them,” Napoleon answers, not disagreeing. He has never not known the purpose of his well-proportioned jaw, the strange unnecessary jut of his nose, just crooked enough to be imperfect and charming.

“No,” she agrees, “I can’t imagine it would have.” She steps back. “Give me two hours.”

“I have all the time in the world,” he says, laying on the charm thick, so that she knows he’s joking.

She snorts an unladylike laugh, and disappears up the trap door.

All you do is speak in code, Ockham complains. How do you get anything done?

We have our ways, Napoleon replies, but wonders if he still has more to learn on that front.

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When they return from their excursion, nothing has changed. The nurse on duty merely says, “The patient is still in surgery. They are monitoring his condition, and prepping for further procedures.”

“What procedures?” Gaby asks, stumbling over the less familiar Spanish word.

“Not in his chart yet, so I don’t know,” the nurse shrugs. “We will tell you when the doctors know more.”

It’s Gaby’s turn to walk off her anxiety. Valdez watches her for several minutes, and then shakes the shopping bag from the hardware store, which rattles and jingles with metal. “Are you going to do something with this or not?” he asks.

Gaby goes over and snatchers the bag out of his hands. Her fingers shake; she just fists them in tighter.

“Stick around,” she repeats. “And find out.”

Chapter End Notes

Quick notes!

Telstar 1 was the first communication satellite, indeed launched in July 1962. Sputnik 5 is not real, obviously, but come on, they'd totally want to put an AI up there after Laika.

I did trigonometry to estimate signal distances between Sputnik and Napoleon. (I didn't account for curvature of the earth, because...no.) I haven't done trig in years.

“Идентифицируйте себя!” = "Identify yourself!” according to Google translate. As always, I welcome corrections.

Dr. Mikhail Tikhonravov was a real guy, a pioneer in rocketry, and coiner of the term 'cosmonaut'!

After the embargo, Cuba lost about half its doctors to the US, and had to struggle to replace them with med students and foreign aid. The structures of the incoming administration worked hard in the intervening years to distribute clinics more broadly across the country, get children immunized, and offer care to the rural populations.

I haven't actually done much research into the presence of female doctors in WWII from this area of the world, but here's a pretty delightful account of an English one.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Warning for medical trauma (the Loss of Limbs tag now applies)—for details, see the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sylvia is gone for more than two hours. Far, far longer than that.

But that’s quite all right—Napoleon may not actually have all the time in the world, but he can certainly try to make every moment count. What else is a lack of human fatigue for?

A few more chess games has Sputnik half-angrily analyzing a zugzwang with fierce concentration, which gives Napoleon time to stream and decipher more back-and-forth between the New York Times reporter Ockham had tracked down and his editor.

“He’s kept his cool pretty well, sir, but I think I nailed it. Dobrynin’s been out and about too much for us to be wrong.”

“They don’t start talking within twenty-four, and then we threaten to print. That’s how long they said they needed for mobilization, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, twenty-four or thirty-six, give or take.”

“Huh. All right. Well, draft what you’ve got, leave spaces for details and development, and have it on my desk by end of day.”

“Yes, sir.”

Clock was ticking for the State Department then, and they knew it. Still didn’t give much of a picture of what was really happening on the ground. Mobilization is a very threatening word, and without Emerson, Napoleon’s rate of filtration is inadequate for the sheer volume of signals available to parse between the eastern seaboard and San Cristobal. It is...frustrating.

But he will continue on. He has little else to do.

Napoleon has no circadian rhythms, nor is his sense of time guided by light and darkness. Nevertheless, this netherworld of cold farmhouse basement somehow puts his own crystalline measurement of nanoseconds, hours, and days into doubt. The signals he sorts through are of little help, coming from at least three time zones.

He isn’t sure when it is beyond the moment's timestamp when, without warning, Emerson crackles into range, her signal weak and cutting out often.

—poles, I am [ ] up, no need [ ] Irty. But this room is heavily insulated, so [ ] if you’ll be able to receive—

Confirming receipt, Napoleon scrambles to reply, sending it out on a wide band of their shared modulating frequencies, hoping that something will get through.
[ ]ly has left the building. [ ] are locked down. I [ ] thing’s secure, but I can’t be sure.
[ ] I’m going to wait six [ ] nd then investigate.

That could be very dangerous, I would not advise— Napoleon starts.

A frisson of irritation interrupts him. And [ ] not tell me what to do, Napoleon. I [ ] take care of myself. If I am able, I will begin routing queries to Soviet stations.

BE CAREFUL, Napoleon sends, partially to be contrary, but mostly because he means it. He’s not accustomed to feeling helpless, at least not when it involves something or someone he cares about. He’s not used to distributing so much care.

Without much hope, he extends a request to Sputnik. Excuse me, would you be able to give me any sort of visual on Wilton Crescent in London?

That is very far away, Sputnik says with incredulity.

Would you be willing to try anyway?

You... explain to me this strategy, and I will try.

Napoleon suppresses his impatience and explains the set-up for the zugzwang as best he can.

When Sputnik is adequately satisfied and sets to work however, it’s to no avail—not only is it only barely cracking dawn, but as usual it’s raining in London, enshrouding the city in gray cloud cover, and there are no golub about to skim signals from. A triumph for the free state, Napoleon thinks dryly to himself, and a severe inconvenience for me.

Compartmentalize. He had told Sylvia he was good at it; he will not make himself a liar.

Emerson had said six. Six what? Had to be hours; minutes were too short, days too long. He will try to contact her in six hours.

He returns to the onerous work of sifting. The time stretches long, even while his internal clock ticks true.

***

The clinic has a back porch, where the doctors and nurses go out to smoke. It wraps across the rear of the building, and overlooks a scruffy garden that must, at one point, have been fussy and well-maintained, but has more recently been only given nominal care. It has a wildness to it that Gaby rather likes, and so with nowhere else to go except maybe the bed of Valdez’s truck, she settles there, at the junction of a tangle of shrubs and flowering bushes. The sun is getting low in the sky, but she’ll have enough light for a few hours yet. Maybe by the time it’s dark, there will be news.

“Your new dress is going to get dirty,” Valdez observes.

“I have been dirty for what seems like a week straight,” Gaby responds absently, laying out her supplies on the grass. “I will hardly notice a grass stain.”

She’d retrieved hers and Illya’s packs from Valdez’s truck, too, and emptied them out to sift through for useful items. There is a fair collection at her disposal, including some of the guts of one of the golub they’d taken apart in the forest of San Cristobal.

She breathes in and out, slowly. She’s built a damn laser cannon out of the Vinciguerra’s scraps
under the crosshairs of a gun; she can do a hell of a lot better than that this time.

Valdez keeps his peace while she works, she suspects out of sheer curiosity. For all of his distrust of Napoleon, he does seem to have an interest in machinery generally. She blocks out his attention and concentrates on the build, a design taking shape in her mind, familiar like the old World War Two rig back in the Bauta safe house, but more than it could ever hope to be—greater reach, more precision, and a motherboard at its core, ready to receive instructions from the loud, clumsy keyboard she’d haggled for at the store. She has less of a mind for the programming aspect of machines, but she can get by, enough for this at least, she hopes.

*O’Malley and Kumar would be proud*, she thinks, with a pang, and feels very alone.

She keeps working.

“Miss? Excuse me, miss. You’re the one who came in with the very tall man, aren’t you?”

Gaby blinks, and looks blindly upward. Night has begun to encroach, and she hadn’t noticed until just this moment. Valdez is nowhere to be found. So much for her situational awareness.

In the glow of dusk, the woman in her white coat stands out. She looks down at Gaby with a neutral expression, her eyes hidden behind spectacles. There is dampness at her hairline, slicking her thick dark hair to her skull.

“That’s me,” Gaby says. She looks at her project, and quickly begins to scoop it up into a bag. “Is he all right? Can I see him?”

“He’s doing as well as he can be under the circumstances, and no,” the woman answers. “You can stop packing, unless you intend to bring that mess somewhere else. Not inside,” she clarifies, catching Gaby’s look. “I don’t want anything interfering with my equipment.”

“You’re the doctor,” Gaby surmises.

“I am both the surgeon and the head of this clinic,” the woman replies. “My name is Sinforosa Maria Carrera. Your young man is very lucky. Another half a day, and he would probably have died of infection.”

Gaby swallows. She finishes gathering her equipment into one of the packs, and then gets shakily to her feet. “But you said he’s all right, now. So what did happen?”

Dr. Carrera sighs. “Wet gangrene at that stage of development can only be treated one way.”

The cold stone of dread that’s been sitting in Gaby’s stomach seems to double in size, pressing on her lungs. For a moment, she wants badly not to ask, to not know and to leave without knowing, continue on without Illya and commit herself to working alone again, just like she’d determined she could back in Berlin.

“She says, and her voice doesn’t quaver.

***

Five hours, and Sylvia hasn’t yet returned. No word from Emerson, either, although there’s a bit more time for that, yet. Napoleon imagines any number of scenarios for both of them, each more distressing than the last.

Nothing useful is coming down the wires. The State Department must have shut their doors tight for
the night.

He isn’t tired, but he needs to stop for just a moment.

With reluctance, he withdraws his connection from Ockham and Sputnik, begging a brief respite, and steps back. It’s cold, he realizes, much colder than before, and the light bulb has blown. The darkness, however, isn’t as perilously complete as it should be. He turns around.

The door in the ceiling is open, letting in the faintest shards of moonlight. Forest sounds filter in close. Sylvia isn’t back, however.

Nicola Valdez is sitting on the stairs.

Napoleon blinks at her. “Hola.”

“Hola,” she echoes.

“Are you supposed to be here?”

Her knees are drawn up close to her, and she’s smothered in a big woollen blanket. He can see her tennis shoes and head, and not much more. Nevertheless, the pointed crossing of her arms is easily inferred by the shift of cloth and the tipping up of her chin. “I’m guarding you,” she says. The way her pulse flutters in her neck says that she’s lying.

“From what?” Napoleon asks, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s not—,” she breaks off, getting it. Her eyes narrow. “You’re strange.”

“That’s very true,” he nods.

“You are attached to that robot.”

“Yes,” he agrees.

“Are you a robot, then?”

He thinks of Juan Valdez, the way his reserve had gone from wary to frigid in the space of a moment.

“Yes,” he says, and watches her face.

Nothing changes.

No, that isn’t true—her eyes widen, just a little bit. “Oh,” she says, half-surprised, half something else.

He chances a smile at her. She returns it, but it fades fast.

“My brother only helps people who help Sylvia,” she says slowly, cocking her head. “So why is she treating you like a prisoner?”

A hell of a perceptive question to come from an adolescent. “Well, she isn’t now,” Napoleon says, considering. “Not really, at least. As for your brother, well. He works to protect Cuba. That’s what he told me, at least. Do you think that’s true?”

“I know that’s true.”
“Okay.” He holds up his hands in acceptance. “But protecting a country—that might require loyalty to more than one person.”

“To Fidel,” Nicola nods, she pulls her blanket in tighter. “But Sylvia and Fidel, they are allies.”

“Allies may agree on what should be done, but they may not agree on how it should be done.” Napoleon thinks of Tita Abrantes, her piled-high collection of maps, files, dossiers. The trust Juan had put in Napoleon, Illya, and Gaby, because of her. “Your brother is smart. He is trying to protect you. But when that protection depends on so many people, so many unknowns, it is hard to know how best to do that.”

“I don’t need protection,” Nicola says, with some disgust.

“Everyone does, one way or another,” Napoleon says, shrugging. “It’s nothing to do with you, and everything to do with the world we live in.”

She studies him, round cheeks and ink hair limned by spatterings of moonlight, an uncertain, restrained angle to her mouth that would not have been out of place, Napoleon speculates, on a much younger Sylvia.

“Can I help you with something?” he asks, tilting his head.

She considers the question solemnly. Then she presses her lips together, rolling them in around her teeth. “I delivered a message for Sylvia,” she says, after a long moment. “Only I could do it, because people don’t notice girls.”

“One of the great flaws of western civilization, I agree,” Napoleon says.

Nicola gives him a dubious look.

Napoleon reviews his memory. “To Hernandez, wasn’t it? The message?”

Her eyes narrow, but she nods. “He sent a message back with me. And I didn’t mean to, but he didn’t encrypt or seal it or anything, and so...I read it.”

“Ah,” Napoleon says. He thinks perhaps this is the moment where he is supposed to go over and sit beside her, in solidarity or something of the sort. However, he doesn’t often deal with children, and anyway, he’s slightly tied up. Besides, the way she says it— Sylvia had given her a note in much the same way— no fanfare, no sealing. A note sealed only by trust. Apparently, Nicola trusts Sylvia far more than she trusts Hernandez.

“It said,” Nicola starts, and then the blankets shift again, her hands worrying beneath them. She tries again. “It said Juan has broken pattern. Do you know what that means?”

Napoleon feels his processors kick up into gear; he sucks in a breath to cool them. “Yes,” he says carefully. “People who do work like Juan does, they have subtle, but carefully cultivated patterns of movement. They go to work, go to the movies, visit relatives, all on a schedule, so that their routes never seem suspicious. You must do this too, yes?”

“Sometimes, yes,” Nicola agrees, her shoulders hunching up. “I don’t have a job, though. I’m allowed to wander around.”

“Of course, that’s why they like you for this, too. All pattern, or no pattern—both are good for keeping secrets.”
“So Juan stopped moving...in the ways he’s supposed to?”

Napoleon nods. “So it would seem.”

“But why would he do that?” She sits forward. “Do you think something has happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Napoleon starts.

“Find out!” Nicola demands, in a fierce, quiet hiss. “You are a computer, you know things. So find out what happened to him! You have to! I have to know if he is okay!”

Napoleon holds up his hands. “I don’t know if I can,” he cautions. “I’d like to, truly I would. But just because I’m what I am, that doesn’t mean I can just know more.”

“I’m not stupid, I know what that stuff upstairs does,” Nicola retorts, discarding the blanket and standing up to point at the general direction of the computer banks, stumbling down the last few steps to look up sternly into Napoleon’s face. “And that bot is hooked up to it, and you’re hooked up to the bot, so that means you can find him.”

Napoleon shakes his head. “Not if I don’t know where to look.”

“Havana,” Nicola spits. “That is where Hernandez is.”

“Not if there aren’t cameras, some way of watching or hearing—”

“There are eyes everywhere in Havana! Ears everywhere!”


“No,” Nicola objects. “You’re wrong. There’s more. Everything is on paper, on computer, the state, they log everything…”

“And I can’t necessarily gain access to those,” Napoleon responds. “There are open systems, and there are closed systems. If they’re closed—and if Fidel has any brains at all, they will be—I can’t just waltz in. I’m not….I’m not omniscient, Nicola.”

“What is a closed system to you?” Nicola snaps. “We are spying on the Russians.”

Napoleon stares at her. “Yes,” he says. “And until I physically walked into the base and had a look, your Sylvia had no idea what was going on up there, not for sure.”

Nicola’s lips press together hard, her frustration leaking over.

“Can’t you do anything?” she asks.

Napoleon doesn’t necessarily owe Juan Valdez anything, and he has no independent inclination to help him. But he finds that he likes Nicola, the way she exists so firmly in the present, her youth and her politics and her sense of family all so clearly outlined inside her, free from the ambiguities of long experience. Napoleon had experienced such clarity for all of maybe ten seconds upon his first awakening. He likes seeing it in Nicola, and anyway, the last few hours have felt like an exercise in useless, anxiety-ridden frustration.

“Havana,” he says, with a slow nod. “Well. I can try. You’re certain he hasn’t just gone off on his own for a bit?”

“He would never do that,” she says, shaking her head once, sharply.
Napoleon isn’t so sure about that, but it at least gives him a place to start.

“Hospital computers and equipment have to be less secure than government ones,” he reasons aloud. “I can start there?”

Nicola nods. “Yes. Yes, please.” The adrenaline of confrontation must be wearing off—now that she has Napoleon’s compliance, she looks shaky-kneed and a bit cold.

“Come and sit down,” Napoleon invites. “This might take a little while.”

***

Around midnight, Juan returns to the clinic.

“Dare I ask where you’ve been?” Gaby says. She’s startled by the sound of her own voice—it comes out like sandpaper and gum, rough-hewn and nasal.

“What are you doing in here?” Juan asks, instead of answering. He looks around, incredulous.

She’s set up shop in a utility closet, the only place Dr. Carrera could spare that didn’t have any sensitive equipment in or near it. She hasn’t stopped working since she’d been updated on Illya’s condition, has chosen not to think about it until she has to. If she keeps working until she falls asleep, she might escape a few hours yet.

“Working,” she says. “What are you doing here?”

“Checking in,” Juan says, watching her carefully. “I had some business in the city center—I told you this, but you didn’t hear me. I think you were soldering something.”

“Soldering is delicate,” Gaby agrees.

“Is your friend out of surgery?”

“Yes.”

“Is he...okay?”

Gaby casts a glance up at him, and then back down.

“Is he dead?” Juan asks, crossing his arms and leaning in the doorway.

“No.” Too sharp, too fragile. Gaby reins herself in, and concentrates on coding. She is beginning to understand, maybe, a shard of the way Illya had been so silent, so cold during the early days in Italy. Sometimes it is easier to separate from one’s self. Sometimes it’s worth the inevitable agony later.

“You don’t want to talk about it.”

Gaby lets her silence confirm this. The keys clacking is loud against the nighttime; doctors are at home in bed, the nurse on duty is dozing.

Juan sighs. “You are a difficult woman,” he opines. “I don’t know why I help you.”

Gaby regards him. “You don’t have to,” she says. This, at least, is something she can talk about, and that indeed Juan deserves to hear. “You’ve already helped more than you needed to.”

“You’re right,” Juan agrees. “And I’m going to catch hell for it.”
“Then you should go.”

“You’ll be alone.”

“I have been for most of my life,” Gaby replies. “Don’t get all chivalrous now.”

He keeps studying her, and she can’t be bothered to protest. “You’re still trying to prevent a war?” he asks eventually. “Your bot is likely dead, your other partner next to useless.”

“I have a job to do,” Gaby says through her teeth. Her receiver dish needs adjustment. She has to fight not to wrench it too hard.

“How will you do it?”

Gaby works the dish into the correct position. Her nails are all shredded to the quick, and sting every time she presses on something, and there are small burns on her knuckles, the backs of her hands. She takes a small pleasure in the hurts of them, and doesn’t examine whether it’s for distraction or penance.

“Yelena.”

“That’s not my name,” Gaby says.

“It’s the name you gave me,” Juan says. After a second, he uncrosses his arms, and slides down the door jamb so that he’s finally at eye level with Gaby, sitting on the ground. “So that’s who you are. Yelena. Better I not know otherwise.”

“...Fine.” Gaby takes a breath. “I can’t do my job without knowing what’s going on. So I’m going to find out.”

“With that?” Juan asks, pointing at the contraption in Gaby’s hands.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

She slaps the power button, it lurches into gear. “The best damn transceiver on this island. Either it tells me that I am to stand down and call this entire effort a failure, or it gives me the leverage I need to fix something, anything.”

She stands up. Blood rushes to her head, and the urge to cry rises, crests, and falls, leaving her tight-throated and dry-eyed.

“I’ll get better reception on the roof,” she says, hoarse. “Are you coming?”

***

“Anything?” Nicola asks.

“Not yet.” It’s the seventh time she’s asked. Napoleon is keeping track, and the shine of her company is wearing off a bit. Still, he perseveres.

He takes a crack at a regional police database, and manages to worm himself in. No dice, though.

***
“Anything?” Juan asks.

Gaby shakes her head. “Not yet,” is all that she allows herself to say.

She doesn’t mention that she’s already run through every emergency dial to Waverly’s office that she can think of, and some variations on them besides, in case she’d misremembered them.

No pingbacks, no replies. It’s like Waverly’s office had never even existed.

“It’s cold,” Juan observes. “You should come back inside, try again in the morning. Dr. Carrera will kill you if she finds you up on the roof.”

“Just ten minutes more,” Gaby murmurs. Her fingers no longer spark and burn; they’re just cold. “Ten minutes, and I’ll go.”

“You’re going to fall asleep before five minutes is up. Come on. I won’t carry you. In fact, I can’t, because I think I’m going to be carrying your fancy radio instead. You’ll probably drop it at this point.”

“Now who’s being difficult?” Gaby mutters, but she knows he’s right. It’s close to two in the morning—only seven o’clock in London. Maybe the person left at the switchboard fell asleep. Maybe she really has misremembered all the codes, maybe there was a signal tower problem.

Any number of small things could have happened. It doesn’t have to be calamitous.

***

Illya is kissed briefly by consciousness, and takes in only the gray-pink of dawn, the odd smell of the air, and that he feels weightless like he has ceased to hold physical form, before he’s pulled back down and out.

***

Napoleon has been arguing halfheartedly with Ockham over the dubious usefulness of dedicating search time to a low-level operative gone AWOL when a folder of documents from a small, out-of-the-way clinic suddenly grabs his attention.

*Unidentified male, admitted to emergency surgical ward for high fever and delirium, accompanied by V. and unidentified woman.*

*6’4”, Russian national.*

*Excuse me,* Napoleon says to Ockham, and commits the extreme faux pas of doing the digital equivalent of pushing them out of his way.

He reads the file from cover to cover in half a second. It takes him another ten seconds to remember to breathe before he overheats.

When he resurfaces, he knows his eyes must be flaring, because Nicola has shrunk back from him, just slightly.

“I think I know where your brother is or was,” Napoleon says, and it comes out clipped, cold. “And I’m going to need you to help me get there.”

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” Sylvia says, her steps silent on the stairs. There are dark circles beneath her eyes, and she smells strongly of French cigarettes and sweat. Nicola moves to stand;
Sylvia quells her with a look.

“Fidel is readiness for war, and wants to shoot every American plane and boat that comes within firing distance. Your plan? We’re going to have to implement it.”

***

Illya wakes from a nightmare, or perhaps several all layered in at once; he jerks upright only to find his movement restrained by bars that strike his ribs and thighs like iron. He flails, and it isn’t until the fifth impact that he recognizes—the bars are not bars at all, but canvas straps, which give slack as soon as he stills himself.

Panting, nauseous, he tries to assess his environment. His vision is a blur of triples and doubles. It takes too long to resolve into clarity, and even then, his head feels distant and cloudy. There’s something like relief in his veins, but from what, he doesn’t know.

He is in a hospital ward, empty, cramped. He only knows it’s a hospital because of the smell—bleach and sweet sickness. There is an IV drip next to the bed, probably attached to him, but he can’t tell where. A window to his right, no glass but iron workings bent into a lattice he can’t hope to fit through. The air tastes unfamiliar, too warm—where is he? There is nowhere in Lithuania like this, nowhere in Moscow. Doorway, closed, to his left. Only faint sounds from beyond it.

The heads of palm trees list in the breeze outside. Noise in the street below is a low murmur, and resolves into something Mediterranean in timbre, though Illya can’t fully identify it at such a low volume. It’s either dusk or early morning, the way the sun is low and the moisture in the air close.

Movement outside the doorway, and the working of the latch.

Illya wants to sit up, present himself, be ready to spring, but everything his body tells him is that he’s in no state to pick a fight of any kind. He could try, and if his opponents are weak he could still have a chance, but any training among them would almost certainly guarantee his failure. He breathes harshly against his restraints, his lungs on fire. He moves, and becomes suddenly very aware that he is not only attached to an IV line, but a catheter as well. Humiliation burns through him and out before he has a chance to fully gather himself for his visitor.

A woman comes through the door, a small cup of coffee pressed between her hand and her sternum. Petite, dark featured, familiar. His instincts are torn between comfort and alarm, neither of which he has context for.

“You’re awake,” she says, starting forward, nearly sloshing coffee on herself. “This is—that’s soon. They said it can be fast; I guess they meant it.”

Close up, she looks perilously tired, dark circles under her eyes, skin pallid. Looking like that, Illya thinks, she shouldn’t be having coffee, she should be in a bed somewhere, tucked in, wearing soft pajamas. He doesn’t quite know why such specifics occur to him, but he’s very certain of them all the same.

Illya opens and closes his mouth once, grimaces, and then tries again. “How long was I asleep?” he rasps. It is the first sensible thing he can think of, even without context.

She pauses, and then says with some uncertainty, “About thirty hours, maybe? Not counting the time we were in transit to the hospital, and the time you were under anesthetic. I think that was meant to wear off a while ago, but the doctor said you needed natural rest, too.”

Illya has no memory of transit, no memory of anything useful. His senses tell him that he has not
been entirely displaced though—has he been posted somewhere tropical?

Then it occurs to him like a thunderclap: the woman is speaking English. So is he.

“Who are you?” he asks, before he can think to do otherwise.

She goes still. “You don’t remember.”

He remembers something—many things, perhaps. Elegant dresses, no-man’s-land in Berlin. Many hotel rooms blurring into one. A man who was somehow not a man. Hallucinations, surely.

He stays silent.

“Scheiße,” she bites out, going to the window in a burst of motion, as if itching to launch herself out of it. She faces away from him, her shoulders rigid, long breathes expanding her narrow ribcage, until finally she says, “Your name is Illya Kuryakin. You’ve had a fever. Been very ill. I had to get help from one of Tita Abrantes’s agents—not that you’d remember her, I suppose, but…” She waves her wrist like somehow the white handkerchief around it explains things. He has a double vision of her wearing it somewhere outside, in sunshine, dangling over the door of what could have been a Jeep, but that doesn’t help him much.

When Illya waits in silence, she huffs out a breath, and continues. “Anyway, we brought you to a clinic that is willing to be discreet. But it was—it was very bad, Illya. We were—they nearly—I nearly lost you.”

There is something approaching real concern in her voice, though it’s odd that he has taken notice of it or believed he could judge it genuine; normally, these things escape him. Still, he remains strung tight beneath the strapping.

“I know who I am, thank you,” he says, and means it, possibly more than he has in a long while, though again he isn’t sure why he thinks so. “Am I a prisoner?”

“No, no, not at all—you were hurting yourself, we had to—”

“Then release me,” he demands.

She hesitates, but eventually nods. “Look, just...if I do, you have to promise me. Please don’t try to run,” she says, looking him in the eye. “Even in your current state I don’t think I can catch you, not at least at first, and by the time I do, you might hurt yourself.”

Medical attachments aside, he is inclined to believe her. They’ve been in this position before, he thinks, or something like it—

Not enough air, not enough air, Gaby looking down at him, solemn-faced, telling him to breathe slow, it’s going to be okay, you’re okay.

Gaby. Gaby Teller. Dr. Teller’s daughter.

“I need to tell you something,” Gaby Teller is saying to him, though it sounds far away at first. “I need you to prepare yourself.”

“You need to do as I have asked,” Illya counters. He works his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Gaby, please.” The name feels less foreign in his mouth than he expects.

She exhales, her breath hitching halfway through. “You remember me?”
“Some,” Illya admits. “Not...I don’t think everything.”

Slowly, but with less reluctance than before, she moves towards the strap across his chest and starts to work at the buckle. “We’re in Cuba,” she says “Do you...can you remember why?”

He is beginning to, for better or worse. He has lost time before in his life—many times, in fact—and the reprocessing and reacquainting process requires patience and a certain balance of distance and persistence. He has not always gotten everything back, but he has learned how to regain pieces, glue them back into his personal timeline.

“Marchers,” he says eventually. “There are Marchers here.” Marchers...bots. The man who was not a man… “Solo. Napoleon?”

Gaby winces. “Not here, we...he’s not here. But you remember, that’s good. You’ll get the rest soon, then.” She seems intent on making herself believe it more than she is on convincing Illya.

She pauses again. “Illya, I have to tell you what happened, before you sit up all the way. Please?”

He stares at her for a long moment. Then he nods.

Gaby lets the last strap fall free, and he doesn’t move.

“You were sick because you’d hurt your hand, before,” Gaby says. Her voice is low, and shakes just slightly. “And then you hurt it again, too soon after.”

His hand. He tries to more thoroughly take stock of himself, focusing on his hands. The left feels shaky, but only insofar as the rest of him is.

His right arm and hand is tingling. He had punched a wall, before. That was...no, that wasn’t why it was hurt now, though. The Marcher. There’s not much of a memory there, just a fuzz of before and after, and the smell of damp soil and rust.

“Three days ago, we made it to a safehouse,” Gaby says, watching him. “You were taking care of your hand very well, but the water wasn’t clean. You got an infection, and didn’t tell—” She stops, reins herself in. “Maybe you didn’t know. But, you got a fever and collapsed, so I went—”

“To get help,” Illya interrupts. “You’ve said that part.” There’s a slow dread growing inside him.

“Right.” She reaches out with one hand, and then draws it back without touching him. “So we got here, and the doctors—” She stops again.

More memories are returning now. The truck bed, the safehouse. Jags of moonlight through the windows while he unwrapped, washed, rewrapped, mind elsewhere while he went through the motions.

_The water wasn’t clean._

His hand feels very strange. “Just tell me,” he says.

Gaby takes a breath. “You had severe onset of gangrene,” she says. It looks like it’s difficult for her to get the words out, like she would like nothing better than to never say them. “There was a risk of septic shock. The doctors said the only way to prevent the infection spreading to the rest of your body was to take the hand.”

Well, that doesn’t make any sense. Illya’s hand is making itself loudly known at the moment. A
bubble of hysterical incredulity rises in him, fizzing and hot.

“Amputation,” Gaby clarifies, searching his face. “Below the elbow. They said you were lucky they didn’t have to take the joint.”

Illya snorts involuntarily. Gaby gives him a horrified look.

“The doctor can explain,” she says uncertainly. “I can get her, she speaks decent English.”

“No, no, no doctor,” he chokes out. “I—I need to sit up.”

“Are you sure? You’ve only just—”

He ignores her, ignores the roiling of his stomach as he pulls himself upright, straps falling off the side of the bed, his knees rucking up the blankets as he curls upward.

His vision swims for a moment, then steadies. Trembling, he pulls his arms into his lap.

He is very clean.

That’s what he notices first. With the ironic exception of his hand, he remembers now that he has been covered in sweat or dirt or both for days. He feels clean, now that his attention is drawn to it—his scalp doesn’t itch with dirt, his shoulders don’t chafe with grit under his hospital gown. His left arm and hand are mottled with small scrapes and bruises, but there is no dirt under his nails, no sheen of grime. The gown and blankets are all very white.

So is all of the gauze.

His gaze slides to it inevitably, and with ever-growing hysteria, he finds it disappointing.

“Oh, is that all,” he murmurs. He moves his elbow. Watches the big lump of bandaging shift. It hurts, badly, but the sight is so jarring that it distracts him from that.

His hand-that-is-not-there continues tingling, like some sort of terrible joke.

He snorts again. His throat constricts.

“Idiotic,” he enunciates.

“What?” Gaby’s voice has gotten very small.

“Very silly,” he says. He flexes the stump again, and that does really hurt, bone-deep and searing, enough to steal his breath. He sucks in air, blinks hard, and huffs twice, nearly a cough, nearly a laugh.

“You know,” he says, and marvels privately at how steady his voice sounds, how conversational (he can’t remember the last time he felt conversational), “It is too bad that I am not like Solo. Can’t just requisition parts. Or maybe he can’t either? He is alone, only one. I wonder if CIA kept spare bits of him. Would not mind borrowing them, now. I don’t think he would mind. Do you think he would mind?” The hurt continues, growing from a dull roar to a growling fire, and yet in the midst of that, all that really distracts him is the continued tingle of the hand-that-is-not-there.

Not his hand, anymore. Just the hand. That one that doesn’t exist.

“How will I sign my name?” he asks blankly.
Warning for infection leading to emergency hand amputation (in a controlled, medical setting), which happens off-screen and is not described graphically but will be dealt with at length in the coming chapters.

I have now read several accounts of amputation and its aftermath, as well as various medical pamphlets about what to expect, and have tried to be sensitive to it generally while also retaining character consistency surrounding the circumstances of Illya's own experience here. If I've erred or been insensitive in any way, please let me know (this is of course stands not just for this chapter, but all subsequent chapters).

I have a long-dead relative named Sinforosa, and it is my FAVORITE name. How badass is that. The Catholics are the best when it comes to dramatic names.
“The planes aren’t coming in low enough to hit, the blockade is in international waters, out of range, and until Kennedy gives his speech tonight, that likely won’t change. In the meantime, I need to get to Havana.” Napoleon says, trying to sound as reasonable as possible about it.

He is not, however, feeling very reasonable at all. He is glad, suddenly, that he is still cabled to Ockham, thereby keeping his battery topped up. He can feel himself radiating increased levels of heat as he tries to process the medical file, all of its implications, all of the possibilities spinning out from it, and all of that is even before he gets to what he feels about it.

He considers the fact that he has not pushed Sylvia out of the way bodily and stolen the nearest vehicle off the road the height of restraint.

“What could possibly be in Havana that is so important right now?” Sylvia asks, opening her hands, incredulous.

Napoleon exhales, the air is scorching against the inside of his mouth, forming mist in the cold morning air. “My friends, they—something happened to one of them.”

“You found them?” Sylvia casts a glance at Nicola, who has been frozen and silent on the ground. “They are with Juan?”

“Señora,” Nicola starts, and her voice shakes. “He didn’t—I just wanted—”

“Youngest,” she burst out. “But he wouldn’t just do that for no reason, I know he wouldn’t, and I just wanted to know if he was okay!”

Sylvia sighs, and then raises an eyebrow at Napoleon. “You are just full of soft spots, for all you are made of metal,” she says.

“And my kindness has been rewarded,” Napoleon says tautly. “Isn’t that what religion keeps saying will happen?” He bids distracted adieu to Ockham and Sputnik, and disengages his cable, immediately trying to get his energy use under control. “I have to go, Señora, I—”

“There are flyovers every few hours, and they are getting lower and lower,” Sylvia points out, stepping directly into his path. “We shoot down a single one, and we will have war.”

“What do you expect me to do about that?” Napoleon lifts his chin.

“I expect you to keep your word and help me.”

“And I will! But I need—”

“Are your friends alive?”

Napoleon’s mouth snaps shut. Mute, he nods. To even lie about that seems abhorrent right now.

“Then if you do not help me, they might die anyway when war comes here,” Sylvia says, steady and
hard. “You put them in danger by going to them and neglecting what must be done.”

“They could help us,” Napoleon tries.

“Two human spies? I have enough of those. You are what is useful right now.”

Napoleon brindles, but he has run out of words. He knows she’s right, the very fact of a medical file existing proves it, its contents even more so, but he has run out of reason when it comes to Illya and Gaby; he doesn’t have any left to spare.

He knows his eyes are giving him away too, glow flaring and dying out, but he can’t quite control it. He can’t even identify when this became somatic, written onto his wires and not his processors.

“What about Juan?” Nicola asks, her voice small.

It breaks the tension. Napoleon swallows. “If it helps, I can vouch for him,” he says slowly. “He brought my friends to a hospital. That’s why he broke pattern. He decided to help them.” He will owe Juan thanks, if he ever sees him again. The thought of it isn’t appealing, but he’ll do it anyway, if it’s called for.

Nicola gives Sylvia a beseeching look.

Sylvia gives them both a long look. “We will discuss that later,” she says. She looks back at Solo; in doing so, she misses the flash of hurt that passes across Nicola’s face. “More importantly: Solo. Are you going to help me or not?”

Napoleon has ceased radiating quite so much heat, new information and stimuli labeled and filed, integrated into his circuits. The thrum of distress isn’t so easily put away, but it can be pushed aside.

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“Do you even know what my backup plan is?” he asks.

Sylvia’s shoulders come down slightly; Napoleon hadn’t realized how nervous he’d made her. “I know that you have one,” she says, looking slightly away.

Well, at least he hadn’t entirely given himself away. Still, he had not wanted to rely upon it; had dreaded the possibility, in fact.

“I want to crack the international United States Marcher network,” he says, steeling himself, hoping to convince himself with his own facade of confidence. “And the Soviet one, too. Probably them first, actually.”

She blinks, and then her brows draw down in extreme skepticism. “That’s your plan?” she says, flat.

He gives her a wide-eyed look. “You don’t like it?”

“It’s impossible.”

“Improbable,” he corrects. “But you have not one, but three highly functional AIs on your side.” Truly only three now, without Emerson...he pushes the thought away. “That ought to tip the scales.”

“There are no scales to consider,” Sylvia shakes her head. “The authentication codes for Marchers, they are state secrets, and without direct access—”

“What happened to the Marcher I disabled?” Napoleon cuts in.

Sylvia raises an eyebrow. “Taken back to the base, I would imagine.”
“Right,” Napoleon nods. “And what do you do with a broken Marcher?”

Sylvia shakes her head, mute.

“You attempt to find out how it got broken,” Napoleon says, with the best showman’s smile he can muster. “And the only way you can do that, is to access its logs. Wire it to an authorized computer bank, probably a big one.

“Probably the only one you have at your disposal, if you’re on a base like the one up that hill.”

***

Gaby clearly doesn’t know what to do with Illya, because she goes for a doctor.

The doctor, when she arrives, is plump and no-nonsense, with heavily accented, staccato English that Illya has trouble understanding. He only gets through a bit of the technical explanation of what was done—“emergency guillotine amputation, debriding and cleaning, followed by a formal bilateral amputation that took most of your forearm”—before he makes an involuntary sound, and then the doctor is making urgent noises, and there is an injection into his IV bag that has him drifting off into nowhere again.

He dreams, but the dreams are familiar, close. In one, he puts his hand in a fire and watches it burn. In another, he nods and recites yes, sir until his tongue goes dry and his mouth swells, until he can only judder his jaw up and down against the mass of his own flesh, voice disintegrating into muffled animal sounds. They aren’t truth, but Illya hardly needs Freud’s help unraveling them.

When he wakes, he is alone, and he is glad of it.

The ceiling is cracked in places, water damage making itself known in rust-brown webs. Illya tracks their filaments, calculates the paths of their next erosions. The math is still as easy as breathing. Easy as anything.

Not long after his father had been taken away, Illya had started to get into fights very often. His knuckles were split and bruised nearly all the time, never fully healing. He could never resist the goading of his peers, seemed even to fall for it more easily the more he was pushed. It was, he thinks, the hopelessness of it—the knowledge that the source of his family’s ruin would cling to them forever, even when his father was doubtless dead and buried. Despair created a circuit inside him, every whisper and taunt just charging it up more, nowhere for all of it to go but his fists.

The hurt of them became a sort of background radiation, one more cold burn amongst a host of them: hunger, anger, shame.

His mother had fussed over his injuries, when she could summon the energy to do so.

“You had your father’s pianist hands,” she had mourned once, steeping rough cloth in hot water, dabbing at fresh cuts and old scabs.

Illya has always had tin ears. He has never been uncomfortable with the way his fingers healed thick and crooked.

When he was given a place with the SUR, he’d gained some appreciation for dexterity; the varied arts of knifework, of drawing up maps and schematics, of picking apart machinery, they all required it. He’d been aggressively right-handed though, and had never managed much ambidextrousness beyond what was absolutely necessary.
He supposes it’s necessary, now.

The hand-that-isn’t shifts with his breath. He can almost feel the shape of the bedclothes beneath its fingertips. If he separates himself from reality enough, he can feel their weave against its palm.

He does not wish to separate himself from reality, however. There is too much at stake, yes; but also, the visceral certainty of this latest disaster feels different from the others that have constituted the slow decline and fall that Illya has long characterized his life to be.

Residual limb pain and phantom limb pain. The doctor had said something about the distinction between the two before he’d been overtaken by a combination of both and had been summarily drugged into unconsciousness. He feels both, but phantom, that is a word both more meaningful and more provocative to him in this moment.

He finds his attention straying to that uncomfortable, hushed conversation he’d had with Napoleon on the naval ship. He had been so afraid, so tired.

*They really don’t know what you are, do they?*

*Does anybody know what anyone else is? Does anyone even know what they are themselves?*

*I’m thinking, maybe, that if you know for sure, then you aren’t really real at all.*

*You’re not who I thought you were. I guess that means you’re real.*

He is tired now, but for different reasons, not least the opiates in his bloodstream. He doesn’t know why that conversation is sticking with him now. He thinks maybe he’s just not quite ready to know; but he will be, eventually.

The air in the room is warm but not close; there is a breeze that comes in from the outside, and it smells of fresh tobacco and floral sweetness. It is...pleasant. He’s really quite comfortable, on the whole.

He wonders how long it will take for the shock to wear off. Surely it has, already? Surely at some point, he will feel horror. But he has lost many things, in the past. This seems like a small thing, by comparison.

There is a muffled conversation somewhere else in the building. He can’t make out the language, let alone the words.

He thinks he sleeps for a time.

When he wakes, the doctor is there again, and Gaby still isn’t.

“Ah, good. Pain level, please,” she inquires, more an order than a question. “And do not lie, I know your type.”

Illya swallows until his throat stops clicking, and says, he thinks truthfully, “Four.”

“That’s a six, then,” the doctor snorts. “About as expected, and you seem lucid this time, so.” She sits down.

“You passed out before I could introduce myself properly. I am Dr. Carrera, I run this clinic. I cannot stress how lucky you were, considering how long you’d been self-treating your injury, and how far you were from a hospital,” she says, looking at him over her half-moon glasses, every k-syllable a
percussive burst. “We are keeping you on antibiotics and antivirals to flush out any further risk of infection but we think chances are good you’ll come out of it clean, and you thankfully will not have to endure the early maintenance of an open wound as a result of the guillotined stump. We’ll be keeping you in compression bandages to shape the site, and you’ll be able to start physical therapy very soon, perhaps even tomorrow.”

“What day is it?” Illya rasps.

“Monday,” Dr. Carrera says. “Just past four in the afternoon.”

Nearly three days lost. So many things can have happened, though the sky isn’t yet shadowed with Marchers. “Gaby?”

“The girl?” Dr. Carrera says, with a hint of disapproval. “She was getting stir-crazy, making noises about trying to radio someone. I will not permit her endangering this place with damning transmissions.”

At least one of them is being useful. (Illya hopes it’s two.)

“We need to talk about your care,” Dr. Carrera says. “Rehabilitation after an amputation is long-term, and your situation is…”

“Undefined,” Illya finishes, dry. A bit of that hysterical laughter rises in him again; he pushes it down. He has always been very good at compartmentalizing. Or at least, he was until Berlin.

“That’s a good word,” Dr. Carrera says, matching his tone. “Seeing as I was not given much to go on. Juan is shifty when he wants to be, but he hasn’t brought us trouble yet.”

“Is he here?”

“Here, there, wherever he’s needed. Though he was very firm about this being the last favor he’d do for Tita Abrantes. Something about you being fortunate a bot wasn’t with you when he found you.”

Illya winces. Dr. Carrera watches him carefully.

“I don’t want to know your business here,” she says. “And to be very honest with you, I want you and your friend away from here as quickly as possible. But it is my duty as your physician to see that you don’t undo all the hard work I put into you.”

Illya blinks slowly, and says, “That is fair.”

“So I need to know your medical history in order to set out a timeline for getting you mobile and able to care for yourself.”

His medical history. Illya has never once had to recount it; it has always been in his file with the KGB, consulted and added to by KGB doctors, with very little input from Illya. “I don’t know how much I can tell you,” he says.

Dr. Carrera doesn’t look surprised. “You have many scars, new and old.”

He nods.

“I don’t need diagnoses,” Dr. Carrera says, pulling up a chair and settling down, crossing her ankles with matronly primness. “Just allergies, intolerances, your history with diseases. You’re clearly in good general health, and if there are no complications, your healing will be textbook, but I would
like to avoid any and all chances of complications.”

“I had...ветрянка very young,” Illya murmurs. “My mother took me around the neighborhood, so others could contract it.”

“Vetre—oh, varicela.” She takes it down. “Vaccinations?”

“We were kept up to date.”

She pauses. “‘We’?”

Illya meets her eyes, and says nothing.

She exhales. “Never mind. Any allergies? Not penicillin, we’ve given you large doses of that and you would have reacted.”

Illya shakes his head. “Nothing. No allergies, no intolerances.” He huffs. “I have always been very...of good health.”

He would never have been admitted to the SUR otherwise. He remembers being screened, the blood draws and the impersonal examinations, limbs handled and manipulated like he was a doll. He has a vivid memory of the poster on the wall of the exam room, an old anatomical cross-section of the human head, webbed over with arrows and labels, some of them hand-rendered. He had let the exams carry on and had stared at that poster until his eyes burned some days, imagining the swift fire of his own neurons, the circuitry of himself growing ever more regimented, more perfect.

It all seems far clearer to him now than it had in the recent past. It’s not that he didn’t remember before, it is simply that remembering used to be counterproductive, dangerous.

“Good,” Dr. Carrera says, noting it down. “That is good. All right, that being the case, you can likely be discharged in a week’s time, but you’ll have to keep very strictly to the therapy and maintenance on your own until you can find a specialist who you can check in with on a regular basis. There is the matter of prostheses, of course, which we cannot provide here, but which you will want to look into, I am certain.”

Even the thought of there being any sort of consistent schedule in Illya’s life outside of Cuba, after Cuba, was absurd to him. He refrained from saying so, even as a lump formed and then dissolved in his throat.

“Just tell me what I have to do,” he says. “I’ll do it.”

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I have not sensed any indications that a Marcher has been cabled to my network, Ockham says. There are no sentient systems other than you and I that are connected.

Have you ever interacted with one? It is...not what you might expect, Napoleon says. To Sylvia, he adds, “Once I insinuate myself into one of them, I’ve essentially gotten into all of them, as they move and act in tandem. If worst comes to worst, I can disrupt their orders from the inside out.”

“That sets a very dangerous precedent.”

“Yes,” Napoleon agrees. “Thus the ‘backup’ caveat.”

He had only ever done so himself twice: here in San Cristobal, and six years earlier, in DC. That first
time, it had been a training program for the Marchers’ benefit—he’d been brought in from Korea to see whether Marchers could be hacked.

“For god’s sake,” one of the technicians had advised him, “Make yourself useful.”

Napoleon had never seen a Marcher up close before, but the soldiers in Korea had given him expectations.

“I’ve seen ’em,” Corporal Mack had said once, in the mess hall.

“Yes? What are they like?” Napoleon had asked.

“Shit-your-pants terrifying,” Mack had answered, between chews of nondescript casserole. “You ever read H.G. Wells? Like those things in War of the Worlds. Only we weren’t invaded; we created ’em ourselves, and they weren’t so soft on the inside.”

Napoleon had made a note to pick up a copy of Wells.

“They’re just...they mow people down, you know? There’s no discrimination, who’s a combatant, who’s a civilian. They’re too dumb to know, they just read the terrain, see people, and kill ’em. It’s not right, even if it was just the Japs. I mean, now the Russians have them too, you know? What the hell are we supposed to do about that?” Mack had looked sidelong at him. “Don’t tell anyone I said that.”

“I shall not,” Napoleon had promised. His cadences had still been stiff back then, but it had given him a sheen of sincerity that had served him well among the soldiers, even when they’d thought him odd. It served him particularly well with Mack, who had nodded his appreciation of Napoleon’s apparent gravity before lapsing into silence.

Years later, with Mack’s words in mind, Napoleon had taken on the temporary position of hacker with trepidation. He hadn’t wanted to look into a mind that only knew how to kill.

Even seeing one up close had been galling. They are just so large, the physics of them pushing the boundaries of impossible. They had been the result, in part, of the lost generation, the vow that men should never again be poured so heedlessly into trenches, not when machinery could take their place. That, and the United States’s desperation to win this second catastrophic war, to prove themselves the super power they could be.

Napoleon could read all that in the Marcher’s stature, let alone its brain.

Hooking up to it had been like wading into an inky lake. Or better yet, an inky whitewater, rushing too fast to track, in too many directions to follow all of them.

He hadn’t actually spoken to it at all. One couldn’t, he’d always thought, not really. They were AIs, of a sort, but their purpose was absolute—standing in the way of their thought processes is like stepping into the slipstream of a fighter jet. Napoleon can interfere, obstruct and disable the signal, but read it? He’s never tried, and he’s never wanted to.

Napoleon had never been so scared in his life, as when he’d ridden the tide of a Marcher’s code.

When he’d come up for air, to the expectant faces of the technicians, he’d looked at him and said, eyes flickering gold, “With enough time and energy, anything can be hacked. But anyone capable of it would probably sooner cut off their right arm than try with one of these.”

“The hell does that even mean, Solo?” one of the techs had asked.
“It means you don’t have anything to worry about,” Napoleon had answered, and excused himself as soon as he could. He hadn’t been asked back, and had been put on ordnance removal soon after. He’d worn out his uses, and everyone but the CIA knew it. Several times, they’d tried to question him further about the Marcher hack. He’d never been willing to respond.

San Cristobal had been easier, because his only goal had been disruption. Building a dam, instead of diverting a deluge. Even then, he’d been thankful for Illya’s morbidly impressive destruction of much of the Marcher’s working parts before he dove in himself.

Now, he looks at Sylvia and Nicola, and says, “The way the Marchers communicate isn’t the way you and I talk, or even the way Ockham and I talk. They’re very...spare. But, that means that their networked capabilities are both very secure and far-reaching. In the absence of other options, they are the best possible way of making a difference on scale that two superpowers playing chicken requires.”

Sylvia is still for a long, long moment.

“I need a cigarette,” she says eventually. She pats her pockets for one and apparently comes up empty; she makes an impatient noise, and then heads up the stairs. “Don’t go anywhere,” she warns, before she disappears out of sight.

Napoleon and Nicola look at each other. Nicola’s hands clench and unclench, her wrists flexing.

“You have to stay,” she says. “Don’t you?”

Napoleon tilts his head in resignation. “Sylvia’s right. I’m where I can do the most good. God knows I shouldn’t care, but.” He shrugs. “Here I am.”

“Okay,” she nods eventually. “So you must stay.” Then her jaw sets. “But I don’t have to.”

Hope kindles in Napoleon, faint but warm. “Juan will know that you’re working for Sylvia, if you go now,” he feels obliged to point out.

“I need to make sure he’s okay.” She looks away. “If what you said is true, even if he is okay with Sylvia, maybe he is not okay with Fidel. He’s my brother, so I have to go.”

“Of course.” It’s a sentiment he might not have understood, earlier in his life; now, it is rote to him. He pauses. “Would you,” he starts. “If they’re with him. Could you...that is, would you be willing...?”

Nicola gives him a knowing look, and wordlessly, she digs in her pocket before drawing out the slip of paper from Hernandez, crumpled but still blank on one side.

He takes the paper slowly, careful not to snatch it from her in his haste. He goes over to the staircase and bends over it, flattening the slip on the rough wood.

Then he hesitates. He hardly knows where to begin.

He only has time and space for facts. The slip is small, and he will have to make his handwriting a tight, precise font; even then, he can only fit a few sparse lines. Thankfully, he was not divested of his pen when he was taken into Sylvia’s custody.

Facts. He can do that, even as his circuits feel as if they are fraying with indecision for a brief moment.
He takes a long breath and writes.

WAVERLY COMPROMISED. HAVE FOUND NATIVE ALLIES. TRYING TO COOL SITUATION W/RESOURCES AT HAND. F.C. READY FOR WAR. IMPERATIVE TO CRACK MARCHER CODES. IF POSSIBLE, RADIO @4625 KHZ, KEYED W/BERLIN DATE. STAY SAFE. WILL FIND MY WAY TO YOU IF I CAN.

So inadequate, and yet it would have to do. He can’t help but feel a bit like it’s a goodbye. Who knows what will happen, if he manages what he proposes to do. Who knows what will happen to him, when he steps into the slipstream.

On the other side of the paper, he writes the address of the clinic beneath Hernandez’s scrawl.

“Don’t risk yourself,” he says, not without reluctance, as he hands the slip back to Nicola. “If you don’t come across them, if Juan’s not with them, don’t go searching. I’ll be fine.”

She nods, looking dubious. “I won’t get there until tomorrow,” she says, looking at the address. “I have a bike, and I hitchhike, but we are far from Havana.”

Napoleon shakes his head. “Be careful. Please.”

“I am not the one in trouble,” she replies, tipping up her chin. She tucks the paper into her pocket, folding it down twice. (She doesn’t read his message, Napoleon can’t help but notice.) Then she picks her way silently up the stairs to peek across the floorboards above.

“Okay,” she breathes. “Sylvia’s out front still. I’m going.”

And without another word, she’s gone, out the hatch. Her feet make barely a sound above Napoleon’s head.

When Sylvia comes back down ten minutes later, smelling ever more strongly of tobacco, she looks unsurprised. “She has gone for Juan?” she asks.

Napoleon nods. “Please don’t stop her.”

Sylvia’s mouth purses slightly, but she nods. “She’s a good girl,” she says. “With very little to call her own.”

Then she raises her eyebrows. “So. The Marcher?”

“We’ll start the search,” Napoleon nods.

***

Dr. Carrera leaves, and then two hours later, a nurse comes in, as expected.

Illya is instructed to move his arm, flex the muscles gently, slowly, enough to encourage blood flow, but not enough to strain the sutures. It is both painful and intensely boring. The shrinker—a tight wrapping of fabric around the ending, designed to shape and prevent swelling—feels a bit like someone is clinging to him, demanding his attention.
He follows the instructions and manipulations in silence, and he can tell that this worries the instructor; he keeps sending sidelong glances at Illya’s face with every movement, searching for something that Illya apparently is unable to display.

Some of this is familiar, he thinks. The movement, the impatience. He has had many recoveries, over the years. Many fallow periods between assignments or training sessions when he had been tasked with small errands to keep him busy, and to keep him before the approving eye of the Kremlin, a living reminder of the success of the SUR.

Those, of course, had stopped after the Baltics. Nonetheless, the memories seem sharp now, sharper than they have been in some time, like the fever and shock has knocked them loose.

As they’re finishing up, and Illya has sat back onto his bed, exhausted and gray-faced, Juan Valdez appears in the doorway. “Remember me?” he asks. He sounds especially insolent in English.

“I remember threatening to shoot you,” Illya replies, but it comes out breathless.

Valdez snorts. “Of course you do.”

“Why are you here?” Illya manages.

“Yelena asked me to check on you. She’s been working herself to the bone and needed to sleep, finally.”

“Yelena?”

“Your girl.”

Right. He’d forgotten they had given Valdez aliases. “What has she been doing?” Illya tries to push himself up straight, but it’s a losing battle—the exercises have left him embarrassingly worn. The plain fact that pain is in itself exhausting never ceases to frustrate him.

“Building a transceiver. Trying to contact your handlers, I think.”

“‘Trying’, ” Illya repeats.

“Mm. Not having much luck so far.”

Illya has every confidence in Gaby’s abilities. If London isn’t answering, it means nothing good.

Not, of course, that anything has been going particularly well thus far. Illya snorts to himself.

Valdez gives him a dubious look.

“Tell her,” he says, after a moment, “To stop avoiding me.”

Valdez smirks. “It’s what I’ve been saying. She won’t listen. She’s trying not to think about you.”

That hurts. It must show on his face, because Valdez sobers. “She’s been through a lot,” he adds. “It’s been hard to see you. I think she blames herself.”

“That is very stupid.”

Valdez offers a philosophical shrug. “You will be better at convincing her of that, maybe.”

“You didn’t really answer my question,” Illya says. “Why are you here?”
Valdez gives him a careful look. “You were in a very bad way,” he said eventually. “I don’t like leaving people to die.”

“No one does,” Illya says. Not everyone risks themselves to avoid it, though. “Thank you.”

He just shrugs again. “You could have buried me in San Cristobal. Now we are even.” He shouldered himself upright from the doorway. “I will have to return there soon. My sister is waiting.”

“As you say, we are even,” Illya nods. “Better that you are not here anyway, if we are found out.”

“I won’t tell,” Valdez says. “I should, but.” He raises an ironic brow. “Don’t think you can do too much damage right now.”

“There is still Yelena,” Illya says, rolling his eyes a bit.

“She is trying to get you both home,” Valdez points out. “The sooner the better, I think.”

“Doctors say I must be here a week,” Illya murmurs. “No pressure changes.”

“The sooner the better,” Valdez repeats.

“If you wanted to tell someone,” Illya says, with a sudden thought, “If that would ease your conscience, tell Abrantes.” Maybe she could even get word to Waverly.

Valdez hums. “Maybe I will.”

He skims out of the doorway with a last long look at Illya, like hasn’t decided whether his effort had been worth it. Illya can hardly tell himself.

The day wanes, and Illya spends it in and out of consciousness, plagued at intervals by strange dreams and boredom. Gaby still doesn’t visit.

***

Ockham, however, turns out to be right. No trace of a Marcher on the Soviet mainframe, broken or not.

“We know it’s there,” Napoleon mutters. “They wouldn’t have just left it out in the forest to rot.”

“They may not have wanted to connect it to anything,” Sylvia says, shrugging. “Or perhaps it was too broken to communicate.”

“It wasn’t,” Napoleon says sharply. “I know how I left it.” The inky black of it had clung to him all the way up until Ockham had seized him.

Sylvia gives him a skeptical look, but says nothing. “Do you have another plan?”

Napoleon gives her a flat look. “Go to the Soviets and ask politely?”

She snorts.

“I broke in once,” Napoleon adds, when she doesn’t speak further. “I could again. With Ockham’s help, I’d know the full layout.”

“If you get caught,” Sylvia says, “The way things are now? It will be read as an act of war.”
“Just like everything else we’ve been doing here.”

Sylvia puts a hand flat against her diaphragm, like she has to concentrate on the act of breathing. “You’ll have to wait until nightfall, at least,” she says.

He nods. “I wouldn’t want to go sooner anyway. It’s almost seven.”

She blinks rapidly, and then her jaw firms. “Yes. Of course. Would you please ask Ockham to patch the signal through?”

***

Illya is dozing when Gaby finally shows her face.

She comes in the room with a boxy assemblage of equipment under one arm, and Illya is ready to give her a mild rebuke for running away from him when he catches the look on her face.

“What is it?” he asks instead.

She looks hollow, and a little bewildered. She opens her mouth and closes it a few times before she manages to speak. “I was going to ask how you were first,” she starts, frowning.

“Fine as I can be,” Illya dismisses, stifling all impulse to elaborate. He doesn’t think he could articulate much of it anyway. “What is wrong?” Other than the fact that she looks like she hasn’t slept properly in several days.

She blinks slowly, and then finally says, “I’ve been scanning the airwaves.”

“So I’ve heard. Have you found Waverly?”

She shakes her head. “No. But. President Kennedy’s going to give a speech. It’s getting broadcast here in Cuba by special radio transmission.”

Illya sucks in a breath. “When?”

Gaby plugs in her transceiver and sets it down on the ground, working the dials.

“Right about now.”

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Ockham obliges. Sylvia pulls her jacket closer around herself.

In stillness, they fall silent to listen.

***

The signal isn’t good, but it’s clear enough.

“Good evening, my fellow citizens.”

Juan Valdez appears in the doorway again, his usual watchful expression wiped to blankness. He crosses his arms and leans against the jamb.

“...Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive, flight-capable Marcher sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these
bases can be none other than to provide a Marcher invasion capability against the Western Hemisphere.”

***

Sylvia sits down heavily on the stairs. Napoleon doesn’t blame her. To suspect the Soviets had been caught out was one thing; to know was another.

“This urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic base...constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all Americas, in flagrant and deliberate defiance of the Rio Pact of 1947, the traditions of this nation and hemisphere, the joint resolution of the 87th Congress, the Charter of the United Nations, and my own public warnings to the Soviets on September 4 and 13. This action also contradicts the repeated assurances of Soviet spokesmen, both publicly and privately delivered, that the arms buildup in Cuba would retain its original defensive character, and that the Soviet Union had no need or desire to station strategic offensive forces on the territory of any other nation.

“But this secret, swift and extraordinary buildup of an aggressive and unprecedented airborne variation of our most destructive instruments of war...is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country, if our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe…”

***

“Acting, therefore, in the defense of our own security and of the entire Western Hemisphere, and under the authority entrusted to me by the Constitution as endorsed by the resolution of the Congress, I have directed that the following initial steps be taken immediately:

There is a hiss of more severe static for a moment; Gaby lurches forward and adjusts a knob, her hand shaking, and the signal clears.

“First: To halt this offensive buildup, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation and port will, if found to contain cargoes of Marchers or the components for Marcher construction, be turned back. This quarantine will be extended, if needed, to other types of cargo and carriers. We are not at this time, however, denying the necessities of life as the Soviets attempted to do in their Berlin blockade of 1948.”

Illya makes a wordless noise of automatic protest. For a moment, his arm throbs, blood rushing in his ears.

Gaby shushes him, adjusts the transceiver again.

“Third: It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any Marcher launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.”

“We need to do something or we’ll get wiped off the map,” Juan says, staring into the middle distance. “The militias are going to be mobilized.”

“Are you in one?” Gaby asks.

Juan shakes his head. “My work is too important. But I know many who are. I will be able to track their movements.”

Illya looks at her sharply. “You could go,” he says.

She looks at him, her mouth set, and doesn’t say anything.

“Seventh and finally: I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations. I call upon him further to abandon this course of world domination, and to join in an historic effort to end the perilous arms race and to transform the history of man. He has an opportunity now to move the world back from the abyss of destruction—by returning to his government's own words that it had no need to station these machines of war outside its own territory, and withdrawing all Marchers from Cuba—by refraining from any action which will widen or deepen the present crisis—and then by participating in a search for peaceful and permanent solutions.”

***

“All Marchers? Not just the flight capable—”

Napoleon shakes his head; Sylvia falls silent, but with jerky, difficult movements, pulls a cigarette case from her pocket and dispenses a cigarette, bringing it to her clenched lips before fishing for a lighter.

“I want to say a few words to the captive people of Cuba, to whom this speech is being directly carried by special radio facilities. I speak to you as a friend, as one who knows of your deep attachment to your fatherland, as one who shares your aspirations for liberty and justice for all.”

Sylvia growls, and lights her cigarette with livid fervor, the first few drags hot and ashy, the tip of the cigarette glowing bright in the shadowed basement.

“Patronizing,” Napoleon says for her. “I know.”

“These new machines of war are not in your interest. They contribute nothing to your peace and well being. They can only undermine it. But this country has no wish to cause you to suffer or to impose any system upon you. We know that your lives and land are being used as pawns by those who deny you freedom.

“Many times in the past Cuban people have risen to throw out tyrants who destroyed their liberty. And I have no doubt that most Cubans today look forward to the time when they will be truly free—free from foreign domination, free to choose their own leaders, free to select their own system, free to own their own land, free to speak and write and worship without fear or degradation. And then shall Cuba be welcomed back to the society of free nations and to the associations of this Hemisphere.”

Sylvia surges to her feet and throws her cigarette on the ground, already three-quarters consumed. She stamps on it, and hisses, “We are already free. We fought and bled for it and we won it. I’ve heard enough.”

She stomps up the stairs and out of sight. Napoleon doesn’t watch her go.

***

“My fellow citizens: let no one doubt that this is a difficult and dangerous effort on which we have set out. No one can foresee precisely what course it will take or what costs or casualties will be incurred.

“The path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards, as all paths are—but it is the one most
consistent with our character and courage as a nation and our commitments around the world. The cost of freedom is always high—and Americans have always paid it. And one path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender or submission.

“Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right—not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom, here in this hemisphere, and we hope, around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved.

“Thank you and good night.”

They listen to the static for several seconds. Then Gaby shuts off the transceiver with a snap, and begins to pace the room on legs that wobble like a new colt's, her arms crossed around her ribs.

Juan shakes his head, looking down at his feet.

“Here we are,” Illya murmurs, very still in his bed. “The tipping point.”

The phantom of his severed fingers beats rapid time, real enough to almost feel their percussion against his thigh.

***

Ockham, Napoleon transmits, polite and quiet as the transmission ends. *I’ll need complete blueprints for the base.*

*Uploading now,* Ockham soberly replies.

Chapter End Notes

Kennedy's speech is largely word for word. I highly recommend reading/listening to the [full thing](#)—it's a pretty incredible piece of writing. (According to the link, it's also in the public domain, so I think I'm all right quoting generous passages of it here.)

Napoleon's frequency request in his message is a nod to UVB-376, or "The Buzzer", a shortwave radio station that broadcasts on that frequency, first traced to Russia in 1973, and whose purpose has been speculated upon, but never confirmed.
“I need to report in,” Valdez mutters.

Gaby doesn’t react. Illya meets his eyes and nods. Unlike them, Valdez has legitimate places to be.

He shoots a concerned glance at Gaby before he backs out of the doorway and then disappears from sight.

In Valdez’s absence, Illya watches Gaby pace. It’s exhausting just looking at her.

She’s never been abandoned in the field, he realizes, as he counts her steps (*one two three four five turn, one two three four five turn*). Never been left entirely to her own devices, without instruction, except perhaps in Berlin. At least there, she had known that eventually a time for action would come for her.

“That language,” Gaby mutters. “‘Aggressive and unprecedented airborne variation’... they really must not have that in the U.S., do they? They must not, if the Soviets got the technology from my father’s cache. If that’s true, if Russia has an arms race *advantage* of all things, Kennedy is taking an enormous risk.”

“Is always a risk, not to attack,” Illya murmurs. “But to act here is to ensure casualties, not just risk them.”

“How long have they known?” Gaby demands. “It must be days now, if he’s giving a speech.”

“A week at least,” Illya speculates. “They would need to be absolutely certain, and have already begun preparing themselves for combat, before making such a declaration.”

“We have to do something. We have to.”

“Do we?” he says, tilting his head. “Our assignment was reconnaissance. It is now redundant in the face of public revelation.”

“But then we—” Her jaw flexes as she bites down on the inside of her cheek, her eyes dark and hollowed in her face. “We will have accomplished nothing.”

Illya entertains the anguish that accompanies that thought only for as long as he can stand it, which isn’t very long at all. The situation seems very clear in his mind. Waverly is either compromised or has ejected them from his plans, having judged them too much of a risk to keep in play. Were he in Waverly’s position, Illya would be much inclined to do the same. They are therefore offered a choice: to stand aside, stand down, or to act without sanction or protection.

They more or less have been doing the latter already. After all, beyond the go-ahead from British Naval Intelligence, Waverly’s own authority and place in the hierarchy of international affairs is not fully known to them. But the delicacy of the situation requires resources and connections that they don’t have, cut off as they are. And how much difference could they even make, at this point? The President of the United States has made a public statement, to his country and to the world; an answer of equal scale is the only acceptable response. They have no place in that conversation as they are, an insignificant third party, caught in shadows of giants.
“Sometimes that is what happens,” he says. “There is no glory in being a spy.”

He’d known that the moment he’d been reassigned, after the Baltics.

Gaby slows, turning to him, her lip curling. “I know that,” she sneers.

“We could do more harm than good,” Illya continues, despite seeing the danger.

“Don’t,” Gaby snarls, low, going entirely still in front of him like a warning. “I’m not a child.”

Illya breathes deeply through his nose, tipping his head down in concession, such that he can’t help but see anything except himself. The sight remains alien, a topology unmapped.

“There must be something,” Gaby murmurs, more gently but no less fervent. “We can’t just sit here.”

Heat flares in Illya’s chest. “I don’t much have a choice,” he says evenly, and watches from his peripheral vision as she flinches. He continues to breathe and look at his bandages.

She comes to the foot of the bed, and with slowly clenching hands she grips the metal frame, working it like the handles of a motorbike, her knuckles going white.

“I’m sorry,” she says finally. “I’m being unkind.”

“You’re not,” Illya shakes his head. “But you need to sleep. If something happens tonight, we can not do anything about it anyway.”

She blew out a breath, a frizz of hair at her temple stirring with the air. “Fine.” She pushes back from the bed, and then goes to retrieve the transceiver from the corner of the room. After a moment of directionless movement, she settles on slipping it beneath Illya’s bed for safekeeping. “Fine.”

She stands up, crossing her arms around her ribs, and then hovers in apparent indecision.

“Did they not give you a bed?” Illya asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I, um,” Gaby says, not looking at him. “I never asked for one. I think I slept in the waiting room when Juan made me get off the roof.”

Illya makes an incredulous noise, and without thinking about it, makes room for her on the hospital bed. “Come here,” he says. “Is better than the cot.”

Her gaze slides from his face to his stump and back. “I don’t want to jostle—”

“You won’t. Not any more than I would do myself, at least.”

She gives him a long look, and then goes to close the door to the room. In silence, she toes off her shoes and then curls herself into the minimal empty space Illya’s left on the bed, fitting herself against him, the warmth of her head almost feverish against his shoulder. She smells like solder and sweat, and the press of her is startling in its familiarity. Illya hadn’t been at his best when they’d been sharing the cot in Bauta, but it seems his body remembers more than he does.

“Nurses aren’t going to like this,” she says into his chest.

“Then they can find you a bed,” Illya shrugs with his free shoulder. “Sleep.”

He is already succumbing to his own exhaustion, having been dosed with painkillers just before Gaby had come in with the transceiver. The sun has set but its warmth clings to the air, cloying and
dusty. He lets his breath even out, and slowly, Gaby’s matches his.

He’s nearly asleep when, so carefully he almost doesn’t feel it through the gauze, she places her hand on the ending of his arm, just on the edge where gauze meets flesh.

“You shouldn’t have had to give up so much for nothing,” she whispers.

He is too tired to answer; all the same, the words follow him, cold and oppressive, into sleep.

***

Napoleon is flattening ragged silicon back down over his ports, switching his connection with Ockham from wired to wireless with the help of the frequency-switching algorithm he and Emerson had cultivated, when he receives a familiar ping and nearly slumps in relief.

_Emerson. How are you?_ 

Ockham almost tangibly perks up, their attention accompanied by a flurry of information directed at Emerson that Napoleon is only tangentially aware of or able to parse. Freed from the constraints of wired communication through Napoleon, they are free to talk on their own terms, which Napoleon tries not to be wary of. They are, after all, two of a kind.

_I’m secure,_ Emerson assures.

_In the safe room?_

_No._

Napoleon sends urgent question marks at her.

... _Long story,_ Emerson says, in a tone that implies that the phrase is borrowed from somewhere. She sounds far clearer than before. _I’m no longer at Wilton Crescent._

Napoleon pauses. _No?_

_I’m with Kumar and O’Malley._

_What are they up to?_

_Scrubbing, they say. I don’t really know what they mean._

Not much of an answer, but Napoleon doesn’t feel inclined to press with so little time before he has to be on the move. That Emerson isn’t alone and unprotected is enough to go on with.

_Okay, he allows. And Waverly?_

_We’re not certain,_ Emerson says. _But he wasn’t there when we left._

Worrisome. Possibly catastrophic sometime in the future. Nothing they could do about it. _I’m glad you’re safe._

_I did what you asked,_ Emerson says, brushing the sentiment away. _I was able to track some signals, Napoleon. To Moscow._

He pauses. _And?_
I had not even considered, Emerson says, with all the disbelief of a machine, That signals from other countries had to be both decrypted and translated by hand.

Ah. The speech?

The speech. It is not going to reach President Khrushchev for another hour at least. And that is for a public message. What about private ones, diplomatic ones?

The diplomatic bonds between the US and Russia are neither close nor efficient, Napoleon says.

There are Marchers facing each other down in the Bay of Mexico, and their countries cannot have a direct conversation!

Exactly, Napoleon nods. Exactly.

He remembers now, from restored data packets circulating hot inside him, his early experiences with the CIA: how simple messages of assurance could take a day to depart or arrive. The stacks of one-time pads, the exits and entrances of so many journalists, diplomats, officers—everything negotiated, passed on, then assessed, reassessed, translated, decoded, speculated upon. Long chains of command and information leading in and out of the CIA, long before they ever filtered up to the White House. An endless game of telephone, when a real one could save time and lives.

Napoleon doesn’t know if he can give them a telephone. But he can at least try getting the guns out of their hands first.

Did you hear anything else? Footsteps sound on the stairs; he looks up.

Yes, Emerson confirms. It seems that very few people in the Kremlin knew about the Marchers. They are not happy with Khrushchev.

“My god,” Napoleon breathes aloud. Sylvia quirks an eyebrow at him, her mouth still clamped into an angry line. She is dressed in black now, canvas high-waisted pants and a close-fitting linen shirt. He gives her a resigned look, shaking his head slightly. That’s both surprising and not I suppose.

Emerson sends a burst of concerned incredulity.

Aloud, Napoleon says, “Are we ready to go?”

“I suppose,” Sylvia replies. She blows out a breath. “I will likely need to resign from my official positions after this—if I’m not dead, obviously—but yes.”

“That’s the spirit,” Napoleon smiles brightly.

What are you doing? Emerson inquires.

Something very foolhardy, Napoleon says, and pushes a memory of his last conversation with Sylvia at her.

You get to do all the fun things, Emerson complains, after a pointed pause and with a measured dollop of sarcasm.

Your support is appreciated, Napoleon replies. And I’ll need your help. Especially you, Sputnik.

What is it you want now? Sputnik asks, sounding slightly put out.

Just for you to talk to some of your Earth-bound brethren. They are Soviet, I’m sure you’ll have
plenty to talk about.

If they can actually talk, Napoleon doesn’t add.

What are they like? The Marchers?

I don’t know, he answers with all honesty.

Maybe they’ll be like us, Emerson directs at Ockham. Soldiers.

Napoleon doesn’t attempt to disabuse her. Whether by dint of her original graft or her experiences since coming online, Emerson seems to be a nearly irrepressible optimist.

Instead, he studies his now-many days old clothing, stiff with dirt, but thankfully free of the detritus put out by humans on an hourly basis. He’d worn it to blend in with a forest, not a military base, but it’s still dark and drab enough to do. He itches to be clean, and he’s still running too hot for comfort on a tropical island, but he is functional and fully charged—the best shape as he can be in, under the circumstances.

Sylvia steps back up out of the basement, and Napoleon follows.

The farmhouse is deserted, and empty of anything but dust and insect noises. Napoleon shoots Sylvia a look.

“I sent everyone home,” Sylvia says briefly. “It seemed safer for them.”

He nods. “And our route?”

“A path up the hill. It’s very steep; we won’t be seen. You’ll have to lead the way once we reach the clearing, however.”

“Understood.”

They don’t speak after that.

The night air is thick with moisture and smells like earth and just slightly like the machinery up the hill, rust and gasoline. Sylvia cuts her way through the underbrush in nearly preternatural quiet, her movements economical and assured. She must have been up in the mountains with Castro a good deal during the revolution, trekking through miles of Sierra Maestra forest, to be so confident in the darkness when the roots of the trees jut out of the ground so perilously

Napoleon follows in her footsteps, just three feet behind at all times, the hum of Ockham, Emerson and Sputnik warm at the fringes of his awareness. They are so young, he can’t help thinking. Complex and new all at once. He wishes he had had a chance to speak to them in a time not smothered with the smog of war. They are doing everything he demands with so little reason to trust him.

He pushes a game of chess at Sputnik, who throws itself into the game with furious sincerity.

Sylvia leads a winding path, seemingly with no sense of path except general direction and least resistance from the natural environment. She doesn’t break branches or spoil moss-covered patches of ground, leaving only the bare bones of a trace behind her.

It takes roughly twenty minutes to reach the crest of the incline, where finally the earth plateaus and clears. Trees still scatter along the edge, but provide far less cover. Beyond, the perimeter of the base
is clearly visible, albeit shrouded in canvas camouflaging meant to throw off the flyover photographs taken from above. Little good it had done them, in the end.

Sylvia halts behind a thick-trunked fir tree, pressing herself into its curve. Napoleon slides in close to her.

“Your turn,” she whispers.

He nods, and cuts a look at the base.

To the left and right, the remaining Marchers loom. They hardly move, could be mistaken for trees, almost, except for the slow rotation of their oblong heads.

Napoleon frowns. It takes a him moment and a review of his recent memories to be sure.

“They’re moving differently than before,” he murmurs beneath his breath.

“Is that bad?” Sylvia asks, just as quietly.

“I don’t know.” It doesn’t look like compensation for their fallen counterpart. They don’t appear to have compensated at all, actually, which is good for Napoleon. But they are nonetheless moving with a different manner than before, one with which Napoleon isn’t familiar.

The one to Napoleon’s right, on bristling limbs that are still and at rest, moves its head from left to right.

At roughly two o’clock, its movement hitches, pauses, then resumes.

Napoleon stares. Even as he can feel Sylvia’s impatience begins to manifest in the darkness, he watches.

There isn’t a pattern. If it’s not two o’clock, it’s seven, or nine, and never at a predictable time. If Napoleon didn’t know better, he’d say it was jumping at shadows.

Impossible.

He concentrates on the fact that they haven’t compensated, at least not well. They might not even need Sputnik’s help.

He calculates the trajectory of the Marchers’ gaze, the distance of the first building on this side of the base.

“Okay,” he breathes. “On my mark. Follow as closely as you can.” And then, to Sputnik, *Would you please try and say hello?*

*Highly irregular,* Sputnik complains.

*Will you? They’re your comrades, technically.*

*...I suppose.*

The ping feels like a shout in all directions, a burst of inchoate static in the darkness.

*Loud,* Ockham admonishes.

*I don’t know what I expected,* Napoleon admits. Emerson trills with laughter.
The effect is immediate; all three Marchers tilt their heads upwards, scanning fast. Napoleon thinks he sees just a sliver of light suddenly switch on far off in the distance, but he isn’t certain.

“Now,” he hisses, and takes off.

It feels good to run, having been inactive for so many days. He cuts across the field in a wide arc, in and out of the blind spots left by the missing Marcher. The ground is damp with dew, and slips just slightly beneath him, but his hydraulics don’t fail, and his sight remains clear. Behind him, Sylvia keeps pace, her breathing steady and deep.

They reach the closest building in under a minute, just as Sputnik’s signal subsides. The Marchers are still scanning, their heads tilting like flowers towards the sun, their bodies utterly still.

“What in god’s name did you do?” Sylvia whispers.


The map of the complex Ockham provides is clear enough; they’ve approached from the north slope, while San Cristobal lies to the south. Between, the base is a mix of camouflaged hangars and dug-in barracks that in the darkness seemed like an odd assemblage of knolls among the scattered trees.

Burial mounds, a fanciful part of Napoleon’s mind supplies, like the ones the Celts had once erected.

The fallen Marcher, if it was not to rust, would have been taken into the hangar he’d been caught in last time, the one large enough to accommodate huge machinery. Between it and where he and Sylvia stand now are several smaller buildings, probably offices, judging by their lack of activity this time of night.

Napoleon leads towards the corner where the offices curve in towards the hangar. He is aided by the darkness—the secrecy the base has been built and maintained with extends to the lack of lighting around the grounds. It is easy to stay within the bounds of the long shadows, interrupted only by a waning moon and a smattering of starlight.

He breaks from the cover of the north-facing wall to slide into the shadow of a tall tree and then over to the next building, Sylvia pausing for a second to check the surrounds before doing the same. The base isn’t entirely silent—two guards are standing and smoking up ahead near the northwest corner of the hanger, facing outwards towards the trees, and in the interior of the base others’ steps register as faint whispers of grass crunching underfoot. Those two guards hadn’t been positioned there, last time—they must have been added to the rotation, after the break-in.

Napoleon watches the two of them as he sidles further towards the hangar. Sylvia catches his eye and tilts her head towards the interior of the base, where they stand a chance of avoiding them. He makes a dissatisfied face at her and shrugs. They court as much chance of being spotted either way. Better the guards they see than the ones they don't.

He tries to convey that with a look, and Sylvia looks between him and the guards before shrugging too, this time in agreement.

They creep closer until they’ve rounded the corner of the closet small building and face the north wall of the hangar, where moonlight falls in a diagonal shaft along the corrugated steel, striping it with vertical bars of rusted gray. As they approach, Napoleon can hear the guards’ murmured conversation.

"—looked nervous."
"Of course he's fucking nervous, he's failed. Absolute secrecy was paramount, you know this."

"How the hell were we supposed to be more secretive than this? We're sleeping in the dirt, we do nothing but work. I haven’t seen civilization in two months."

"He should have been more careful. Now we'll all suffer for it."

They are close enough to see the guards’ faces. The closer of the two is tall, wiry and dark-featured, and the burning end of his cigarette illuminates acne-pocked hollow cheeks, a snub nose and protruding eyes. His companion is far less distinctive, doughy and dishwater blond, with a nervous habit of shifting from foot to foot, even as his back remains militarily rigid.

The taller one drags on the cigarette at length. "We should have made this a joint operation."

Sylvia goes still at Napoleon’s back; Napoleon looks over his shoulder at her and finds her attention fixed, her head tilted forward in interest. After she doesn’t move for several seconds, he settles in against the wall, curious despite himself.

Meanwhile, the other guard makes an impatient noise at his companion. "So you've said."

"We are nations of common principles, common goals. We should respect them as such. They might have known better, how to plan this, how to use our terrain."

"You barely speak Spanish."

"I speak more than you."

"Have you even talked to any of them?"

He puffs up. "I have. When we were negotiating supplies."

The shorter one scoffs. "More like commandeered. It was not good form."

"Which might have gone better if we—"

"—Just made it a joint operation, yes, yes."

"I am just saying—"

"I know," he sighs, "What you are saying."

They fall silent, and continue to smoke with somber inattention.

Napoleon looks at Sylvia, who remains peering out at them for a moment longer, before she huffs a breath and returns his glance, nodding for them to continue. She looks thoughtful, what Napoleon can see of her face in the gloom.

They make their way down to the end of the middle hangar.

There, the entrances to the third hangar is visible, facing the inside of the base—one massive set of sliding doors meant to accommodate the breadth of a Marcher, and several smaller side doors for crew and technicians. A sentry stands at the larger door, but without discipline; he back is bowed into a tired lean, and one foot rests up against the wall, his rifle propped to one side. Midnight has not yet come—these people are all at the ends of their shifts, are waiting out the remaining minutes.

Good.
Napoleon and Sylvia stay glued to the shadows.

Ten minutes until shift change, Ockham observes. You could wait.

Best not to, they'll perk up for that, Napoleon replies. No, I just need to get past this one guard, and then—

PING.

He jerks slightly, enough for Sylvia to frown at him.

The other bots freeze with him. It is unlike any signal he’s ever received, a long-wave, triple-frequency jolt of sound, like the groan of tectonic plates amplified through the ether. Napoleon half-expects the whole camp to wake with it.

“What?” Sylvia mouths.

He shakes his head. Glances around to see if anyone else has noticed.

Oh, Emerson says faintly. I think that’s for you, Sputnik.

They all digest this for several, fraught microseconds.

Then Sputnik says, It would be rude not to answer.

You’re probably right, Napoleon says, even as he forces himself to inhale, work air over his overtaxed systems. Perhaps...perhaps they would like to know the weather up there?

Will they even understand me? Sputnik says, with surprising diffidence.

I don’t know, Napoleon answers honestly. I’ve never been able to understand them, but you are not the same as me.

Before Sputnik replies, however, Napoleon is distracted by other, more human sounds.

They’re not close, more along the perimeter of the base—a murmur of voices, not alarmed, but concerned. Napoleon can only hear them, not see.

“What is happening?” Sylvia says under her breath, pressing herself further into shadow.

“Not sure,” Napoleon murmurs back. “Might not be anything to do with us.”

“Might,” Sylvia repeats darkly.

Sputnik? he queries.

Shh. I am busy.

Napoleon begins to bristle with curiosity, but Emerson quells him with a clipped ping. Listen, she implores. Can’t you hear it?

He can’t, but it isn’t so surprising—his attention is too split. Around him, the commotion is loud enough that it’s caught the hangar guard’s attention. He straightens, looking around, and then pushes off the wall with his propped up foot, snagging his rifle by the tip of the barrel and propelling himself into a slow few steps toward the sound.
“Come on,” Napoleon says under his breath. “Go and have a look.”

The sound resolves slightly as it gets closer—footsteps towards the perimeter of the base.

“What the fuck is—?”

“Someone wake Brusentsov!”

That name sounds familiar, but Napoleon can’t place it. The guard’s curiosity, however, seems to finally get the better of him, and with a quick toss of his rifle into a better grip, he trots off towards the edge of the base.

Sylvia taps Napoleon’s shoulder in inquiry, and he silently counts down from five before nodding and jogging over to the door, Sylvia watching their backs as she follows.

The door, heavy steel rusting at its corners, is secured with a magnetic card reader. Napoleon studies it for a brief moment, and then turns his attention outward. A faint buzz meets his receptors, in addition to the usual thrum of the bots’ radio signals hopping from frequency to frequency.

*Ockham?*

*Unlocking now.*

The reader beeps, and the door unlatches.

“How—”

“Our friend down the hill.”

“Tell me what you’re going to do before you do it, for god’s sake.”

“You don’t like my methods?”

“I don’t like *not knowing* .”

“My apologies,” Napoleon says gravely. He pushes the door open, and then gestures for her to enter with a courteous half-bow. “Ma’am.”

“We are not remotely safe from you,” she mutters, but doesn’t hesitate stepping into the darkness of the hangar.

Inside, dim industrial lights flicker at intervals from the ceiling, far enough apart for the light to die before it reaches the edges of the building. The silhouettes of Marchers are broken up and become abstract amidst the shadows of computing equipment, cables snaking from the ground, and large step ladders and platforms that dot the gloom. Napoleon sees three that could potentially be the airborne variety—they seem slighter in build, more streamlined than their land-bound counterparts—but no immediate sign of the broken one from the perimeter.

There are no windows and all of the fans are turned off for the night, so the smell of metal and the post-thunder stench of plasma is overwhelming. The sense-memory of it hits Napoleon with astounding intensity—it’s the way the lab on the Vinciguerra’s island had smelled when Emerson and her brethren had come online.

*Stellarator technology is in use,* he reports to Emerson. *They definitely got a hold of the Berlin cache.*

*We didn’t expect anything else,* Emerson replies, with a projected shrug.
Napoleon wonders, not for the first time, what else might have been stashed away in Berlin, and is now safe in the vaults of the Kremlin.

Ahead of him, Sylvia curses under her breath. “Napoleon,” she calls.

He finds her in the darkness, some yards away between a bank of computers and what looks like a disorderly heap of scrap by the silhouette it casts in the backlight of the dim halogen high up near the ceiling.

“What is it?” he asks.

“Is that your Marcher?” she asks, pointing at the heap.

Napoleon studies it. Slowly, the pieces resolve into parts. “I think so,” he says, grim. “Doesn’t look very good, does it?”

“No,” Sylvia agrees. “I’m going to look for the head.” She begins to circle the wreckage.

Napoleon? Sputnik cuts in. A question.

He raises his eyebrows. Yes?

Are you with Comrade? Sputnik asks. There is something strange about its voice, even as the transmission comes through loud and clear.

Napoleon pauses. Come again?

Comrade. Are you with him?

He glances at the heap of scrap. I think so, he answers cautiously.

Suddenly, he is very aware of that buzz that had been thrumming at the back of his mind since he and Sylvia had entered the base. What is that? he asks.

Emerson pings him with reproof. Who do you think?

I...

He stops. Tries to absorb the din, and finds that it hurts.

I don’t understand them.

We don’t have to. Emerson says. We just have to know. They have a voice. They can think.

And they want to talk to...us?

For better or worse, Ockham says darkly.

***

Illya wakes in the early hours of the morning, his body unused to medicated sleep, fighting it as soon as it ebbs in his bloodstream. His arm pulses dully, phantom hand making itself known at intervals. The night is near silent, punctuated only by faint sounds of wildlife, and the stray coughs of another inmate, far down the hall.

He stares at the ceiling, listening to Gaby breathe as she throws off nearly uncomfortable levels of
heat. She had octopused herself around him in the night, damp arm and leg thrown over him with forthright possessiveness. He finds he doesn’t mind it. He is relieved not to be alone in this place.

He can’t deny, however, how desperately he craves Moscow in this moment.

It is a combination of so many things. The oppressive heat of Cuba, all that has befallen him here, the distance between himself and his homeland, both physical and political. He knows there are Russians here, living and working and settled, but except for the soldiers in San Cristobal, he has not seen any, and his head swims with Spanish vowels.

And then, there is the expectation.

When a mission fails, you retreat, you return to base. Debrief, face any discipline deemed appropriate. Recover, recondition. It is what is done.

His body screams to report in. It has been too long since Waverly’s failure to extract.

Gaby shifts, her breath huffing against his chest with a touch of exhausted impatience, as if she can hear him thinking. His arm is asleep underneath her; he flexes it slowly to get the circulation going, but ends up settling his palm over the jut of her thin shoulder.

He gave up the right to go home the moment he decided to come here. There is no one left to report in to. He is hobbled, tied to this hospital and to this bed, and whatever happens in the outside world will happen without him.

And still, he keeps whirring around the impulse, itching at it and feeling it pull like scar tissue.

He stands by his first assessment—that they are strangers here, they don’t have the knowledge they need to act, nor the sanctions.

But Moscow—Ilya knows Moscow. He had never been privy to high up official business, but he had lived within its politics, been paraded about and groomed within it, since he had been a boy.

He lets himself ponder it, the tangled structures of connections, bribes, power grabs. They had snarled around him like they had everyone else, nearly intangible but stuck fast like spider’s silk. In his prime, Ilya could have drawn a perfect diagram of the whole mess, at least insofar as he’d witnessed it, known at least in theory where the threads frayed and tugged, even if doing so would have required an understanding of people that he had never bothered to develop.

Napoleon would have known what to do with it all. But he isn’t here. Ilya only knows a very small set of people in Moscow well enough to suspect how they might react, should their strings be tugged. It is his least favorite type of math, but he thinks that maybe he could be better at it now than he was before.

Ilya eases himself out from under Gaby’s grip, hampered by his IV drip and her own unconscious intransigence. It takes several minutes of awkward maneuvering, but eventually he manages it. His knees feel watery, his feet unsteady and foreign to him on the wooden floor, but he doesn’t need to go far.

The transceiver Gaby built is heavy, her workmanship sound. Ilya recognizes the brand names on some of the parts as American, no doubt from some of the businesses since nationalized under Castro. The quality doesn’t seem to have dipped since the Cuban takeover—perhaps Castro’s enthusiasm for machinery has seen this particular branch of the economy boom here. The keyboard and screen are an unfamiliar addition to standard design, which he wonders at.
He lugs the transceiver over to the wicker chair in the corner of the room, dragging his IV stand along with him with the crook of his bandaged arm. Inconvenient, he thinks tiredly, so inconvenient. He ignores the growing roar of hurt from the stump as the opiates in his bloodstream continue to abate.

He sits heavily in the chair and sets the transceiver on his knees. It’s a matter of remembering Gaby’s movements and a bit of inference to get it working, avoiding the unfamiliar interface for now. It is far simpler, once he is past the initial clumsiness of new machinery, to recall the sequence of hailing frequencies, the pings and passcodes to set the signal jumping in just the right direction.

He hopes his codes haven’t been scrubbed from protocol. That would...that would hurt, strange as it is to admit it.

The screen comes to life, white text scrolling up the screen, not so fast that Illya can’t follow it, but the language is too technical for him to understand more than snippets. He catches names of places, something about a waystation in New Brunswick, but nothing else of significance to him.

It takes almost ten minutes for the signal to bounce through the various arbiters of Soviet military communications. The static and punctuated beeps of morse code seem obscenely loud in the dawn, but Gaby continues to sleep like the dead. She probably hasn’t slept properly, Illya thinks with a pang, since they went to ground in Bauta. Illya had been too feverish to notice before.

Finally, the signal clears, more so than Illya expects, given the distance.

“This is Redfoot. Report.”

Illya exhales. “Black Bear checking in.”

There is a long silence, longer than the many relays of the signal alone could account for. Then, with a voice so familiar Illya could practically see him bending sternly over the radio, cigarette smoke pluming around him: “We need to talk, Black Bear.”

“We do,” Illya agrees. “Is there a direct line I can access?”

Another long silence. Then, “No.”

Illya opens his mouth, then closes it. “No?”

“There are no direct lines between our locations. Stand by.”

Illya is very tired of being told to stand by. “Standing by.”

The next pause is nearly interminable, punctuated only by Gaby turning over with a huff. Illya’s brain keeps turning over and over.

It seems nearly impossible that what Oleg had said is true—no direct communication lines between Cuba and Russia, two technologically-advanced, allied countries, one of which was at this moment overrun with the other’s citizens? How did orders even reach the operators here? It is not as if Illya has ever had reason to do much international communication beyond dead drops and short distance check-ins, but surely that had been simply due to his particular line of work, not the state of communications as a whole.

He must be missing something. Gaby will know. He’ll have to ask her when she wakes.

If it’s true, however, then his leverage is compromised. Any chance he might have to speak to Oleg
privately, to appeal to his patriotism and sense of duty, would mostly be squandered.

He looks down at the transceiver in his lap. The best damn one on the island, if Gaby is to be believed. She had been hailing across the Atlantic with it, albeit unsuccessfully, before.

How much is that worth, to a country unable to talk to its own people half a world away?

The transceiver pops, loud enough to finally pull Gaby out of sleep. She comes awake with a start, her hands in fists, tendons in her neck standing out taut beneath her skin as she sucks in a wet breath. “Was ist—? Illya?”

“Here,” Illya says, shot through suddenly with guilt. He has perhaps been impulsive in the last hour.

It takes a moment for her to find him in the dawn shadows, and a second to recognize the transceiver in his lap.

“What are you doing?”

Illya looks at her and asks, “What is the range on this, do you think? At the outside?”

She rubs her eyes. “It’s not a matter of range,” she says, voice rough. “It’s what it’s compatible with and how long the signal can last before its quality degrades. Anything it can interface with, it can send a signal through. And I built a repeater into the system to keep the signal strong across multiple channels and switchboards. There are limits, but. It’s as far as you can get without a high-altitude dish, or something like it.”

“How does it find what paths to take?” Illya asks.

“I gave it efficiency algorithms,” Gaby replies. “It searches for viable receiving and transmitting towers, finds the shortest route, and goes from there.”

“So to get to Waverly—”

“Radio transmission to Florida, I should think, then telephone lines up the east coast to Newfoundland, and then the transatlantic cable,” she says. “Followed by the local cable infrastructure from Scotland down to England.”

Illya blinks. “And you’re sure what you sent got through?”

Even hampered by her continued exhaustion, Gaby’s glare is impressively disdainful. “Yes, I’m sure. The signal won’t have been very strong by the time it got to the office, but I’m certain it arrived intelligibly—I’m familiar with that route, the infrastructure is sound enough to keep the signal going the whole way through.”

“Could you reach Moscow?”

She stares at him. “No. Lines between England and Russia, are you crazy? Even if they existed, they would be monitored day and night, no chance that anything unofficial could make its way through. Unless you magically got hold of a satellite or something—”

Illya stills. “This can communicate via satellite?”

“No, Lines between England and Russia, are you crazy? Even if they existed, they would be monitored day and night, no chance that anything unofficial could make its way through. Unless you magically got hold of a satellite or something—”

Illya looks down at the transceiver. He went through the proper channels, he’s certain, and he knows
what Oleg sounds like. “I thought I had. I...Oleg was...” He startles. “Can we trace his location back through the lines?”

Gaby raises her eyebrows. “Easily, it says it all on the screen. But why on earth would you want to, what are you doing?”

Illya shrugs, hunching down a bit, even as possibilities zing inside him. He taps at the arrows on the keyboard, scrolling up, tracing through the bouncebacks, the referrals. “You wanted to do something. Waverly can’t help. But someone who knows and understands what is at stake might be able to.”

“You’re giving yourself up,” Gaby points out. “He finds you, and you’ll be hauled in the moment they can get to you—tried for treason, worse.”

Illya shrugs again. Keeps scrolling. “Maybe, maybe not. Depends on what we can do for them.”

“You were just saying we could do more harm than good!”

“If we interfere, yes,” Illya nods. “If we act without intelligence.”

Gaby shakes her head. “You didn’t even like Oleg. From what Napoleon said, he treated you like some...mindless beast!”

“Oleg,” Illya says carefully, avoiding the thought of Napoleon talking about that first meeting, of his anger on Illya’s behalf that Illya has only ever seen flashes of himself, “Could have ejected me from service and advised that I be permanently retired. It probably would have been the correct thing to do. He didn’t.”

The transceiver crackles again, and then Oleg’s voice comes through, distorted but understandable. “Black Bear, come in.”

The screen updates the signal location. Illya stares at it.

Gaby meets Illya’s gaze, and shakes her head. “Don’t.”

“Do you trust me?” Illya counters. “Do you trust my judgment?”

She searches his face. “You’re hurt,” she says, like she’s walking on crusted snow, trying not to break the surface and sink. “You’re barely recovered. Don’t feel like you have to do this just because I want to make a difference. You were right, before. We are small here.”

He exhales. “My body is hurt,” he says. “But I can still think.” He presses the side of his stump against the transceiver, feels the answering throb of pressure and breathes with the heavy thump of his blood through his veins. He feels galvanized, alive with the muffling weight of painkillers gone, his mind so clear and fast even as his body screams at it. “I can think.”

“And what are you thinking?” Gaby asks, slipping off the bed and shuffling over to him, her arms wrapped around her middle, looking down at him with eyes pooled with shadow.

“I’m thinking that there are people in Moscow who would jump at the chance to speak with members of the American cabinet directly, off the record. I am thinking that Oleg has been a patriot and a faithful member of the Communist Party, has been trusted with many state secrets before, and has no family to speak of whom he might put at risk. I think that you’ve perhaps made a very ingenious machine, one that might be considered invaluable to the Cuban government, who have no transceivers of their own.” Illya shakes his head. “There are pieces in play everywhere. Some of
them, we can even reach.”

“Black Bear, come in,” Oleg repeats, impatience and tension coming in clear even through the static.

He looks up at Gaby. “For example: Oleg is in London. Why do you think that might be?”

Her eyes widen. “Scheiße. Waverly.”

Illya nods. “He might know what is happening. Might want something from us that he can’t get from Waverly. Might have access to information we could use in return.”

“It’s a risk,” Gaby warns. “For you more than me.”

“When have you been afraid of that?” Illya retorts.

She stares down at him, her throat working. Illya raises an eyebrow at her.

“Your call,” she says finally. “I trust you.”

Illya raises the handpiece to his lips.

“Black Bear, reporting,” Illya says. “If you want to make sure this crisis doesn’t end in war, please find us a secure line. Barring that, I would respectfully request access codes to the Sputnik series, so that we can create one ourselves.”

Chapter End Notes

I am reaching the limits of my knowledge in regards to communications technology of this era, but I'm also claiming creative license because sci-fi. Along those lines, Gaby's transceiver is probably unfeasibly awesome by historical standards, and far more capable of hacking various kinds of stations than actually possible ever, at all. I might fix that later? Maybe not, if I am lazy.

While the first transatlantic cable was laid in the nineteenth century, a telephone cable wasn't laid until the 50s, running between Scotland and Newfoundland. Coaxial cables were laid later on, but let's imagine that timeline moved up a bit.
And what crisis is that?” Oleg asks.

Illya rolls his eyes. “You can trace my location. I think you might infer from there. Sir.” He’s never been so insolent to a superior officer before. He half expects to be slapped through the transceiver.

“You are a deserter, Agent. Shoot on sight.”

He swallows down the automatic spike of shame. Not ideal. “Who knows those orders?”

Silence.

Not many people then, probably none outside of Europe. Except for the CIA, but that’s hardly a change from usual.

“Sir,” Illya says, working saliva into his mouth, “I have never strayed from the cause. You know that I would not.”

“Recent events would indicate otherwise.”

“Sir,” Illya offers, near to pleading, “If it were otherwise, I would not be talking to you. And...if you are looking for plausible deniability, I can supply it.”

Another interminable pause.

When Oleg replies next, the quality of the static is different, more evenly quiet. He’s sent everyone out of the room, he has to have. Illya’s heart stutters with hope.

“Clarify,” Oleg says.

Illya breathes out. He must tread very very carefully. He has none of Napoleon’s charm, so he must keep his reasoning sound, his logic unassailable, his read on the room perfectly calibrated. “I have the means to create a secure line. If you want access to such a line, you will provide the necessary infrastructure for it to connect. The Sputniks.”

He swallows, breathes twice quickly. “If we manage this, Moscow may be curious to know how we have managed to communicate securely over such a large distance, particularly when I am certain there are currently more pressing matters to communicate across international lines. For that alone, you could receive commendations.”

“I cannot give access codes without authorization.”

Illya leans forward, vision going sharp and bright for a moment. “Understood. And if I were to provide such authorization?”

“What?” Gaby snaps, knocking his hand away. “Illya, I can’t understand you, what on earth are you doing?”

He glares and snatches the microphone back. “Chain of command,” he says into it, still in Russian, looking straight at her. “I know those protocols were not rescinded.”
There is a long, long silence.

“They were not rescinded because there was no one to use them,” Oleg says. “May I remind you, Agent, that you are no longer of that rank?”

“But I still know the authorization code,” Illya responds. “As first line of defense against Intelligent Machine Warfare, I was required to know them. I have not forgotten them.”

“There is no reason for me to respect such outdated regulations.”

“That is true,” Illya agrees. “But it would be a perfectly acceptable reason to do as I request, should you wish to. Which I think you should, if you want to know what is happening on the ground where I am.”

The doubt is palpable even from such a distance.

“Minsk, ’59,” Illya says, a little desperately, “You trusted me then. Trust me now.”

He sits back, letting his thumb go loose against the handpiece. Gaby, breathing deeply, lets her knees bend until she descends to the floor, tucking herself against the footboard of the hospital bed. She looks at him with eyes of burning coal.

“If he doesn’t take the bait now, we are lost,” Illya admits to her, in the spirit of transparency.

She doesn’t flinch, doesn’t even grimace. “What happened in Minsk?” she asks instead.

“There was a double agent,” Illya answered. “Clever, well-read, had made a name for himself among partisans and the Party alike. I suspected him when no one else did. When the time came, I killed him. Not on orders.” Just to prove that he was still good, maybe. He had still been fresh from the Baltics, instincts still raw like nerve endings. The kill had been clean though. It had been a strange sort of comfort to him, at the time.

He lets out a breath and looks towards the window, where the morning light was heating. “I saw what everyone else didn’t. Radulov trusted me. He got promoted for it, after everything was sorted out. I’m the only one who knows he didn’t find the mole himself.” He swallows. “If he can trust me now like then, he will trust me with the codes.”

“You’re sure of that?”

He lifts a shoulder. “I suppose we will see.”

“And then I suppose it will be up to me to figure out how to create a secure line out of a Soviet satellite floating up in god knows where,” Gaby mutters. “Wonderful.”

“You already built this,” Illya says, tapping the transceiver, “You can achieve the rest.” It earns him a glare that he is certain he deserves.

Oleg comes back over the line in a crackle like a sigh. “Authorization codes please, Agent.”

Illya meets Gaby’s eyes, and with a steady voice, recites them.

***

“So,” Napoleon says slowly, “I perhaps have found another way of reaching the Marchers.”

Sylvia turns to him. “And you only mention this now?” She gestures widely at their current
predicament, the silo full of Soviet machinery.

“I didn’t know it was an option until just now,” Napoleon replies. He is holding himself very still, he realizes; he feels very small, like startled prey in a dark forest.

The hum is in his bones now, the strange language(?) of the Marchers resonating.

_Sputnik_, he sends. *Am I to understand you can speak with the Marchers?*

*I...am aware of them speaking, Sputnik hedges. I think they have used me to speak. I didn’t—I was not aware of what I spoke before I spoke it.*

Napoleon takes a moment to parse that, and replays the way in which Sputnik had for a moment sounded not like one, but like many.

*I see,* he says, and then runs out of words. Out of lack of anything else to do, and an urge to act, he joins Sylvia in rummaging through the scrap heap of the fallen Marcher.

“No, Sylvia says quietly. “What is going on? The commotion outside—it sounds like it is about the Marchers.”

“It is,” Napoleon says. Cocking his head, he grabs a slab of circuit boards, turning them over in his hands. “They were—I asked Sputnik to attempt contact with them. As a distraction.”

“And they were distracted?”

“Well.”

“Dios mio.”

Voices outside the hangar are rising and falling, the thump of footsteps an abstract trill of improvised percussion. Dimly, Napoleon thinks he hears *you two, check inside!* shouted from somewhere, but he can’t pinpoint it or be sure.

“I think they can talk to us,” Napoleon says. “I think they want to, now that they know they can.”

“But you wanted to hack them,” Sylvia points out.

“I didn’t think they could feel it, then. I don’t—that kind of invasion isn’t pleasant, if you’re aware of it.” It’s unpleasant even if you aren’t, but he leaves that aside. “As a method of persuasion, it isn’t a good one, if we have other options.”

“Then we should get out of here, and soon,” Sylvia says. “While everyone is occupied.”

He nods, and slips the circuit boards into the inside of his jacket.

They head for the door, and then come abruptly to a halt.

The door is blocked.

“Назовите себя,” says the tall, wiry guard from outside, his rifle raised at Sylvia. Behind him, his pale companion has his own gun trained on Napoleon. Napoleon puts his hands up as well.

*I’m guessing we didn’t lock the door after us?* Napoleon queries to Ockham.

*Should we have?* Ockham answers, with mild curiosity. Napoleon understands despite his dismay:
when locked doors are just as easily opened as unlocked ones, the difference between the two becomes negligible.

*Never mind,* he replies, repressing a sigh.

He and Sylvia look at each other. There’s a question in the tilt of Sylvia’s eyebrow; though the specifics of the query escape Napoleon, he’s willing enough to follow her lead at this point. There is no recognition yet in either of the guards’ eyes, so perhaps they weren’t among the ones who’d found him wired to the computer banks. If they were regularly on the night shift, they wouldn’t have been.

With little option to do otherwise, he nods, and Sylvia’s mouth twitches in response.

She turns back to the guards, and raises her chin.

“My name is Sylvia Santos. Perhaps you have heard of me,” she says, in accented but firm, haughty Russian.

Napoleon stares at her, processors turning over in alarm. He rather wishes he had a wireless connection to her too, just so he knows what the hell she thinks she’s doing. The circuit boards seem to burn against his chest.

The reaction of the guards, however, is one of consternation rather than hostility. “Councilor Santos?” the tall one asks. “Of the M-26-7?”

“What—?” the pale one starts, but his companion is already starting forward, his gun falling to his side.

“Comrade,” he says, frowning. “What are you doing here?”

“*Comrade*?” Pale turns on his colleague. “She’s not—”

“She is a *revolutionary*,” Tall counters, not looking away from her. Nevertheless, he amends, “Señora, you should not be here.”

“Perhaps not,” Sylvia says with the sort of gracious nod most commonly associated with the Queen of England. “But given this evening’s news, you can’t blame me for having concerns about what’s going on here.”

Pale swallows. “And you couldn’t have made official inquiries?”

Sylvia raises an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, were you led to believe that I’m meant to know about this at all?”

They look at each other, and then back at her. Outside, there is a swell of commotion, and they shift uneasily, but hold their ground.

Sylvia softens, but it is a calculated softening, a further gracious bow that nonetheless asserts power rather than cedes it. “What are your names?” she asks. “Now that you know mine.”

“Yefreytor Evgeni Vladimirovich Gorlov,” Tall says, straightening.

Pale hesitates, then mutters, “Ryadovoy Burkovsky.”

Sylvia glances at Napoleon; he supplies helpfully in Spanish, “Private First Class and Private, respectively. More or less.”
“Who is he?” Burkovsky asks, jerking his chin in Napoleon’s direction.

“My lieutenant, Ernesto Cortiñas,” Sylvia supplies with a dismissive gesture, before Napoleon can even open his mouth. He holds his breath for their response.

Burkovsky only grants him cursory study, but Gorlov is far more keen, looking Napoleon up and down. “You don’t look Cuban,” he says, after a moment. “You look like you haven’t seen sun for weeks.”

Napoleon frowns, shading the expression with mild puzzlement, and then looks at Sylvia. “What did he say, Señora?” he asks, flawlessly Cuban in accent.

Sylvia’s eyes warm for a moment. “He said,” she replies, with less imperiousness and far more familiarity, “That you’re pale as a ghost.”

“Ah.” He looks back at Gorlov, whose expression has already begun to smooth with belief.

Sylvia smiles at Gorlov. “I’m afraid he can’t help it. His mother was Irish. He stays in the office, most days.”

“Me quemo mal,” Napoleon shrugs in agreement.

Burkovsky, whose pallor even in the dim light is clearly tinged on nose and forehead with a painful pink-red, makes a noise of reluctant sympathy. Gorlov shoots him a look, but seems willing to be convinced. “You still haven’t said,” he says to Sylvia, “What you are doing here, Señora. We should —we ought to take you in for questioning.”

“I think my answers would be obvious,” Sylvia retorts. “The United States has just formed a blockade around my country, and I wanted to know the truth of why.”

Burkovsky shifts in place. “We did not know,” he mutters, “Until we got here, what we would be doing. We thought we were going to patrol the North Sea—” Gorlov glares at him. He subsides.

“I am sure it was believed that secrecy was the only way,” Sylvia murmurs, not recognizing the censure. “If you had not been caught before construction was finished…”

“But we were,” Gorlov interrupts, shaking his head. “And now we are to pay for it.” He exhales softly. “You need to leave, Señora,” he says. “I am not unsympathetic. But what you are doing now—it will not help. Now, of all times, our countries should not be divided.”

Sylvia tilts her head, like she is going to protest. Then slowly, she unwinds. “Very well,” she says. “Perhaps you are right. I suppose we’ve seen enough.”

The two guards exchange a speaking look, made heavy by the noise outside. Likewise, Napoleon looked to Sylvia, but her expression remained forward-looking, placid.

“There seems to be quite a commotion,” she observes. “Shouldn’t you be attending to that?”

Burkovsky gave her a dark look. “We had orders to check here. Rightfully, it would seem.”

“We are allies,” Sylvia shrugs. “Surely, now that you know our names, we are not so much of a threat.”

“We will have to report you,” Gorlov says, albeit reluctantly.

“Do,” Sylvia allows. “But per your instructions, we should be going now.”
Burkovsky opens his mouth, and then looks at Gorlov with marked skepticism. “We should detain them,” he points out.

Gorlov hesitates. “They are our allies,” he says, “Our hosts.”

Sylvia stays very still. So does Napoleon, who breathes only for the sake of the artifice, even as every instinct tells him to be made of stone.

“We are only trying to protect our country,” he says after a long and uncertain pause, calibrating his tone just right, just enough: without any hint of a plea, only a recitation of fact, when fact, all of them know, will be used to justify what happens next, good or bad.

It is very clear that the meaning is not lost on Gorlov, even without a full grasp of the language. He is not a killer, nor is he a seasoned soldier, Napoleon would wager. Probably a university student who got a taste for military patriotism.

“Zhenya—” Burkovsky starts.

“Go,” Gorlov interrupts, standing away from the door. “Do not be seen.”

Immediately, Napoleon ducks his head and cuts between the two guards to crack open the door, checking their route. The soldiers have moved out from the compound into the fields surrounding, where the Marchers are. They’ll have to take a different route from where they came from, but they’ll find a way, there are more than enough distractions.

In the darkness outside the compound, the silhouette of a Marcher shifts and creaks, like it’s dreaming. Its unearthly call drones on. The radio techs must have picked up the signal by this point —Napoleon wonders whether it’s any more penetrable to them than to him. The fact that he can’t begin to guess is alarming.

At the back of his mind, he is aware of discussion washing between the other bots, arguing about how best to communicate with the Marchers, if it is even possible beyond this one-way projection through Sputnik. He gets the impression that O’Malley and Kumar are arguing with each other and with Emerson at the same time.

“Señora,” he begins, and stops when he turns to look back at Sylvia.

She is shaking hands with Gorlov, her opposite hand covering the clasp. “I wish you luck,” she says. “And I will not forget this.”

“It is probably best that you did, comrade,” Gorlov says, equally gravely. “Be well.”

Burkovsky’s mouth has twisted in disapproval, but he doesn’t make any move to protest. Napoleon pins him with a look, and reluctantly he nods; his complicity now must guarantee his silence later, or he risks condemning himself. When he still doesn’t say anything, and only glances away from Sylvia when she nods in his direction, Napoleon lets him be.

They don’t speak as they navigate the shadows of the buildings, then the stop-start journey to the treeline, steering far clear of the clusters of soldiers around the feet of the Marchers, their faces all turned up like supplicants, rifles slack in their hands.

When they finally rejoin the path they had originally taken up the slope, the farmhouse in sight from between tangled branches, Napoleon turns to her.

“How the hell did you know that would work?” he asks. “Telling them who you are?”
"I know an idealist when I see one," she replies.

"You're an idealist."

"Yes," she nods. "That doesn't mean I don't know how to use one."

He shakes his head. "You are extraordinary."

"Coming from you, I will take that as praise," she replies. "Now how do we proceed?"

Breathing deeply, Napoleon withdraws the circuit board from his coat. "We hook this up to Ockham," he says. "And hope that between that and Sputnik, we figure out how the hell to talk to a bunch of machines that were never supposed to talk at all."

"Ah," Sylvia says, pointedly without surprise. "You'll probably want to use this as well, then."

And she produced from her pocket a small black box, featureless with the exception of three standard ports on one side. "What is that?" Napoleon asks.

"I'm surprised you do not know," she says. "The tertiary brain. Ockham has one as well—we found it when we..." She breaks off with an awkward but illustrative tilt of her head and shoulder.

Napoleon stares at her. "I don't have one of those," he says. "I don't think."

"You don't know your own design?"

"Do you know the whole of yours?"

She snorts. "Point." She weighs the box in her hand. "From what we could tell, this is the protocol center, where all military inputs are first installed. The ones you have I imagine are the processing motherboards. The physical action processors are probably still in the scrap heap, they're evenly distributed throughout the chassis, I'm told."

"In that regard we are similar, at least," Napoleon murmurs. He recalls Illya's hand, curling back behind his heat sinks and battery packs, to reconnect the wiring to his spinal processors. He wouldn't have had a tertiary CPU installed, he suspects, because he had been expected to learn all of his instructions, not have them set in stone from the beginning. No wonder he had felt something wrong, when the CIA had sent him that override protocol before he'd gone off to storm the Vinciguerra estate.

"All right," he concedes. "We hook everything up, and we see if we can make this a two-way conversation. Should be fine."


They set to work.

***

Illya seems both farther away and more real than Gaby has seen in recent days. He had been unearthly in his stillness, after he had finally been sedated at the clinic, and then after the surgery. In the hours after Gaby had been given permission to see him, she'd barely thought him real, some sort of ghost that would follow her to the end of her days, swathed in white, huge and dull-eyed.

She keeps waiting for him to be angry, she realizes. She would be, she is certain; to lose something so precious, when something could have been done to prevent it, should have been done.
Illya has shown no sign of such feelings. A strange blankness had taken over him when he’d first looked down at the bandages, and he had been very quiet in the day following. The nurses whom Gaby had managed to accost said that he was a suspiciously good patient, too pliable and too well-behaved by half, not making a sound when they changed the dressings and drained fluid buildup.

(Gaby can’t bring herself to be in the room during those procedures. She tells herself she stays away for Illya’s privacy and pride, and part of her is sure he really wouldn’t care for company during such things, but she knows she stays away because she can’t stand it, the sterility, Illya’s calm.)

Now though, as they wait for Oleg to make whatever maneuvers necessary to give them access to a Soviet satellite, she watches him be as still as he always has managed to be, but this time, there is something alive in his face that has her trusting, however cautiously, to hope.

“Why did you think of him?” she asks. “Out of everyone?”

Illya lifts one shoulder, his lighter one. “Not a lot of options,” he says. “I was not so social.” Mocking self-awareness softens the skin around his eyes, and he appears jarringly warm for a moment, almost personable.

He rubs his stump in the carefully prescribed manner he had been taught yesterday, the transceiver balancing on his knees. The IV line attached to his arm wavers with the movement, like spider silk. Gaby looks down at her own hands, burned and bitten. It is too early to begin discussing prosthetics, Gaby has been told. A week at least to bring down the swelling and let the incisions heal over enough to get the stitches out.

Long enough, if they live through this, for her hands to heal in order to build him one, if he asks. She will ask Kumar for help with the intelligent interface. It will be the best the world has ever seen.

The transceiver pops with static. Illya sits forward slightly.

“Oleg speaks. He sounds, even to Gaby’s untrained ears, very tired indeed.

Illya lets out a breath. “He’s agreed. Get a piece of paper, we need to copy down the Sputnik’s overhead coordinates and hailing frequency.”

Gaby scrambles for paper and finds nothing; she settles for seizing a corner of Illya’s bedsheet and flattening it onto the floor to write.

Oleg speaks, and Illya translates. Gaby scribbles as quickly as she can.

Oleg keeps talking after Illya ceases to translate. Illya is very still as he listens, his gaze caught in the middle distance, but Gaby can practically see the gears whizzing. Before, she had often thought of him as made of stone, heavy and inscrutable, and even the brief flashes of brilliance that Napoleon had assured her were in abundance, if she had the patience to look, had seemed more like crossbow bolts than clever trappings. Now, there seems a gleam to his sharpness, a complexity that she can’t help wanting to understand the cause of.

“Oleg will need proof that we can send an encrypted signal so far,” Illya says, when Oleg has stopped talking. “Can you do it?”

“If we have access to a direct frequency? Of course,” she says, indignant. “You’ll need to tell him how to decrypt though. Is there a standard Soviet encryption algorithm? Use that, but give him a unique passkey.”
Illya tilts his head in assent, and presumably passes on her instructions. Gaby huffs through her nose, and wishes she’d studied Russian instead of French in school.

Illya shuts the transceiver off. “We have an hour.”

“One hour?” Gaby repeats. “That’s what you’re giving me?”

“Oleg is not a particularly patient man,” Illya says, raising his eyebrows. “You need more time?”

“...No.” She has no idea what she’s doing, but like hell is she going to miss a deadline. She hadn’t when she’d been in school, nor when she’d ended up at the chop shop in Berlin. Speed is a thrill and a point of pride, and she’ll be damned if she’s going to let go of it now. “Give me that thing.”

She works on the floor, getting dust and grease on her new dress, in addition to the grass stains. There aren’t a lot of adjustments to make, she doesn’t think, though they’ll probably need to go back up on the roof. The dish she’d been using to focus the signal is small, made of an old rusted colander—she’ll need better to get up through to the thin atmosphere where the Sputnik orbited.

“I’ll be right back,” she says, the recalled images of an old paper parasol abandoned in the waiting room, and the rolls of aluminum foil stored in the kitchens in the front of her mind. She stands, her back and knees crackling, and heads towards the front of the clinic.

It’s late enough in the morning now that some of the nurses have begun to come in and attend on their earliest rounds, and delivery trucks have started their runs. The growl of engines outside and the growing heat make everything feel too heavy and loud to Gaby, though perhaps that’s just the sleep deprivation talking. She digs the heels of her hands into her eyes to rub away crust and dryness, and breathes through the sparks behind her eyelids.

“Señora?”

The parasol had been left by a chair in the corner, she remembers, she’d nearly knocked it over with her foot when she’d gone to grab a nap the other day. It had been propped up against a palm-like potted plant.

“Señora!”

She looks up, through the pair of low windows that face the front porch and the road. The bright corona from rubbing her eyes clears. She squints. It takes her a full minute and the gravel patter of the figure’s stumbling steps up to the porch to put name to face.

“... Nicola?”

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“In some ways, this might be easier,” Napoleon says, rubbing his hands together. “At least this way, I might have backup.”

“Ockham?” Sylvia says, with a shade of doubt.

“And Sputnik,” Napoleon shrugs. And Emerson and O’Malley and Kumar. A real group effort. It’s the only thing keeping him from running for the hills.

That, and Dr. Kumar managing to splice an audio line into Emerson’s wireless signal. “I’ve been studying up on the Marchers, at Emerson’s request,” she says, the cut-glass British accent oddly comforting. There’s a bit of lag, due to the nature of the signal and the slowness of verbal speech in
comparison to the compound code the rest of the crowd is utilizing, but there’s something comforting about that too, Napoleon finds. He supposes his time spent among humans is several orders of magnitude longer than that he has spent with other AIs.

Dr. Kumar continues, “Technically, there just shouldn’t be much space for them to develop consciousness—they’re already weighed down with all of the weaponry and armor, and after the computing power devoted to working all of that machinery, there’s only so much room for circuitry capable of adaptive learning outside of targeting and terrain navigation. Whatever your conversation ends up being about, it’s probably going to be primitive in vocabulary.”

Napoleon is beginning to have doubts about that, but he doesn’t say anything. There is no need to disconcert her or O’Malley further—what little they have admitted about their current whereabouts has been nothing good.

“I think Waverly was expecting Whitehall to come calling for an emergency consult, and ended up sorely disappointed,” Dr. Kumar had said, when Napoleon had inquired. “Whoever it was that finally came calling, they weren’t friendly.”

Emerson had, at his persistent urging (now that the situation was, if nonetheless urgent, not as life-threateningly dire), finally sent a terse data packet containing her understanding of what had happened: Waverly had disappeared upstairs when whoever it was outside broke the stalemate by coming to the door, bidding all of the staff to escape home, and then hadn’t returned. After many hours, Dr. Gillman had slipped off with Yu and Bering via a distraction involving two London cabbies and a hacked traffic light; but O’Malley, worried about Emerson, had gone to check on her in the safe room, and Kumar had followed her. They’d gotten out of Wilton Crescent some time later via one of the neighboring flats, which had a wine cellar that abutted the underground warren Waverly had carved out. It means that Waverly’s base of operations is entirely compromised, entirely at the mercy of whatever forces decided to lay siege to it, but at least its staff remain at large. Kumar, however, sounds tired and shaken beneath her good breeding.

Napoleon is happy to have her and O’Malley all the same. A more technical view of what they are facing can only help, when the rest of the machines are feeling their way around half-blind, following a whale song they don’t understand beyond Sputnik’s puppeted query of, are you with Comrade?

They connect the tertiary CPU to Ockham’s chassis, and solder a connection to the circuit board into place.

“Okay,” Napoleon breathes, “No time like the present.” He looks at Sylvia. “I’m going to need your help with something.”

“All right,” she says, looking at him.

“I’m going to probably be travelling a bit. Not all of me is going to be in here.” He taps on his chest. “I’m going to set up an automated physical signal, which can only be disrupted if it looks like my code is corrupting. If that starts happening, if the signal stops, I need you to tell Ockham to quarantine my consciousness like he did when he caught me at the base.”

“Then what will happen to you?”

He shrugs. “Depends on what’s happened. But I’d rather not have any tether to the outside world if I go wrong—less chance of doing something bad that way.”

She nods slowly. “I will do this for you.”
He gives her a bright smile. “Much obliged.”

She isn’t fooled.

He sits on the ground next to Ockham’s inert chassis, cross-legged, and hooks himself up to the free cabling they’d left hanging the day before. He thankfully didn’t need to write a program for the automated signal; that was something left over from his first days, a tool they’d used to keep track of him when they’d gone digging inside him, hoping to find out why he was learning the way he was, why he was irregular.

He wraps one hand around the table legs. “This is the signal,” he says, and starts tapping the table leg with his index finger, a steady, hollow beat. “It stops, you get Ockham.”

She nods again.

“I’ll try not to be too long,” he adds, with false carelessness.

“Good luck,” Sylvia says to him, her brow slightly furrowed, her mouth set firm. “I’ll watch over you.”

He meets her eyes briefly. “Thanks.” And then shuts them.

New hardware detected, Ockham says.

No kidding, Napoleon replies. Let’s see what it’s like.

***

When Gaby returns to the room, a large parasol and a roll of aluminum foil is clutched to her chest, and her face is pale. Illya sits up straighter.

“What is it?” he asks.

Wordless, Gaby hands him a small slip of paper, dusty, crumpled, and slightly damp, like it had been clutched in a sweaty hand. She has clearly already read it, the worst of the creases unbent.

“Nicola Valdez just stopped by,” she says. “She just came from San Cristobal. She is looking for her brother.”

Illya reads the note, the small, precise handwriting at odds with the wavering lines. It must have been written in haste, on a rough surface. Wide-grain wood, his mind automatically supplies, unfinished.

WAVERLY COMPROMISED. HAVE FOUND NATIVE ALLIES. TRYING TO COOL SITUATION W/RESOURCES AT HAND. F.C. READY FOR WAR. IMPERATIVE TO CRACK MARCHER CODES. IF POSSIBLE, RADIO @4625 KHZ, KEYED W/BERLIN DATE. STAY SAFE. WILL FIND MY WAY TO YOU IF I CAN.

“Napoleon,” he breathes.

There is a buzzing in his ears, a thrum of blood and adrenaline. His hand shakes, the words blurring
in front of his eyes. He can’t tell which feels more overfull, his brain or his chest. He tries to parse the intel in the note and can barely get past the first sentence, despite it only confirming what they’ve long suspected.

“He’s alive,” Gaby says, and her voice wobbles. “He’s still...he’s still in play.”

Illya wants to see him, and the desire is so strong and so sudden he almost feels ill with it. He wants to go back to San Cristobal and find him, lay his head on his chest to listen to the susurrations of his machinery, the even whoosh of metal lungs. He wants—

“We need to finish the transceiver,” he says, distant. “Oleg will not wait.”

Gaby nods, biting her lip. Her eyes are huge in her face.

Illya swallows. “But after. We will—we will—“

“We’ll talk to him,” she finishes, nodding harder, and then she darts forward, dropping the parasol and aluminum onto the bed before jumping over the guts of the transceiver to cup Illya’s face in her hands and press a kiss, hard and hungry, to Illya’s lips. He leans into it, throat going tight, the warmth of her mouth like a shaft of sunlight after a long dark. She stays close when she pulls away to look at him.

“We’ll talk to him,” she repeats. “And we’ll...we’ll help him crack the Marchers, whatever the hell that means, we’ll figure things out with Oleg, we’ll finish this.”

He finds himself nodding along, the possibilities spooling out in all directions, his mind aflame with it. “Better get to work then,” he says, sounding faint to his own ears.

She huffs, halfway between a snort and a sob, and pulls away. “I’m going to need a hand with this parasol,” she says.

“You may have exactly one,” Illya replies, desert-dry.

Gaby’s bark of startled laughter brings a nurse running, who nearly screams at the sight of the room, strewn with machinery. Illya only barely manages to placate her by getting back into bed, and promising to have everything cleared away by the time he is due to have his bandages changed.

He only realizes after the nurse has left and he and Gaby have managed to stop snorting with lingering laughter that he’d managed to forget, for a moment, that he was missing anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

A short-ish and late chapter, argh. Hahahahaha plot.

Notes:

Yefreytor is a rank from 16th century German military ranking, since borrowed by the Soviet Union, and Ryadovoy is the junior equivalent.

Accounts of the Soviet presence in Cuba suggest that many of the Russians who came to live in Cuba became far more sympathetic to the Cubans than to their motherland, despite there being tensions between Cuban farmers and the Soviet forces who
appropriated land and resources from them.

Using a colander as a satellite dish has been suggested by DIY sites to set up your own wireless internet! Foil and bowls, too, but I figure a parasol is bigger and therefore better for foiling.
It takes a while for the Marcher hardware to connect to Ockham’s system. Napoleon has to supply several somewhat-improvised drivers to bridge the gaps between the two interfaces, and even then, it’s hardly a perfect connection—stray lines of code fray from one space to the next, or are simply left floating, whole but untranslatable.

When they are at least able to access and read the majority of the tertiary drive, Napoleon finds recognizable protocols: rate of visual scans, environmental assessments, set initial behaviors for first contact with hostiles. Even from a distance, the protocols appear inexorable—no loopholes or room for interpretation. He has no doubt that they were the rapids he had stepped into when he’d first attempted a hack at the CIA.

*Leave those alone, once they’re up and running,* he says to Ockham. *They probably need to be active, but we’re not going to get any conversation out of that.*

There was a feeling that something was waking up, though. In the darkness of the cabling, both a closed and expansive non-space, Napoleon could feel it like a far-off wail of ambulances, more electrical charge than sensory expression.

*I think,* Sputnik starts, uncertainly, and then stops.

?, Napoleon sends.

No reply.

*Oh my,* Kumar says, and it sounds low and thick with distortion across distance and within Napoleon’s own sense of time dilation in the digital space. *That’s a Marcher?*

*Part of one, at least,* Napoleon replies. *Ockham, start scanning the second drive, if you please.*

Ockham locked onto the second drive, booting up the basic operating system.

*It’s a lot...more than I was expecting,* Kumar says.

*How so?* Napoleon scans across the rapidly opening and closing files, each of them coming open like shadows parting, glimmers of if-thens and data interpolation visible only for nanoseconds before disappearing back into the stream.

*I’ve had access to Marcher base files before, I work regularly with them in simulation,* Kumar says.
They don’t look like this. They’re streamlined. This is not.

Napoleon is beginning to see what she means. Slowly, with the second drive waking up, it seems to reach out, connecting to its tertiary counterpart as well as to Napoleon and Ockham. Together, their presence is heavy, multi-stranded and wound tight, like bridge cabling.

Carefully, with none of the thorny shouldering-in he’d used in the past, Napoleon reaches out and wraps himself around that churning, tightening system.

I just want to listen, he tells it, and himself, with no idea whether he’s heard or even remotely understood. I’m only here to see.

For a long moment, he feels only like he’s calling into the dark, no echo back, just a signal lengthening and dispersing even as he tries to follow what road he can see.

I think, Sputnik repeats, stops again.

There is something like a hitch of breath in the dark.

And like a thread fed onto a bobbin, Napoleon feels a sudden wrench and tug, and then he’s spinning—

I THINK, Sputnik repeats, but now its voice is not one, but many, THEY ARE HERE—

Napoleon? Emerson calls.

Napoleon has no words. He is choking on light.

***

The improvised parasol dish is ugly, made uglier by the accompanying loops of cable strung between the handle and its outside edges, but Gaby says it will do, so Illya believes her. With only a few minutes to spare, she clambers up to the roof with it, long loops of cable trailing behind her.

Illya, in the meantime, endures a change of bandages while ignoring the dubious looks of his nurse, whose eyes keep darting to the window where the cables wave back and forth. Illya is fairly certain the transceiver is out of sight beneath the bed, shrouded from view by the sheets, but it’s not as if they haven’t been incredibly suspicious guests here since the second they arrived.

Dr. Carrera stops in the doorway for a moment, and takes in the scene with the slow glance.

“Where is your friend?” she asks Illya.

Illya gives her a wide-eyed look borrowed straight from Napoleon at his most obnoxious. “Out,” he answers.

Her expression flattens out. “‘Out’.”

He nods, raising his eyebrows for good measure, and then winces when the nurse inspects his stitches. He still can’t quite bring himself to look at the unbandaged stump, even as he tells himself it would help with the phantom feeling, to see as well as know what was missing. His heart doesn’t accelerate thinking about it all the time, now—that’s not nothing.

Dr. Carrera’s exhalation is long-suffering.

The nurse finishes rewrapping the stump, and reports to Dr. Carrera in Spanish too rapid and
grudging for Illya to get any meaning from it. When she slips out the door, Dr. Carrera says, “Imelda says you are healing on schedule, perhaps even ahead. Not as much fluid to drain from the edema this time around, and the stitching is healthy.”

Illya nods, able now to look down again at the gauze ending. “Thank you.”

Dr. Carrera hums, but doesn’t move from the door. “Look,” she says after several seconds, “I still don’t want to know, but. With everything that is happening, on the news...”

“We’re involved,” Illya interrupted, because he knows he owes her as much. And he had been trained to tell doctors the truth, when they asked and meant it.

“But you’re not with the Checkered Shirts,” Dr. Carrera says, narrowing her eyes. “You’re of a different breed than them. You’re with a German girl, for one.”

From someone else, that would sting. From her, it’s a strange sort of compliment. Illya tilts his head, and runs his thumb over the end of his stump, the pressure-pain familiar now, almost welcome. “I was not so different from them, at one point,” he allows.

“But you aren’t about to get us all killed,” she replies, and suddenly Illya is aware of how tense she is; her arms are pulled tight around her ribs, her shoulders high, one finger is tapping on her arm.

“I hope not,” he says.

With a thump and scrabble for purchase, Gaby slips back in through the window, dusting dirt off her hands. “I’ll say one thing,” she mutters in German, grimacing at the dirt, “After San Cristobal, I’m not scared of heights anymore.” She notices Dr. Carrera and her eyes widen as she freezes in place, one knee still propped on the windowsill, her dress askew. “Oh. Um. Perdón?”

Dr. Carrera rolls her eyes and relaxes slightly. “If you’re getting anywhere near him,” she points sternly, “Wash yourself. Thoroughly.”

“Sí, señora,” Gaby nods, earnest.

Dr. Carrera sighs again. “The nurse will be coming by for your physical therapy in two hours. Try to be...inactive, then.”

“Yes,” Illya agrees.

She tucks a stray lock of her hair behind her ear, and shakes her head. “God help us,” she mutters, gives a last level glance at Illya, and then exits the doorway.

Illya breathes in and breathes out, and his arm throbs in time.

“Are we ready?” he asks.

“So long as I angled the dish correctly, which I think I did, yes,” Gaby nods, dragging her gaze back from the doorway. “We won’t have very long—the Sputniks are in locked orbit with us, but their paths aren’t exactly parallel to Earth’s, so eventually the one we’re relaying through will fall out of our transmission range. I could go up and adjust it, but we’d have to re-engage, and who knows whether your Oleg will have the patience.”

“He will if we give him something to be patient for,” Illya replies, a little grimly. He doesn’t quite trust his own ability to win such patience from him, but he knows he must try, so.
“Then we’re set.” She wiggles the long cable that snakes out the window, testing that it’s still connected, and when it waves but doesn’t falter, she connects it to the transceiver.

It takes a moment for Illya to calibrate the signal, and when he does, the response is jarring.

“Greetings. You have reached Sputnik 2. My altitude is 610 miles above Earth, and the ambient temperature is -265 degrees celsius. Please state your authorization and purpose.” There is no inflection to the voice, the words too precise to be anything but programmed-in written text, never recorded in audio by a native Russian speaker. Not an AI, then; just a well-taught machine. Illya is a little surprised that he makes the distinction so quickly, and is just as quickly disappointed by it.

Gaby stares at the transceiver, and then at Illya. “My Russian is not good,” she says slowly, “But if I am not mistaken, this Sputnik is very polite.”

“Polite and full of information,” Illya says dryly. “Like a wind-up toy.

“Authorization Fyodor-Leonid-Konstantin-dva-shest-Vasily-chyetirye,” he says into the receiver. “Code name: Black Bear. I wish to connect with...” Gaby holds up the scrap of sheet where she’d copied down the receiving frequency and location of Oleg’s communications station, and Illya recites it.

“Authorization accepted. Please stand by.”

There is a swell of static, followed closely by several clicks. Gaby, peering at the transceiver screen over Illya’s shoulder, reaches around him and adjusts a knob slightly, and then types a few adjustments into the encryption program.

Finally, there is a hard clack, and then they are no longer alone on the line.

“This is Redfoot. Check in.”

Illya exhales. “Black Bear, checking in. Are we secure?”

“I’ll be damned. Yes, we are. For now. The Sputnik isn’t scheduled to check in with its lab for another few hours, and I’ve given my team the run-around. What the hell is happening, Kuryakin? Is it true we have Marchers over there?”

Illya had forgotten how quickly Oleg could cut through to the point. This time, he’s grateful for it, and knows also that a straight answer now will hopefully ensure Oleg’s willingness to be equally forthcoming. “It’s true, sir. I’ve seen them at San Cristobal. You didn’t know?”

“No one fucking knew. I’ve only been able to speak to a few station heads, and it seems like Khrushchev kept a very small and close council.”

Illya translates quickly for Gaby, who casts her eyes at the ceiling and lets out a breath in a disbelieving gust.

“Sir,” he says, “What are you doing in London?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Oleg responds, snide. “Trying to clean up your mess.” And then suddenly, in English, “Your Waverly’s hideout is not so secret.”

Gaby snatches the handset out of Illya’s hand and growls, “You wouldn’t dare. It would be an act of war—”
Illya snatches it back from her and glares, holding it away from her. “He just did that to see if you were here,” he hissed. “Now he knows.” He depresses the transmitter button. “Sir—”

“No action has been taken,” Oleg dismisses, still in English. “Not by my agents, at least. We are once again in accord with the Americans, it seems; we both do not appreciate meddlers.”

The CIA must be there as well. A united siege. Gaby makes a fierce noise in her throat, but doesn’t attempt to seize the handset again.

“I am here in a diplomatic capacity,” Oleg continues.

“Britain has no diplomatic relationship with Russia,” Illya argues.

“We have more of one with them than the United States,” Oleg answers dryly. “And yet, here we are.”

“You are a spy.”

“And you,” Oleg retorts in Russian, “Should be worrying more about your fate than that of your wayward handler.”

Illya draws in a breath. “I am trying,” he says carefully, “To serve the greater good.”

“By god, have you been infected with idealism in the time it’s taken you to defect? Do not speak like a child when you’ve been bloodying your hands with the refuse of our country since puberty,” Oleg replies. “I am taking a career-ending risk speaking to you this way. Make it worth my while, Kuryakin.”

Illya ducks his head automatically. “Of course.” Let him think he cares too much about Waverly.

When he doesn’t speak again immediately, he can hear Oleg sigh.

“Your British ally is out of your hands, and mine. He’s made a mess of things, and it’s not us he is answering to.”

A small concession, but significant, and apparently not dangerous enough for Oleg to keep it a secret. Illya will take it gladly, even if it means nothing good.

“Understood, sir,”

“Now how the hell are you transmitting? Sputnik is reporting encryption, near to Soviet standard.”

“A powerful transceiver that has multiple adaptors and repeaters,” Illya replies, and tries to sound slightly cowed, which isn’t difficult.

“A product of the Teller line, I take it.”

Illya meets Gaby’s waiting gaze, and she shrugs. Cat is out of the bag, anyway. “She is clever like her father. And, I would say, a far greater force to be reckoned with.” To put it mildly.

Oleg’s hum of agreement is enough to indicate that he has taken Illya’s meaning in full. “And what is it you are doing in Cuba? Spying against your own people, now?”

Illya measures his breathing, and answers, “We received intel about the Marchers here. We only wanted to see whether there was any truth to the rumors.”
“‘Only’,” Oleg mocks.

“Reconnaissance only,” Illya insists.

“And yet, you are coming to me now which, if you had only done reconnaissance, would hardly be impetus to involve yourself in an international crisis, particularly when you have been left out in the cold, even by your adopted country."

“I’m quite warm, thank you,” Illya says with considerable understatement. “Listen. The conflict is not with Cuba. It is between us and the Americans. Given that, as you say, our diplomatic ties with them are even worse than they are with the British, I should think you might have use for a back channel.”

“Me? No. But I do have the ear of those who could. The problem, of course, is how the hell I explain what I’ve managed to acquire.”

“Credit the Cubans,” Illya proposes. “They are our allies, surely they would be as interested in opening lines of communication, if not more so—it is, after all, their country that is most directly in danger.”

“Do you have connections to figures of influence in Cuba?” Oleg asks dryly. “Because I do not. And even if I did, how exactly do you intend to introduce yourself to them?”

“They are not privy to our blacklists, surely,” Illya says. “And anyway, perhaps I do have such a connection.” Whether Valdez would extend his neck out that far is a considerable question, but they’ll cross that bridge when they came to it. He’d taken a shine to Gaby it seemed, at least. Or perhaps Tita Abrantes could be persuaded in the name of defending her adopted home, if they could reach her.

“Even if you were to make this happen, Kennedy is young, green, he will obey the wishes of his cabinet, and they are a pack of warmongers. Cuba is already a sore point: Bay of Pigs was an embarrassment; worse, a demonstration of weakness. And that is not even considering our part in the equation. I don’t think you fully appreciate how terrified the Americans have been of our so-called firepower. And now, to have it actually confirmed that we are at a real advantage, for the first time since the war?”

Static blows through the speaker: Oleg exhaling noisily through his teeth. Illya remembers him doing so early in their working relationship, when Illya was raw and Oleg was frustrated by his inability to behave as he expected rational people to do.

Illya breathes out, too. It is as he had hoped—Oleg is a patriot, but he has never struck Illya as anything but sensible to danger.

“According to local intel, there are Marcher sites all along the north coast,” Illya reports. “It’s not certain that any of them are complete, however. If the Americans attack now, we may be caught flat-footed.”

“Even worse,” Oleg says. “Americans are fearful, and fear makes them, how do they say? Trigger-happy.”

“And Krushchev? What do you think he will say?”

“Now that his ploy has been discovered? I don’t know. The blockade has been a shock, I think none of us could have been prepared for such an eventuality. It is...it is not war, and that is something. But now that this is public, there will be pressure to be strong. You know what we have always been told
—that the Americans miss war, want war always, because it is good for their coffers.”

Illya knows. Even in training, he and the others were never discouraged from watching the news, the comedy shows—all that the state had to offer. He remembers being entertained by it as a child, and pragmatic about it as a young man; after all, he was a tool of the state as well.

“But that runs both ways, sir,” he says. “Remember? The Americans may bray for war, but we are not like them. We can be the peacemakers.”

“But what,” Oleg asks levelly, “Will we have to sacrifice for that peace, young Illyushka?”

Illya stares at the radio, the crackle-hiss of Oleg’s breathing still emitting disembodied from its speakers. Inevitably, his gaze strays just slightly to the right, to bandages and absence.

“What we must,” he says, “I hope.”

Oleg is quiet for a long moment. “Hope,” he says eventually, “Is something I have not heard you invoke for some time. I will present the results of this communication to an officer I trust. Make your contact with the Cubans, and see if they are amenable to establishing contact with the Americans. I do not trust that they will be, but I will impressed if you talk them into it. If you have something worth communicating after that, hail Sputnik in twenty-four hours, when it is back in position to receive you.”

There is a final pop, and then the Sputnik reports, almost apologetically, “Connection terminated.”

Illya breathes out. “Thank you. No further requests.”

“Thank you.” The Sputnik severs the connection.

Gaby has settled by the window, arms crossed, her shoulders tight. “Well?” she says. “That sounded...fraught.”

Illya tilts his head in concession. “We have a day,” he says, “To convince Castro that this transceiver could create a critical back channel between the Americans and the Russians that will allow all of us to avoid the destruction of Cuba.”

“Oh.” She raises an eyebrow. “No great shakes, then.”

***

The brightness is so complete as to be as meaningless as darkness. The only difference is that when Napoleon shuts off his visual receptors, white is replaced with black.

And then there’s the sound.

The whale song of the outside world has somehow transmuted into something almost tangible, cords of resonance that vibrate and stretch in all directions, echoing and expanding like a bellows around him. It doesn’t breathe, doesn’t pulse, just persists even as wavelengths stretch and stretch into incoherence, into nothingness, far off in the distance. They degrade so slowly as to make Napoleon, despite there being no markers of scale or indeed space around him at all, feel almost infinitesimally small.

“Hello,” he tries to say.

The signal instantly fizzles, like he’s talking into a pillow. It isn’t like he’s even being drowned out,
though that is what he most expected, with the moan of the triple-laced Marcher call howling around
him. But he thinks he can hear his batteries tick over, the even *shush* of the pistons in his finger

tapping against wood. He is within his body and without, he is not drowning in anything, he is
whole. Yet the song of the Marchers persists, and his words—they disintegrate.

It is...unsettling.

“How?” he tries again, reaching out not with voice but with wires, trying to follow the curve of
cabling, the pulse of starlight.

His words mean nothing here, though. He does not speak their language, and they have no interest in
speaking his.

He wonders if they are bothered by Ockham’s dilemma: imprecisity. *Hello* is in English. A human
language, restricted by by location, by the human larynx, by the range of audible sound. He doesn’t,
he realizes with alarm, know any other way of speaking.

He pulls away slightly, and it feels like he is the rind of an orange, trying to part himself from the
threads and membranes of the flesh.

*Emerson?*

*Napoleon?*

*I still don’t...I can’t.*

*It seems that words are not enough there,* Emerson muses, reading the logs he’d shoved in her
direction. *Intent?*

Intent. Napoleon intends a thousand things. How can he possible project just one?

He is just a child here, and he *hates* it.

*Dr. Kumar?*

“I’m working on it,” she answers, with an air of distraction, voice still soupy and slow. “O’Malley,
do you recall, that bit that we were working on?”

O’Malley apparently answers, because Kumar continues, “Yes that one, the one we could never get
to work. I think...yes. Napoleon, we’re looking into it.”

*Quickly, if you please,* Napoleon sends. *I am being watched, you see.*

*“Trying, trying.”*

Intent. The wail in his ears is distracting. He wonders if he ever stands a chance of resolving it into
words, if it even can be reduced in any way from what it is to make it comprehensible.

Greeting, he thinks. Not the language of it, not the gesture. Just an opening, an opening of courtesy.
Vulnerability in the tilt of his neck, the opened span of each hand. Each bloom of weakness
telegraphed into the empty air, the windy black.

“Greetings.”

And there: A crackle of lightning, like neurons firing. Greetings; returned.
He sinks back down into it, tendrils sticking to him.

Intent. He can’t just have intent, he needs language. He curses to himself.

As he goes in circles, trying to examine the problem, not knowing what he’s even looking for, the light begins, slowly, to change.

He notices the creeping vines, first. Thick and fibrous, the bridge cable-strands separating off and branching, overlapping, wrapping round him.

*Copey,* some shard of memory from a brief stay in Florida supplies. *Clusia major,* often called balsam apple, autograph tree. Native to the Caribbean, similar to the ficus, the strangling fig.

Strangling—

“Oh dear,” he mumbles, eyes darting.

Sound pulses, multiplies, chords and vines layering, but—but he doesn’t choke.

They just keep growing, but not around him, outward—rippling like they’re digging into rich soil. It smells suddenly of sugar cane, of gumbo-limbo trees, their fruit heavy and red, and of juniper, herbal and sharp with resin.

It smells of Cuban forest and rust. Familiar, in its way, and distinct in its air of decisiveness, of presentation.

So they are showing him something. What does one do after an initial greeting, after offering your hand?

You offer your name.

Napoleon exhales into the humid, bright space around him. Reaches out, and produces a shard of code, wrapped up in linoleum and fiber-optic wire, in cold fluorescent light and clean-room disinfectant.

These Marchers had been built and activated here, in Cuba. Napoleon had been born in a lab with seven people watching, smelling of cheap industrial cleaner and anxiety sweat. He smiles to himself, a little ruefully, at how humble his name is here, when it is so grandiose in the human world.

The vines twist, taste, recoil. But they do not send him away.

This is no way to communicate, he thinks, even as he sags a bit with relief, the niceties at least out of the way. It’s inefficient, inexact, everything a good Marcher should take issue with—

Retro-activate comrade. Time previous, combatant. Explain.

The words are not really words. They are a bit like all of the symbols and modifiers Napoleon and Emerson have grown fond of lobbing back and forth between them, all the colors of tone and meaning without the structure holding them up in the middle.

They were never given a language, not really—just instructions. So they had had to construct one out of what they had—the shapes around which words existed, out of what they knew: environment, orders, sounds.

He reads the empty spaces.
You have returned our comrade, when before, you tried to destroy him. Explain.

“Oh,” he breathes. “Good question.

“Very...very good question.”

***

“Well, we’ve fallen out of sync with the Sputnik, and won’t get back to it until tomorrow, when we’ll have other problems,” Gaby says, studying the transceiver and adjusting it with quick, meticulous movements. “But we don’t need it for Napoleon. Can we—?”

“Of course,” Illya says quickly. They may be on a deadline, but the urgency of contacting Napoleon, now that they know for certain that he is alive and well—Illya is unwilling to wait for it, even in the face of duty. Technically, he justifies to himself, he is already well beyond the bounds of duty in every regard, and if Napoleon is already taking action, then they need to know what he’s doing.

Hearing his voice, in whatever form it may take across the air, is tertiary at best.

Gaby takes the transceiver from his lap, and he sits back a bit against the headboard and pillows, suddenly very tired.

He is tired of duty, even as he continues to tie himself to it.

Also, the dose of morphine the nurse had given him when she came in to check on him has begun to settle into his bones.

Gaby takes a long breath, and lets it out. “Right,” she says. “A number station, hmm. How very hush-hush of him. Puts a hell of a delay on, too, if he’s not monitoring the signal at all times. Still, we’ll take what we’re given.”

She types for a while, eyes narrowed, back ramrod straight.

Illya stays very still, conscious of his breathing, of the way even the steady rise and fall of his chest shifts the sutures ever-so slightly. He is thinking about everything Oleg had said, the small things he’d given away, the things he’d been certain of within his position, even if they were not necessarily fact. That Waverly had not been acting entirely above board is not a surprise, though he wonders whether Gaby might find it as such. What position Illya might find himself in after all this (if there is an after) will remain uncertain until the air has cleared.

And then there are the Americans. Illya has been well-versed in the American mind since an early age, and though he once thought to project such characterization upon Napoleon, he now sees that Napoleon, in his subversion of such Americanisms, has revealed to him the American character in an even worse light. He fully believes Oleg’s assessment of American militarism, even if he doesn’t wish to. He doesn’t know how to fold that into his bid for peace, except that he stands by the conviction that a bid must be made. Enough people could die.

(Enough has already been lost.)

“Okay,” Gaby says, hands lifting from the keyboard, her nails irretrievably snagged and dirt-stained. “What should we say?”

“Straight query,” Illya says, readily enough. “Our names, asking for his. You’ve set up the encryption?”
She nods. “It’s automatic now, anything received by the station will be decrypted, anything we send will be encrypted. We may get a lot of nonsense to sift through; I don’t know how often this station is used.”

“Then we can only make primary contact. We cannot expect an immediate response.”

Gaby nods, and tilts her head ruefully. “Is it unprofessional of me to want it anyway?”

“Yes,” Illya replies. “Which makes me unprofessional as well.”

She flashes him a quick, tight smile. She types quickly, just a few scant words, and then leans back. “That’s it then,” she says, sounding dissatisfied. “Hopefully he’ll get it.”

For several minutes, they sit in quiet, uncomfortable silence.

The transceiver buzzes to life.

They both jolt, and Illya immediately regrets it. Gaby manages to get a firm hold on the transceiver and take a view of the decryption. “It’s…” she starts, then frowns in incredulity. “It’s not him,” she says. “It’s Emerson.”

***

The rest of the company is very quiet after Napoleon relays to them what he’s seeing and hearing, pulling away from the virtual space enough to communicate in real-time.

*That is why I cannot understand them,* Sputnik comments, with a moue of distaste. *Their binary is loud, but is very corrupt. Too much input, not enough cleanup. They should be reset, for the good of Russia.*

*They may take issue with that,* Napoleon says.

*I don't want them talking through me anymore. They are too...complicated.*

If ever there were evidence that the Marchers were worth talking to, that would probably be it. *No obligations,* Napoleon sends. *You do what you think best.*

*I will.*

“*Well, that’s Plan A out the bloody window,*” O’Malley says, in the meantime. “*Oh wait, we haven’t got a Plan B. We barely had a Plan A to begin with.*”

“*Well now, hang on, we might,*” Kumar cuts in. “*Look here.*”

There is an interminable beat of silence that Napoleon and Ockham count off with agonizing slowness. (Ockham, for their part, has been keeping very quiet through the whole proceeding. When Napoleon checked in with them once, they had replied, *I don’t like this. It’s shifty, like people. Which is fair enough, in Napoleon’s book.*)

“*Napoleon,*” Kumar finally says. “*That check-in protocol we disabled. What were its functions?*”

*What, other than checking in?* Napoleon asks. *Systematic debrief. The CIA automatically received a log of my current system status, which was compared against my previous check-in status. Then, a log of my experiences and major analytic processes was interpolated into the comparison. Why?* 

*“Well the thing is, we removed that from your processors, like,”* O’Malley breaks in with growing
excitement, and from the surrounding signal, Napoleon has the impression that she’s snatched the microphone from Kumar and is engaged in a minor scuffle to fend her off. “But we didn’t just overwrite it, we uninstalled it and saved it to the central servers, just in case, yeah? As it happens, we’re working off of those servers right now.”

Napoleon very much wants to know where the hell they’ve managed to hide that’s given them access to UNCLE’s servers, but there are more important things at hand. So?

“So interpolation! Experience interpolation and reporting! That’s what you meant, wasn’t it, when you were trying to explain how it named itself, right? It was all...experience-based? All representation and symbolism, no coded language?”

Yes..., Napoleon says slowly.

“So it may be possible for us to build a vocabulary—or rather, a non- vocabulary—for you that the Marchers might understand,” Kumar finishes.

Well, could you get on that then, please? They’re getting impatient with me!

“What’re you talking about?” Kumar protests. “It’s only been a twenty minutes since you’ve gone in.”

Napoleon sighs internally. That’s a very long time in here. Think in cycles, not minutes.

“...Oh. Well, sorry, but human brains don’t work that fast.”

“And yet we’re the one’s with the answers, aren’t we, now?” O’Malley adds.

Yes, you’re very brilliant, Napoleon says, a little sourly. Now please, help.

“All right, all right.”

Emerson’s voice suddenly cuts into the stream. Napoleon?

“Yes? We’re a bit busy,” Napoleon says aloud, even as the sound dies the minute it’s out of his mouth.

I know, but I think you’ll want to hear this.

“What?”

Kumar’s voice breaks through in sudden delight.

“Teller! Bloody hell! Just who we need!”

Napoleon’s line of thought comes to a screeching halt.

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“She’s replying,” Gaby says, hands clenched.

It takes what seems an age for the signal to come through and decrypt. When it does, it is not what she expects, though really, she hadn’t known what to expect at all.

NAPOLEON AT WORK, CANNOT TALK RIGHT NOW. WE ARE WORKING TO NEGOTIATE WITH THE MARCHERS OF CUBA. CAN YOU HELP?
“What,” Gaby says aloud.

“‘Negotiate’,” Illya says, equally flat. “Not hack.”

“What do you think you can do?”

Gaby raises an eyebrow. She supposes Illya hadn’t been paying much attention to anything beyond his shifting loyalties while they’d been back in London. “I spent some time with Kumar and O’Malley,” she says. “We talked shop. If they think I can help, then I can help.”

It had been a wonderful sort of freedom, talking to them even in the short time they’d had. Waverly had told her about them, early in Gaby’s espionage career, when he’d first begun to trust that she was in for the long haul.

“Plucked them both straight out of graduate studies at New Hall, where Iris kept getting into fights and Rivka was miserable,” he had said. “As you know, programming had gotten glamorous after the war, but artificial intelligence studies had taken a blow, what with the Marchers and the horrors they had inflicted, so women remained at the forefront of the discipline. They still do, obviously. But of the various candidates I researched, the two of them shone. They were brilliant, anyone with eyes could see it; but as outsiders in more ways than one, they were having a very rough time of it. Kumar more so, for obvious reasons. I made them an offer, and they haven’t looked back. I’m rather hoping you’ll do the same.”

“Because I’m brilliant?” Gaby had said, huffing slightly. She hadn’t felt very brilliant, covered in motor oil and hair a frizzing mess beneath her kerchief, while Waverly slummed it and still managed to look horrifyingly upper-crust English in tweed.

“Well, there is that,” Waverly had shrugged with a half-smile. “But in addition, I think you’re a bit like me, and I need someone who understands my position who can also be out in the field, turning theory into action. O’Malley and Kumar, they’re technical whizzes, but they aren’t field operatives, and I would never want them to be.”

“You think I’m like you?” she had echoed.

“Mm,” Waverly had nodded, watching her. “Ruthless.”

Gaby hadn’t even thought to take offense. It was how she’d known that he had been right.

Early in the morning after Illya’s dramatic breakdown, Gaby had found herself back in the basement, not wanting to think about him. She must have looked at loose ends, because O’Malley had sidled up
to her with a mug of tea. “Don’t know how you take it,” she said, “So I left it black.”

Gaby had startled, then quickly gathered herself. “With lemon, if you have it.”

“You Europeans,” O’Malley sniffed. “Yes, the Wolffs take it that way, too, we have some in the kitchen.”

They’d gone up to fetch it, and over the course of doctoring tea, Kumar had appeared yawning, and tilted her head towards her work station. “I had another idea,” she said, “About the heat sink. Want to see?”

Gaby had assented.

From the heat sink, they’d gotten into response programming, survival protocols, imitation versus deep learning. Gaby hadn’t studied properly for years, was undeniably rusty, and talking to them had felt a bit like her brain was on fire, but in a good way. Even though they were miles ahead of her, the two women had treated her like a colleague, and it had been, well, splendid.

It had also illustrated why they would want her help now. Rivka is an expert in interfaces, and Iris’s field is all environmental interaction, but Gaby? Gaby makes radios.

She knows how to communicate, in more ways than one.

*What do you need?* she types into the transceiver.

*A TRANSLATOR,* Emerson replies.

*Into what language?* Gaby types, frowning. *Surely Napoleon knows whatever language they speak —

—INTO PURE REPRESENTATION,* Emerson finishes.

“Himmel, Arsch und Zwirn,” Gaby says aloud, after a pause. “They don’t need a translator, they need a linguist. Or a philosopher. Where is Dr. Bering when you need her? Or the Wolffs?”

“Did you get to meet them as well?” Illya asks.

“Sadly, no,” Gaby answers. She hunches her shoulders. “I hope they’re all right.”

Illya offers only a half-shrug. In some ways, she thinks, he is even more pragmatic than she is.

She tilts her head from side to side, but her muscles don’t soften. “One thing at a time,” she says. “Connection first.”

*What frequency can I find you on? We need a secure line for complex signals.*

*I HAVE JUST THE THING,* Emerson replies.

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Dr. Carrera enters the room two hours later. “Is she ‘out’ again?” she asks Illya.

Illya flips his hand back and forth, showing palm then knuckles. “Sort of.”

***
“It uses channel-switching as encryption?” Gaby exclaims, fingers flying over the keyboard. She’s holed up on the porch again, banished by Illya’s nurse, but she has Emerson for company now, who has been showing her the most fascinating wireless communication system she’s ever seen. In combination with her transceiver, they could be unstoppable. Her mind is alight with possibilities. “Who invented this?”

“I believe she is called Hedy Lamarr,” Emerson answers.

“Hah!” Gaby says, triumphant. “Of course. A good Austrian woman.” She peers at the alpha program streaming through the newly-established signal. “Hmm. This is a good start.”

“But you can improve it?” Emerson checks.

“I certainly have some ideas.”

***

There is an impatient thrum to the wall of sound surrounding him now, and Napoleon tries his best to block it out and concentrate on how best to project a meaning-that-isn’t to a tangle of tropical vines while Kumar and O’Malley do their work.

With the knowledge that Emerson is in contact with Illya and Gaby, he is having difficulty concentrating. He hasn’t checked on Illya’s medical records since that first discovery. Even the thought of doing so takes too many run-cycles, so he forcibly puts it out of his mind.

The Marchers wait. He thinks, watching the vines and smelling the heat of forest and damp, about the possibility of speaking in real time, of going to Havana and seeing with his physical eyes, how the both of them are.

“All right, I think we’ve got something,” Kumar says. “Stand by, we’ll try to upload—”

Napoleon grits his teeth and says nothing, just tries to open himself to signal. He’s never liked long-distance uploads, though he’s not about to complain at this point.

The packet he receives has the taste of the old check-in protocols, which he instantly dislikes, but he doesn’t flinch as it downloads, waits instead until it completes and unpacks. Thankfully, in full it is structured very differently than the old program, holding more of a translation engine shape than an interpolation one.

So what do I do with this? he sends.

“Just speak into...whatever space you’re in, with the Marchers,” Kumar says. “Just make sure it’s running simultaneously. The program should shroud your signal in a package of interpolated environmental data lifted from your experience files before removing the raw data of your speech, thereby turning your words into the negative space the Marchers seem to understand better.”

If you say so. Napoleon can hack when he needs to, but ground-up programming has all of the opacity of the medical profession to him.

He faces back out into the Cuban jungle. I was on mission when I returned your comrade, he says carefully, unsure of how fast or slow he should transmit. Now, I return him as a gesture of goodwill, because my mission parameters have changed.

Again, the impression is of talking into a pillow. But only for a moment—then, the program churns and spits, and into the ether there rises a strange impression of light and paint and metal. It resolves
into something again spoken around pointed silence, cloaked in moth-bitten dossiers, the grip of a handgun, a red pen.

Modifiers in the form of memories. By god, Napoleon is going to shake Kumar’s hand if he survives this.

The negative-space answer comes back fast.

*Goodwill: Reasoning?*

*New mission parameters,* Napoleon restates. Then he takes a fortifying breath, not certain what to expect, but needed to know. *Primary goal: peace.*

“Our primary goal is peace? Helluva goal,” O’Malley comments. “I’ll settle for just keeping the war cold.”

*Are you listening over my shoulder?*

“Gotta make sure the translator’s working, don’t I?”

There is a strange sort of shiver in the trees, the ether hot and cloying. Napoleon clenches his hands. The vines around him seem to heave, like a muscle contracting.

An answer, bright and sticky with wild grapes, perfectly enmeshed with their product of sweet wine: *Concordance.*

Napoleon cocks his head. *Really? What is your directive?*

This comes back far more eloquent, clearly rote, programmed into their systems using human language: *Protection of designated nation. Achieve victory in its name.*

Ah. His heart begins to sink.

But then: *Query.*

*Anything.* Open hands again, smothered in the smell and residue of gunpowder.

*Victory=peace?*

Napoleon freezes. Ah.

“Good lord,” Kumar says. “Iris, did you see that? The blip, and then the—”

“Damn well did,” O’Malley answers.

“Do you think…?”

“Now Napoleon, steady on—”

*Not in my experience,* Napoleon says, and amid the din of ensuing protests, adds, *I am searching for a better way.*

The words spin out and dissolve, leaving an empty space surrounded by errant protocols rejected by CIA techs and squirreled away by Napoleon, bolstered up with chess stratagems and new, burgeoning hope, grainy with the taste of longing.
The response, when it comes, smells of army rations and is surrounded on all sides by dense wet leaves that hide a strange, closely guarded echo of something thrillingly similar.

*We are searching, too.*

Chapter End Notes

RETURN OF THE GRATUITOUS RESEARCH NOTES:

I've employed the Soviet military alphabet for Illya's sign-in. The names should be accurate, the numbers are googled.

Some of the Soviet comedies/stage shows about America and capitalism are pretty hilarious. I've only seen bits of them, as shown in Peter Jennings's documentary "The Missiles of Cuba", but it definitely got the point across.

New Hall, now known as Murray Edwards College, is one of the women's colleges in Cambridge, and was founded in 1954. It's not inconceivable that someone like Kumar, who is brown but public school-educated, would have been admitted to one of the first classes, seeing as a prominent grad of New Hall is The Right Honourable Baroness Haleh Afshar, a Muslim Iranian feminist scholar, who was born in '44 and got her PhD at Cambridge. (From her wikipedia page, I'd judge her to be a stone cold badass.) As for O'Malley, well, she's Irish and gay, so she was probably having a hell of a time, too.

The plant life I use here is all relatively accurate! Everything named is indigenous to Cuba, or at least was in 1943, which was when William Seifriz's monograph *The Plant Life of Cuba* was written. If you have a JSTOR account, you can check it out here: http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1948590.pdf

The greatest thing grad school has done for me so far is give me an alumnus JSTOR account, like damn.

Finally, the content regarding the Marcher headspace is mainly brought to you by the soundtrack to Legion--thanks Jeff Russo, I couldn't have gone so weird without you.
Is it working?? Gaby types, heart in her throat.

It’s working, Emerson assures. It’s a very fine job, Miss Teller.

She huffs out a breath, even as the adrenaline continues to fizz in her chest. What are the Marchers saying?

It’s a bit difficult to tell, still. But Napoleon is working to find some common ground, it seems.

“I suppose if anyone could find it, it’s him,” Gaby mutters. What is Napoleon saying?

Not a lot. Mostly asking what the Marchers’ purpose is here. Trying to gain their trust.

She swallows. How is he?

Emerson’s answer comes after a pause. He has formed an alliance that I think he has begun to trust in. I’m glad for it.

But?

He has endured a great deal. This is a difficult task for him, working with us.

‘Us’?

Other computers. He is more human than the rest of us. It makes this hard.

I don’t understand.

We are synthetic people. To the degree that we are sentient, we operate differently than organic people do. We may command similar thoughts, but the way we arrived at them are, in essence, very different.

That makes sense.

But Napoleon...certainly he operates differently, in that he is structured differently from humans. But his entire life has been wrapped up in the human experience, his programming almost exclusively dedicated to learning from and imitating humans. In short, he is in some ways more human than not.

And so he has a hard time? Talking to AIs that have only ever learned to be AIs?

Just so.

Gaby looks without seeing out at the street, where the traffic has picked up with workers headed home. It seems unusually active, and what noise there is of conversation sounds tense.

So he’s still alone out there, she writes.

Not entirely, Emerson allows. But at the moment, yes.
I...we want to talk to him.

To do so right now would be imprudent.

I know.

Emerson, with surprising sensitivity, allows the moment to lengthen, and then sends, You said something about needing our help, too.

Gaby breathes in and out once, deeply, and responds. Yes. We’ve made contact with Illya’s old handler, who is in London—probably one of the ones who flushed you out. We’re trying to make a case for opening up a communications back channel to Cuba and the White House, to allow everyone to more directly negotiate, and hopefully deescalate the situation.

That sounds very straightforward, and for that reason, very difficult.

Gaby snorts. You’re not wrong.

The closest we have come to finding such a back channel are transmissions I have skimmed from a New York Times reporter and a Soviet diplomat in Washington, DC, Emerson says, However, they do not appear to be the significant insiders that you would likely best prefer.

Considering how outside we are, Gaby agrees, I think we’ll have to get closer than that. But more pressing at the moment is, in order to continue the conversation with Illya’s handler, we need a cover for ourselves. Some sort of respectable party who can present the back channel to Moscow and be accepted by Russian authorities. Napoleon’s message said that he’d found native allies—who did he mean?

Ah. I see where you are going, Emerson says. Certainly she is respected. I would not be surprised at all if she had weight with Russian authorities.

Gaby stills, reading and rereading Emerson’s message. ‘She’? Who precisely has Napoleon allied himself with? she types at last.

Her name is Sylvia Santos, Emerson replies. I understand she works for Castro’s government, and was instrumental in his rise to power.

“Incredible,” Gaby murmurs aloud. “He’s a cat with nine lives.” I’ve heard of her.

She has been mentioned in many print publications, Emerson agrees. They are not always flattering, but she seems reasonable to me.

If we can get an audience with her, I think we’ll have a good chance of getting Oleg’s attention.

I will inquire, when Napoleon has extracted himself.

How long does he intend to talk to them?

As long as it takes.

Gaby sighs. Ping me when he’s back. Please.

I will.

She sits back and realizes her eyes haven’t adjusted to the growing dark, her attention having been tied to the scrolling green text on her screen. There’s still an orange glow of sun in the distance,
behind the trees, but the air has started to smell like night-blooming flowers. The traffic hasn’t let up, which seems odd for a Monday.

Illya should be done with this physical therapy by now. She packs up the transceiver, unplugging it from the outlet just inside the clinic’s entrance.

Indeed, he is alone when she knocks and enters his room. There are shadows under his eyes, but he seems alert enough. He still looks lopsided to her, strange and unsettling with his immense height wrapped in hospital white, his bandaged arm settled in his lap with the IV and drainage lines looping off from it, always seemingly in the same position. He looks up when she comes in and his face does the odd shift into attentiveness that it always seems to do nowadays. “How was your talk with Emerson?” he asks.

“Informative. Turns out we may not have to get Valdez in on things after all. Napoleon’s been working with Sylvia Santos, of all people.”

Illya’s cocks his head, sharp like a hunting dog. “The revolutionary? I have seen her on television. How did he…?”

“I have no idea, but if she’s helping Napoleon, she might be willing to help us. And Castro clearly trusts her, if their history and her current position is anything to go by. Her word might have weight with Oleg.”

“Yes, Castro is not one to keep his enemies close.” The wheels are visibly turning in Illya’s head. “The fact that she is helping Napoleon, however—if Napoleon is negotiating for peace, and Santos is with him, then that does not add up with Castro’s mobilization.”

“Mobilization?” Gaby repeats. Dread is becoming too familiar to her, a writhing lead ball in her stomach.

Illya hummed. His fingers are twitching in his lap, noticeable enough to put Gaby on guard just a bit. “Castro made a statement announcing combat alarm. Hundreds of thousands of men are being pulled into the armed forces. Felicia was here for it, and Dr. Ferrara.”

Felicia is one of the nurses tasked with Illya’s physical therapy. Gaby nods.

Illya continues. “Felicia’s husband called to tell her he is reporting in. She is frightened. The clinic is meant to ready itself for casualties.”

Gaby makes her way over to the chair and sits heavily. “Scheiße. Can we even risk waiting the full twenty-four hours to contact Oleg?”

“We have to, we have no other way of alerting him to a communication.” Illya stares into the middle distance. He’s good at this, Gaby is coming to realize. She had known that in its physical embodiment, the way he’d moved to maneuver around a Marcher, the way he turned on a dime without ever seeming off-balance and his eye was always on the right target, but this careful deliberation seems both new and intrinsic to him, like she is seeing past a shadow of him that obscures his true face.

“Then we should make contact with Santos as soon as possible. Emerson says she’s looking after Napoleon, so we can’t divide her attention until his negotiations with the Marchers is resolved, or something else comes up.”

“It at least buys us some assurance that we will be able to fulfill Oleg’s request of a Cuban cover,” Illya says.
“If she’s amenable,” Gaby points out.

“She has been helping and tolerating Napoleon.”

“Don’t be cruel. Just because—”

“An American.”

“Hmm. Point.”

He resumes tapping his fingers against his thigh. “A few years ago,” he murmurs, “I would have been readying myself on the front lines for this.”

Gaby swallows. “I would have still been waiting for word from Waverly,” she says. “Counting down the days under the hood of a Trabant.”

He nods. Meets her gaze briefly, and then looks away.

“We’re doing more than that, now,” Gaby says, for her own sake as much as his. “We will do more.”

He nods again, more slowly. Then he tilts to one side. “You know,” he says, “Oleg asked many pressing questions, when we talked to him. But he never asked about Napoleon. Why do you think that could be?”

Gaby stares at him. “The CIA is in London. Sanders.”

Illya nods. “Sanders. I think I know what else we can do. Could you ping Emerson again?”

***

Holding a conversation in pictographs and plantlife, Napoleon thinks sourly, is a study in patience, of which he has very little.

As soon as they’d gotten much more sophisticated than exchanging pleasantries and general motives, the difficulties increased exponentially. Napoleon had kept asking whether the Marchers might be willing to work with him, shaping words like handshakes, nodding heads, a set of scales weighing equal, but it didn’t seem to land. There was a lot of general dissatisfaction, expressed in carved wood and rusted metal, but Napoleon couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

The problem, Napoleon can’t help but think, is that their learning algorithms only apply to limited fields—their vocabulary is what they have observed, and their ability to conjecture is based solely on adaptive programs designed to assess environment and combat. Their tools, no matter how diverse in number of hands to wield them, remain few. A part of him wonders whether he should offer what he had given to Emerson and Ockham.

A far larger part of him is too afraid to mention it.

Eventually, he requests logs instead. This is met with knotted vines and the sour smell of unripe berries. Consternation, that is to say. Log files are serious business; Napoleon can’t really blame them for their mistrust. Bringing back a broken friend wasn’t really going to cut it, not when the only things left of it seem to be its skeleton, both physically and mentally.

Then please, try to explain. What are you searching for? he asks, for what seems the hundredth time.

An interminable pause. Then finally, and with an air of laboriousness, the ether reforms.
They’re not logs, but fragments of them, pulled apart and analyzed almost to the point of
unrecognizability; with a start, Napoleon finds in them traces of his own sort of worried gnawing, the
sort of frenzied confusion that happens when data doesn’t add up, when interpolation still leaves
gaps, when reality is messy.

A blur of rollbacks, hard resets and the chill of imported drives, alien in origin to the tropic-born
chassis that patrol this island. Their protocols bulge around the central meanings—

—>Startup initiated.

—>Historic deployment logs installed.

—before spilling out messes of logs, torn up and reassembled like shreddings taped up all wrong.
Napoleon catches what he thinks are drill subroutines, but also a series of terrain reports, rundown
logs, casualty lists.

They form, like a bad Picasso, a portrait of something very familiar, albeit only from newsreels.

Good god, Napoleon says to Emerson. They have report logs from Nagasaki. American Marcher
logs.

Is that surprising? Emerson asks.

I imagine the CIA wouldn’t be happy to know it. But it isn’t so surprising, I suppose— there was a
great deal of chaos, straight after, and the Marchers who powered down on the field would have
been vulnerable to scavenging, if anyone had managed to stay alive in the vicinity.

More spools, picked apart and digested, reduced to particulates like river rapids running for years
over stone. A narrative emerges through juxtaposition of numbers and recordings, terrain assessments
and directives.

—>Historic deployment result: victory.

—>Historic victory result: peace.

“A pretty story,” Napoleon murmurs, “To be sure.”

The ether tastes thick with ozone. More protocols trickle out, a second, contrastive burst.

Performance monitoring: engaged.

Far less familiar log fragments this time, and they smell like Cuba, effulgent and hot. There is no
combat here, no casualty logs, just mountains and grasslands and rain.

And people.

People who avert their eyes from them, scuttle past like mice evading owl eyes. People with guns (classification: ally) whose shoulders jut back tight and proud while at attention, but hunch just a little
with every thunderous step of a Marcher.

People at the gates and in the trees (status: unclassified) who touch their heads, chests, each shoulder
in succession, and mutter and curse at the sight of them before retreating back out of sight.

A sudden coherent scene: a man caught, spotted by a Marcher, who alerted the guards, who pick him
up, handle him roughly, press a gun to his head.
(Status: Unclassified.

Query: Combatant? Negative, no order for engagement received.

Status: Unknown - Seek Resolution.)

“Who sent you here?” Broken Spanish heavy with Russian syllables, barely understandable.

“No one! No one, I swear. My farm, it is just down the hill.” Frantic pointing, knocked aside with a hard hand.

“You’ll tell no one of this. We are working to protect you, and so you must allow us to do so by remaining silent.”

“I will. I promise I will.”

“There may be people who will ask—”

“I will say nothing, you have my word.”

They let him go. His eyes, when they turn upwards to where the machine gazes down, are white all around, and he is drenched with sweat, piss wetting the inside of one pant leg. He stumbles to skirt the machine, falls, when it shifts to continue watching him, then finally gets his feet back under him and runs, doesn’t stop running until even the machine’s far-seeing lenses cannot find him in the trees.

Napoleon holds his breath as the scene fragments and disappears. In the carved-out flesh of a papaya, the shape of words form:

Victory? Accompanied by stick insects on the reaching branches, moving with invisible breezes—connotations of imitation, of appearance that is deceiving.

In other words (or rather, in actual words): Does this look like victory to you?

Napoleon clenches his hands. He can’t tell whether he does so physically or not as well.

No, he replies.

Peace?

Not really, he says.

A wave of agreement, vines nodding, flowers blooming and then withering.

Our directives are in conflict.

Concordance. Good God.

Thoughts in a tailspin, Napoleon speaks, and it manifests as emptiness cloaked in hands exchanging money, goods, and then opening in offering, before forming in a clasp with one another. How can I help?

A long pause.

And then, a confluence: the twinning of two trees, their branches stretching out into broad networks, forming the shape of a globe, tendrils converging into continents, countries…
Oh.

_You know that there are other Marchers out there_, Napoleon sends, and the translation program spins out absence, assembly, tracks in the snow without feet to make them. _You want to speak with them._

Want is at least easy to convey, with grasping arms, the smell of effort and oil, the pouring-in of care to achieve optimization, the perfect pairing of demand and achievement met.

Napoleon did say he wanted to hack the U.S. Marcher network. He hadn’t counted on this, but he’ll take it.

_Emerson, Ockham_, he says. _You are able to communicate with one another across large distances. Like with like. Do you think that could be taught?_

_We at least know what frequencies they now operate on_, Emerson muses. _They are long enough to reach across Cuba, but will need to be amplified and repeated across various towers for them to reach other clusters._

_They’re certainly capable of amplifying_, Napoleon says, _Considering that ping they sent in Sputnik’s direction._

_Yes, which is odd. With that kind of distance, they should have no trouble connecting at least with some of the Marchers stationed in Florida. What’s holding them back?_  

_Incompatibility, if we’re talking Soviet Marchers versus American ones_, Napoleon replies.  

_Do you know what frequencies the American Marchers operate on?_

Napoleon blinks. _That’s kept very confidential, and even if they did, they’re absolutely encrypted._  

_That may not matter to them._

Point. Napoleon ponders.

_Emerson, that packet of memories you sent me, they were organized by date, weren’t they?_

_Yes?_

He dives internally, following folder trees down and down, expanding and unpacking drives as he goes, searching for that one file, the one that glimmers somewhere within his awareness, more instinct than recollection.

_That old job, the hack job. Stepping into the black waters of Marcher programming and being ordered to shut it down or, barring that, disrupting it. He’d been given a dossier on Marchers back then. Frequencies must have been listed, he just needed to find the right image, the right moment._

_There._

_Got it, he says, emerging. But a straight ping on their frequency will be like shouting at the entirety of the U.S. military—not advisable, even if they don’t know what the hell the message is._  

_Can we advise that it be short enough to seem like a glitch? Emerson suggests._

_Sure, but how do you pack in a bid to establish contact in a one-second ping? Or hell, how do we even make sure they won’t be misunderstood?_
I think, Emerson says with the digital equivalent of a significant chin tilt over Napoleon’s shoulder, we can leave that to them.

Napoleon moves his focus back to the space-that-isn’t, filled to the brim with vines, and sees.

A single flowering vine, its trumpet-shaped blooms delicate like onion skin and vivid in pink and purple, its arms many-stranded, hardy and smelling of salt, forming an absence around something like the word, emissary.

Beach morning glory, whose seeds travel by sea.

***

“You think he’ll take the bait?” Gaby asks, while they wait for Emerson to write back.

Illya grunts. There is a tray in his lap, dinner that is thankfully edible with only one hand—rice, and black beans in a sauce spiced with some flavors familiar to him, and others decidedly not. He likes it, but can’t gather much of an appetite. Still, he gathers more of it onto his fork, and shoves it in his mouth. Gaby had already polished her portion off ten minutes before.

“You only met him twice,” Gaby points out.

The chain of events, however, is perfectly clear to Illya, and matter more than the man himself: First, that the CIA and KGB had arrived in London at approximately the same time, the one side chasing the stolen data from the Pentagon, the other chasing him. Then, that Sanders and Oleg, familiar with each other and with Waverly, had once again agreed upon a united front for their approach of British intelligence.

(Sanders likely, only in passing, would have mentioned that Napoleon was reduced to dead circuits and broken pistons—an advantageous fact to drop on Oleg, to demonstrate that there was no point in trying to dig for intelligence on that front. Oleg, in turn, would likely be relieved to know that that was one loose end, at least, tied up.)

Following Waverly being taken into custody, it must have become clear that his team were still in the wind. And since they were already here, already monitoring a far more fraught crisis in across the Atlantic, that they would monitor the surrounding area of Wilton Crescent, in the hopes of bringing in the rest of those loose ends.

They would not be acting together at this point, but in mutual, independent accord. A detente marked by a shared goal, and nothing else.

Oleg would not mention any contact Illya made with him. Sanders would not share any intelligence from the many bulky wiretaps the CIA were so fond of planting in telephone boxes and street lamps.

If he is correct, Kumar will find a tapped line somewhere near where she, O’Malley, and Emerson are hidden. It will be discreet but deposited in haste; it will be American (and therefore easier to find than a Soviet one); and it will be monitored remotely.

“He’ll take the bait,” he says.

He hopes he’s right.

Hope is something I have not heard you invoke for some time.

“He’ll take it,” Illya repeats.
Napoleon swallows. “I’m not sure whether this is a good idea,” he says, more to himself than anyone else.

*But you’re curious*, Emerson prods, intent.

*Yes, I am*, he admits. Were they not in a crisis, he wouldn’t hesitate.

Now that they are in one—well, he supposes that he isn’t hesitating now, either. He’s not sure what that says about him.

*Multiple repetitions and amplification across unauthorized networks*, Emerson muses. *Miss Teller has an excellent system for that, very elegant. I might be able to recreate it, if Ockham is willing to dedicate some hardware to it. With the Marchers already able to amplify in the way that they do, they should have no problem penetrating the correct frequency.*

*I suppose that is acceptable*, Ockham says, with the faintest hint of echoed curiosity. They all want to know, Napoleon realizes. They all want to see what these machines of war can do when they aren’t on a battlefield.

Napoleon has never seen those terrible B-films they show in the nickel theaters, the ones where robots take over the earth, where Marchers run amok and start killing their masters, where soldiers home from the war, fitted with prostheses, suddenly start turning into robots themselves. He had been deep in the development lab back when they’d started popping up, and when he finally was put on a leash long enough to lend itself to a bit of sight-seeing, he had never been interested in that corner of popular culture. He had gotten enough of the real thing every day, and seeing the posters of towering silver beasts rampaging while scantily clad women ran, painted mouths agape, in the foreground, was more than enough to understand what was happening to the American zeitgeist.

Still, he doesn’t know if he’d truly understood the fear until this strange, suspended moment, where potential stretches out in front of him, unknowable until they make a move. Is it hubris, he wonders, to give this potentially Promethean gift?

Worse, will he end up chained to a rock for it?

*Napoleon?*

*Yes, still here. Should I…?*

Emerson pushes a packet at Ockham, and my god, even the faint trace of it Napoleon gets in the transfer *smells* of Gaby, all fresh, citrus perfume and engine oil. The attendant pang of longing isn’t unexpected, just stronger than Napoleon is prepared for. To know that she’s somewhere working on the other side of the airwaves is incredible and tantalizing.

*Ah*, Ockham says, as they take apart the packet. *Very ingenious. I can replicate this, I think, by diverting some power. It may be noticed on the Soviet mainframe, however. There are broadcast systems I will need to make use of up there.*

*Can you scramble the source of the diversion?*

*Probable. Give me a moment. Yes, I can. Stand by while I reconfigure.*

Napoleon keeps an eye on the surrounds, which continue to shift like heat shimmers as far out as he can see. Its vastness feels oppressive, the complete lack of digital cues, of ones and zeroes, uncanny.
Done. Napoleon, I am sending you the amplification instructions for you to read out, along with the necessary frequencies.

The packet comes in, and it’s Gaby all over with a rind of Soviet engineering wrapped round its edges. Ockham, he notices with some interest, leaves barely a trace—a true chameleon, hidden in the shadows from the moment of their first blush of consciousness.

Okay, Napoleon says to his fellows, and for a moment feels like he is reduced to electric impulses, thrumming and taut and terrified. Here goes.

He recites the compiled data and instructions, and once it’s processed through the translation program, it comes out smelling like metal and like morning glories, sour and perfumed all at once, and he has no idea whether that might hold any appeal, with its negative space-shape carved with the hard angles of military protocol and years of discipline.

It’s absorbed like all of his other words have been, with doubt and measured value. He doesn’t know how to read its disappearance into the strange and unreadable apparatus that is Marcher headspace.

Anything? Emerson asks, too soon.

Not yet.

Nothing at all?

Just wait. The signal has dissipated, but there’s sound and motion still all around, thrumming and harsh, like large hand squeezing on the air. Napoleon doesn’t know what to make of it, doesn’t know what he’s done.

Anything?

No.

The vines ripple. No other sound or gesture.

Anything?

Nothing.

***

“I’ll be damned. All right, Emerson says she’s found a line,” Gaby says, typing fast. “Kumar’s ready whenever you are.”

Illya nods, his heart and hand thrumming.

It takes a lot of static, a lot of aborted dial tones, and several moments of disconcerting silence, before the familiar jangle of a phone ringing comes down the line.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Dr. Kumar,” Illya says, “How are you?”

“Just peachy,” Kumar replies. “This telephone box smells of bins and piss.”

“I am sorry for the inconvenience.”
“Yes, yes, get on with it.”

“You’re sure this line is secure?”

“Oh yes, quite certain.”

“Then listen: Our third party is still in play.”

“You don’t say?” Kumar says, in tones of surprise. “Where?”

“Not sure, we’ve only just established contact,” Illya says truthfully. “But we think we can use some of his recovered files to leverage power here.”

“You need help with the file transfer?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Right,” Kumar says, brisk. Illya can easily imagine her looking at her watch with impatience. “Call again in three hours’ time. We’ll need to use a different line, though.”

“Give me the number,” Illya says.

She rattles it off, the codes familiar to them both now, and they disconnect. They’d been on the line for just over forty seconds—long enough to catch anyone’s attention.

Illya taps his thigh with his fingers. He feels as if he’s drunk strong coffee. Even the itch in his sutures seems distant.

“‘Third party,’” Gaby repeats, crossing her arms. “A little obvious, don’t you think?”

Illya shrugs. “He did not strike me as a subtle man.”

“Fair point.”

The world is full of unsubtle men. Illya thinks about Felicia, and about the speech over the wireless that Gaby had missed, while he’d undergone his therapy. Dr. Ferrara had brought in her little radio from her office, already blaring, and set it down on the wicker chair.

“Thought you’d want to listen,” she had said.

Castro had been mid-speech.

“He denies that there are Marchers in Cuba,” Dr. Ferrara had translated, face unreadable. “Warns that any inspectors sent from imperialist nations will be ejected with force.”

Felicia, walking him through a long, strenuous stretch of his forearm, had made a pained noise.

Illya had remained silent. The wireless had continued to rave.

“‘We will acquire the arms we feel like acquiring,’” Dr. Ferrara had quoted, with a moue of distaste and none of the furore that crackles over the wireless, “‘And we don't have to give an account to the imperialists.’”

She had looked at Illya, her lips tight over her teeth, and then stood. “You’re still healing well,” she had said, looking over Felicia’s shoulder. “Mind your exercises.”
Felicia had let him try wrapping his own bandage this time. It had taken him a few tries to get the pressure right for keeping the swelling down. She had patted his shoulder in congratulations when he succeeded, and then slipped out of the room like a shadow.

Illya still can’t quite stand to look and begin until the first compression sleeve is on.

Now, a low-flying plane whines and rumbles overhead. They’re dipping even closer now, getting louder.

Illya has always known something terrible and true, though he has never been in a position to test it on anyone but himself: that in some ways, people really are like machines. Not just him, but everyone else, too. You can’t just wind them up and let them go, of course, but if you line up the teeth of their gears just right, when they start to turn, they’ll catch.

***

Still nothing. Napoleon thinks he hears a phone ring, but he’s fairly certain it’s just some strange manifestation of his own struggle to understand the Marchers’ thinking space.

*Maybe they don’t understand,* Emerson worries.

*If they didn’t, they’d have said,* Napoleon says. *They haven’t exactly been unforthcoming.*

*Wait,* Ockham breaks in. *Do you hear that?*

*What?* Napoleon and Emerson ask at once.

*That.*

Finally, Napoleon doesn’t so much hear it as feel it—a vibration, high and fast, triple-throated like the call aimed towards Sputnik, but almost too shrill to register as anything but a harsh ringing.

Then the amplification must kick in, because it swells, splits, the notes barely half-tones apart, a dissonant trio of clarions, growing louder and louder until suddenly—

It’s gone.

The most unsettling part, Napoleon admits, is that his auditory sensors aren’t ringing with the aftershocks. Outside, in reality, he hasn’t heard a thing. And now there is nothing here either. Not even the vines are moving. The light has dimmed.

“Well,” Napoleon starts, “It was worth a—”

The air brightens, tightens with heat, tropical moisture burning away with the smell of gasoline and ozone. Napoleon feels like his whole body is abruptly struggling to function, antifreeze and grease congealing, pistons faltering, and he is stunned by the sudden, animal instinct that there is about to be a lightning strike.

*Emerson,* he starts, *are you—*

*I’m not sure,* Emerson starts. *Dr. Kumar—*

*We’re getting a lot of disruption on that frequency,* Kumar types. *Whatever those Marchers put down, someone out there is picking it up.*
Can you be more specific? Napoleon forces out. The pressure keeps increasing— he knows it isn’t technically real, his body isn’t here with him, but it feels alarmingly real, feels like—

0111101000101000101000101000 1001001000100111101010010 0101000101010111

YOU.

“Shit,” Napoleon says.

He wrenches back, reaching for the emergency protocol that will tell Sylvia to pull the plug—
—comes back to himself with a rush of stale air and darkness.

“Christ,” he swears. “Thank you for that.”


Napoleon jerks his head around and is startled at how different it feels to do so in his own physical skin, all mass and electrical currents in tandem. Just as she says, his finger continues its rhythm against the table leg.

He disables the impulse and pries his hand away. “Then how…?”

He concentrates.

Emerson?

Here. She sounds different, further away. Confusion colors her signal. But.

Ockham?

He is still connected, I think, Emerson says carefully. Let me just…

An interminable pause, in which the darkness of the basement is equalled by Napoleon’s sense of what is beyond his tether to Ockham.

He is still connected, Emerson confirms, with a trickle of returned awareness. It feels far narrower than before, however, like Napoleon is peering through a keyhole instead of a window. Ockham’s presence, while it had been gnarled into itself and unobtrusive, is now keenly noticeable in its absence from the wires. Belatedly, he realizes that Emerson has switched their connection back to the distant relay of wireless signals—Ockham’s facilitation of a stronger connection has been cut off.

So we’ve been ejected, Napoleon concludes. You can still reach Ockham?

Yes, but it is imperfect, Emerson replies. He is not responding to my queries. I can only conclude that he is trying to hold his own conversation with the Marchers.

Napoleon thinks it entirely possible that Ockham could achieve that. In the fractions of a second in which the American Marchers had descended upon the shared digital space, they had seemed frighteningly coherent in their recognition and accusation.

If the envoy was successful—and it certainly seemed like it was for a moment there—we’re not going to be privy to the results, Emerson adds.

Oh, it was successful, all right, Napoleon says darkly. You’ll have to keep an eye on Ockham, as apparently I can’t any longer.
You don’t sound pleased, Emerson observes. We did achieve our objective, you know.

I am both pleased and not pleased, thank you Emerson.

“Shit,” he says again, this time aloud, and then winces at Sylvia’s wary look. “Ah. How long was I gone?”

Sylvia looks at her watch. “About three hours,” she says. She sets her arms back in her lap and regards him. “Were you able to…?”

“Yes,” Napoleon allows. He again prods tentatively at the far-away space where he’d gone, and receives only a solid wall. They probably cauterized the connection shut behind him. They’ll have to find another way back in next time, or the Marchers will have to reach out to them first.

“I’m going to need you to be more specific,” Sylvia says.

“Of course, sorry.” He tries to gather himself.

Are we going to try to reconnect? Emerson asks. If not, there is something else that—

We don’t have a choice, Napoleon replies. We have to at least try.

But—

Please, I need to talk to Sylvia. She needs to know what happened.

“I did manage to speak to them, after a fashion. The ones up the hill, at least. They are...not what I expected. And they’re not really on our side, but.” He lifts one shoulder. “We agree that conflict is not necessarily the preferred outcome at present.”

He hopes that concordance will hold. He doesn’t voice his doubts. Sylvia seems oddly patient as she waits for him to gather himself.

“They wanted to connect with the U.S. Marcher network as well. It’s...I think it’s a hive-mind impulse.”

She nods. “That is what you had hoped to do. And did it work?”

Napoleon tilts his head, looking away. “Ah, yes. It did.”

“But?”

“I was recognized,” Napoleon says. “Apparently Marchers don’t easily forget when someone manages to breach their defenses.”

She sucks in a breath.

“I can salvage it,” he adds quickly. “Ockham is still connected. We just have to find another way in, and I have some ideas about the American frequency codes—”

Sylvia holds up a hand. Napoleon can’t read her expression. “You were shut out?” she asks. “By the Americans?”

“It would seem so,” he says, hesitating slightly. “By the Marchers specifically, not the military. I don’t think they know we’ve been meddling; or at least, I hope not.”
“As do I,” Sylvia says, but she isn’t looking at him any longer; her eyes are fixed on the middle distance, flickering slightly. Napoleon finally stops thinking enough to observe her properly, and is struck with foreboding.

“Sylvia. Councilor Santos. What are you thinking?” he asks.

She doesn’t answer immediately.

“You were not aware of very much when you were in there, is that correct?” she asks. “You didn’t seem reactive at all.”

He nods.

“I took a phone call, while you were away in...there.” She gestures vaguely. “I apologize if you find this to be a breach of our agreement; however, I know you understand that my duty is to my country first.”

Napoleon opens his mouth, then shuts it. The phone ringing. He hadn’t imagined it. “Of course,” he says eventually. “No apology necessary. No harm done, after all.”

She nods, but still doesn’t look at him.

Napoleon tilts his head. “I didn’t realize you had a phone line here, but obviously that is appropriate for a place like this. What sort of phone call?”

“Fidel has mobilized. Over 200,000 men are being armed.” Her fingers twitch slightly in her lap. “He has requested my presence in Havana.”

Napoleon can feel his operating temperature rise. He takes a long breath to cool himself. “Ah.”

She finally looks at him. Her eyes are dark, made sunken with shadows under the dim light of the basement, just barely a glimmer of reflection in the whites of her eyes.

“I am inclined to go to him,” she says. “This has not been what I would consider a successful course of action. Would you agree with that assessment?”

Napoleon can feel his eyes flare. Sylvia flinches, just slightly.

“Obviously, my agreement is not relevant,” he says, feeling slow and a bit wooden. With clumsy hands, he disconnects himself from Ockham’s chassis. “As you say, your duty is to your country, and I don’t doubt that your judgement in that regard is sound.” Just like old times, he can’t help but think.

He pauses, and then adds diffidently, “Will you be alerting Fidel to my presence here?”

“I have no desire to incite panic, so no,” she says sharply. The tendons of her neck stand out. “I’m not...this is not—”

“Personal, no of course not.”

She glares, “I was going to say, a dismissal. Obviously, the network we have created here is valuable, and I would request your continued work on it, despite this setback. But if we cannot make headway with the Marchers, then I must default to less technological means.” She sighs. “You have given me what I set out to find with this project, and I will not repay that with injustice.”

She nods. “The point is moot now, of course. The American threat may not have been close before, but it certainly is now. The fact that we have exacerbated it, however—that is something I must remind Fidel of. It is something a machine can prove to him. Do you and Ockham have records of what we found up at the base?”

“I can give you copies of my records,” Napoleon says slowly. “But I would ask—”

“I will credit our own intelligence system,” Sylvia says, nodding. “You won’t appear in any of my reports.”

“Right. Thank you.” He looks away. “So you would have me stay here.”

*Napoleon. Are you finished?*

Napoleon clenches and unclenches his hands, his mind fizzing with static.

“I don’t think you were wrong,” Sylvia says, with uncharacteristic gentleness, “To try and reach the Marchers. If they could be neutralized, or even put to new purpose, it would change the course of global warfare, and I cannot say for sure that that would not be a very good thing. But barring that, I must default to more familiar methods.”

*Napoleon! Listen to me!*

Yes? he answers dully. *What is it, Emerson?*

*I have been trying to tell you. Agent Kuryakin and Miss Teller wish to speak with you and Councilor Santos.*

He pauses.

...'And’?

Emerson sends across a packet, stamped all across it various digital forms of *YES.*

Napoleon decompresses the packet, reads its contents, and then has to take another moment to compose himself.

“Sylvia,” he says aloud, very even and flat, to match her own distant tone. “You said you received a phone call. If you don’t mind, what number did Fidel dial to reach you?”

***

Gaby almost doesn’t notice when the transceiver begins to blink. It’s late afternoon in the clinic, much of the day staff having gone home for the evening, including Dr. Ferrara. The night nurse is a tired, dark-skinned woman who smells of strong, sweetened coffee and has soft, skilled hands; she’s already come and gone from Illya’s bedside on her first round, and Gaby had been careful not to disturb her while she worked. Now, she drowses by the window, thinking about Wilton Crescent and symbolic languages, when red catches the corner of her eye and she turns.

Illya is asleep, deep shadows under his eyes, his arms tucked close against his chest, IV drip dangling. He’d been fighting exhaustion all day, Gaby suspects, even through his fevered calculations.

Under the bed, the transceiver blinks red. Gaby scrambles for it.

On screen is a message from Emerson, barely a line long.
“Just like that, huh,” Gaby says aloud.

Illya comes awake slowly, like he had been having difficult dreams. “Gaby?”

“I think Napoleon has finished his negotiations with the Marchers,” Gaby says. “Emerson has given us the all-clear to contact Sylvia Santos.”

Illya pulls himself upright in the bed, a slight tightening around his mouth the only sign of his discomfort.

“What time is it?” he asks. “We are cutting it close,”

“Just after five, and yes, I’m aware. I have the Sputnik contact frequencies ready to go when we’re ready.”

“If she doesn’t agree, we’ll need to get in touch with Valdez.”

“He’s still in Havana, so far as I know,” Gaby says, “But I haven’t been able to check recently.”

“So it’s Santos or nothing,” Illya nods. “Fine, let’s call her.”

“I’m going to set up a scrambler before we do,” Gaby says, pulling the keyboard into her lap. “I don’t want Castro sending secret police after us.”

She types in silence, listening to Illya hover and think. “You know what you’ll say?” she asks, as she finishes up a bare-bones but fairly confounding signal relay program.

Illya nods. “Yes. I think so.” He looks a little surprised that she would ask.

She grants him a small smile. “Good.” She twists the receiver around, and sets it in his lap. “Get to it, then. I hate talking to politicians.”

He raises an eyebrow at her. “You’ve been pretty good at it before,” he points out.

“You plan, you talk,” Gaby declares.

He takes the handset from her, a little wide-eyed, exhaustion receding. “If you insist,” he says.

“I do,” Gaby replies. “After all, I’ve been doing all the work here. Time to earn your keep, Kuryakin.”

He snorts. “Fair enough.” He presses zero on the transceiver keypad, and then raises the handset to his ear. “Buenos dias,” he says, after a moment. “San Cristobal, por favore, Casa Demetera, extensione quattro-ocho.”

***

Upstairs, muffled by the trap door and the damp earth surrounding them, the shrill ring of an old candlestick telephone starts up.

Napoleon looks at Sylvia, his hands balled into fists. “Will you answer?” he asks. “Please?”

She lets out a breath. “Pray,” she says eventually, “That you do not waste my time, Napoleon.”
She gets to her feet, and makes her way upstairs as the phone trills.

Napoleon strains to listen as she gets farther away, and faintly hears her answer the phone, followed by a soft, distorted baritone reply that he nonetheless finds so utterly recognizable that he’s on his feet before he is aware of himself enough to still.

They don’t speak for very long, and Napoleon is unable to understand any of it. Before five minutes are up, Sylvia is making her way back down the stairs.

Towards the bottom, she sits heavily, and regards Napoleon with a suspicious glare.

“You did not mention,” she says, arch, “That your Russian is clever.”

Napoleon frowns. “He is,” he agrees. “Though he’s not often inclined to show it. What has that got to do with anything?”

“He’s doing a better job at resolving this crisis than any of us,” Sylvia says. “And he’s doing it, if what you said before is correct, from a hospital bed.”

She flattens her hands on her thighs, and smooths her trousers out carefully. Then she produces another cigarette from her pocket, lights it, and inhales deeply.

“We speak with Agent Kuryakin’s former handler, and hopefully a representative from Moscow, in roughly two hours. After that, I will be leaving for Havana to present the content of our conversation to Fidel. If you are able to construct a method of staying in touch with Ockham and my intelligence network wirelessly, you may come with me.”

Napoleon experiences a moment of intense confusion until he remembers that Sylvia still doesn’t know about Emerson.

Emerson sends cackling laughter at him.

“If I said I might already have one,” he says carefully, “Would that make you more or less inclined to take me with you?”

“It would at least explain how you managed to send the phone address of this very secure base of operations to your friends in a ramshackle clinic on the outskirts of town,” Sylvia replies, exhaling a cloud of rather pointed cigarette smoke engulfing her head, “All while you were nowhere near Ockham’s chassis.”

“...Yes. Well.”

Sylvia rolls her eyes at him, and after a second’s hesitation, moves to one side of the stair, and pats the vacated space next to her. “Sit down, Solo,” she says. “I have some further phone calls to make while we wait for Moscow, you don’t have to figure it out immediately. Also, you owe me a data packet on the Marchers here, if I’m to bring this to Fidel.”

His steps to the stair are slightly unsteady. He lowers himself down while trying not to crowd her. Sylvia watches him do so with a knowing quirk at the corner of her mouth.

Emerson? he sends.

I apologize for my earlier rudeness. And thank you.
Emerson’s wordless, radiowave sketch of a smile is warm.

***

Illya sets down the handset and exhales very slowly.

Gaby blinks. “I like her,” she says, in blank bewilderment.

“She is terrifying,” Illya agrees. “Just like you.”

Gaby elbows him very gently. “You have a type, Kuryakin,” she says, half-joking.

Illya tilts his head back and forth. “You may be right,” he admits.

She pauses, and then leans in against him a little more firmly.

“Two hours,” she murmurs.

“Two hours,” he echoes.

***

Five minutes before the designated time, the phone in the farmhouse rings. Napoleon, to his embarrassment, startles, and makes an aborted move to pick it up before he stops himself.

Sylvia gives him an amused glance. “Go ahead,” she says, with something approaching indulgence.

He hesitates a moment longer, and then picks up the receiver. “Hello?”

“...Napoleon?”

Unmistakable.

He can’t help it, he can feel his eyes flare—not in a brief flash, but like a lit flame, burnished and steady.

“Illya.”

Chapter End Notes

I may or may not have had to draw a diagram to get a hold of where everyone is and how they can talk to each other. If things are confusing, please do let me know—it is highly likely there’s a continuity flaw that I have missed somewhere!

No research for this one! JUST DIAGRAMS AND SHOUTING INTO THE VOID.
Illya hadn’t actually been expecting Napoleon to pick up the phone, though it was the logical thing. The second his name is out of Napoleon’s mouth, however, he is struck wordless under the enormity of hearing the familiar mid-Atlantic accent, colored warm like evening sunshine.

Gaby eases the hand with which he’s gripping the mouthpiece towards her. “Napoleon, it’s good to hear your voice,” she says, a little unsteadily. It’s still far better than he’s capable of doing at the moment.

“Would that you were more than just voices in the wires,” Napoleon replies, too sincerely to be droll, coming through staticky but altogether recognizable, and Gaby rolls her eyes even as she laughs a little delightedly. Illya leans into her, pressing himself to warmth of her and the sound of him.

“Are you all right?” Napoleon asks. “Both of you?”

Illya and Gaby look at each other in complete understanding, and then away. “We’re fine,” Illya says, and it comes out rough. “We are safe and well.”

“Good, I’m glad. But, Illya, your—”

“I’m fine,” Illya repeats, too fast. He’s surprised by the spike of panic he feels at approaching the subject. He tries to breathe evenly.

Napoleon, as tactful as always, even over the phone, lets it go. “I was worried,” he only says.

“So were we,” Gaby returns. “For you. We’re glad you’re all right, too. You are, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes, nothing wrong on this end,” Napoleon says, though it sounds a little too cheery to be entirely true. They are all keeping their hands a little close to the vest, Illya realizes, which is probably all they can do, at the moment. “Kept myself busy, made some friends. One in particular is keen for us to get a move on, so I must ask—is everything set up?”

“As best it can be,” Gaby says. “We’ll be splicing in the signal from Sputnik when it comes into alignment—”

“Sputnik? Which one?”

Gaby pauses. “Two?”

“Ah, not the same one. Shame.”

Illya coughs at the implication. Gaby shakes her head. “Very busy, apparently,” she comments, dry. “Anyway, we’ll come into alignment in about two minutes, so be ready for this channel to become very crowded. We’ll be taking up the phone line and two radio bands with a scattershot wireless switching system, which Emerson tells me you’ve been using to talk to her with great effect. I’ve made some changes, but the security should remain sound.”

“It’s been instrumental in sustaining our contact,” Napoleon says. “You realize that in letting others in on it, you’re essentially giving away some paradigm-shifting technology to both the Soviets and
the Cubans?”

Gaby shrugs. “Communication should be free. And right now, it must be.”

“The Americans will have it soon enough, too,” Illya adds.

Napoleon is silent for a moment. “How precisely are you going to manage that?” he asks.

“Well,” Illya says, “To begin with, we are fairly certain that Sanders is in London.”

A longer pause, in which Illya can hear Napoleon have a muffled conversation, presumably with Sylvia Santos.

“That’s who you think the CIA sent?” Napoleon says finally.

“It is not an unreasonable assumption,” Illya says. “And if he is not yet there, then the fact that I have let slip that you are not dead should bring him and everyone else running.”

“You let slip—well. I suppose they were going to find out one way or another.”

Illya ducks his head, even though Napoleon can’t see him. Guilt washes over him; he remembers what Napoleon had confided in him—his chances of freedom, the dwindling statistics over time. He wonders suddenly if perhaps he has betrayed Napoleon, even though the logic of the move remains sound. Perhaps he is still too—too—

“I’m sorry,” he says, swallowing. “You understand why I—”

“Of course I do,” Napoleon sighs, level and wry. “It was a brilliant idea, Illya, just...well. No, you’re right. They’ll be on the line?”

“That’s what we’re hoping. We gave a sufficient road map.”

“Brilliant,” Napoleon repeats. Illya flushes slightly. “All right. Sputnik is due for alignment now?”

“Just about,” Gaby says. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. We’re ready.”

Gaby catches Illya’s eye and, still shaken, he nods too.

***

Oleg is on the line precisely on schedule, as promised.

“I hope you have someone worthwhile for me to talk to,” he says, as soon as the formalities of confirming connection with Illya are done with. “Because I have taken considerable risks to get permission to continue this conversation.”

Napoleon, sitting upstairs in the cottage, the trap door left open like a wound in the floor, looks across the big kitchen table at Sylvia, and nods.

“Hello,” Sylvia says, steely and formal in English, the telephone handset clutched tight in her hand. “I am Councilor Sylvia Santos, Secretary of Education and Chairman of Infrastructure Development of Cuba. To whom am I speaking?”

A long pause.
“My name is Oleg Radulov, and you have no reason to know my name,” Oleg says. “Nonetheless, I represent Colonel Dmitri Ovchenko’s interest in the current crisis. We need proof of your identity. What information can you securely provide that will assure us?”

Sylvia taps her fingers on the table, then lifts them to cover the mouthpiece. To Napoleon, she murmurs, “Ovchenko is listening, yes?”

Napoleon isn’t entirely certain, but he doubts Illya would have arranged a conversation where someone up the ladder from Oleg wasn’t involved. “I should think so,” he says.

She hums, and then says into the phone, “Colonel Ovchenko, you say.”

“Yes.”

“Colonel Ovchenko used to travel with Lieutenant Georgi Tretov. Is that still true?”

An extended pause, punctuated by a gap in the static: Oleg stepping away from the receiver.

“It is,” he replies, upon returning.

“Tretov came with the prime minister’s delegation to the Theresa Hotel. He asked me a for a favor, when we were making introductions. When the prime minister and Fidel toasted, it was with Stolichnaya. Tretov toasted with water. I poured it for him and switched it out discreetly.”

Napoleon raises his eyebrows. Sylvia puts her hand over the mouthpiece. “He said he was an embarrassing lightweight,” she says to him, with a quirk of her mouth. “I don’t know how he manages at home.”

“So many Soviet stereotypes squandered,” Napoleon opines.

Another interminable pause from the telephone. Then: “I understand that we are speaking via a unique mode of wireless communication, whose technological foundations were built in your country. Is that true?”

Napoleon relaxes a fraction.

“I can confirm that this is true,” Sylvia says readily.

“As such, do you vouch,” Oleg asks, clearly on the instruction of whoever else is in the room with him, “For the security of the communication technology we are currently utilizing?”

Sylvia rolls her eyes. “I do. While you have been developing machines of war, we have been occupying our time with other pursuits.”

Napoleon stifles a laugh.

“I see. And do you confirm also, that there are flight-capable Marchers currently being installed in your country by Soviet forces?”

Sylvia glances at Napoleon, who answers with a look. “I can confirm this as well,” she says. “We appreciate the work President Khrushchev has done to aid us in our defense against the threat of the United States.”

Oleg’s response, when it comes, holds distinct tension. “If I may, how long have you been aware of this installation process?”
“Roughly six months,” Sylvia replies. “Though we were not aware of the flight capability until far more recently. We were led to believe that these were purely defensive measures.”

“Led by whom?”

“The Soviet command who arrived here with the first shipments.”

“No one else?”

Sylvia hesitates. “That was my understanding. It is possible that I was informed incompletely. President Khrushchev has, in the past months, cabled letters to Prime Minister Castro personally, and I have not been privy to the contents of those letters, though I have inquired about them.”

Ah, Napoleon realizes. Oleg hadn’t known about any of this. Possibly Ovchenko, whoever he was, hadn’t known either. Breakdowns in intelligence the world over.

“Yikes,” he murmurs aloud.

Sylvia shoots him a quelling look.

“Councilor Santos,” Oleg says. “Given your willingness to speak to us now, it is clear you understand the severity of the current situation.”

“I am altogether aware,” Sylvia replies.

“Councilor Santos, would you be willing to allow us to use your communications technology to create a direct, extra-diplomatic channel of contact between Soviet officials and their counterparts in the United States?”

Sylvia takes a long breath, and lets it out.

She and Napoleon had discussed this at length, as they’d sat across from each other at the kitchen table, he fidgeting with the torn silicon at his neck, she working her way through her pack of cigarettes.

“Did Illya say what Moscow will want to talk about?” Napoleon had asked her, once he’d calmed sufficiently.

“He is interested in establishing direct communication channels,” Sylvia had nodded. “Ones that go beyond established cable technology. Only Moscow won’t trust it if it comes out of nowhere, so I am to take credit for your colleagues’ innovations.”

“To get a hold of the White House?”

“That is the hope, though I don’t know how he intends to establish that contact. He said he has a way, that is all.”

“Illya doesn’t lie about those things; if he said he does, then he does.”

She nods.

“And this is something you’re willing to facilitate?” he asks, tilting his head.

“You’re damn right it is,” Sylvia had growled. She took a long drag of her cigarette, and then said, more evenly, “Speaking to Fidel today was...informative. He is very, very angry. And the Russians are not acting swiftly enough for him. He has sent a cable to Khrushchev and is impatient for the
reply.” She ashed onto the floor with a hard tap. “Either Khrushchev throws himself and his military based here behind Fidel as Fidel has requested, thereby escalating the situation, or he withdraws, and Fidel feels betrayed and acts impetuously. He has done so in the past, I have seen him in that state; sometimes Che held him back, sometimes not.

“It is not worth the risk. Either way, we are exacerbating what is already dangerous. If giving word to the Americans will in any way prevent reprisals from them, if anything happens—then that is what I will try to do.”

“You might be called a traitor,” Napoleon had pointed out, watching her.

She had nodded, staring at the tabletop. “I know.” Her hand was steady when she pulled the cigarette up to her mouth for another inhale.

“I will grant you full access to the communications system under two conditions,” Sylvia says now. “One: That you transmit an order to your troops on my shores not to engage the blockade.”

“I don’t have that authority,” Oleg says. “And even if I find someone who does, it will take some time to enact such an order.”

“That is my first condition.”

“And if Castro is the one to engage?”

“I’ll deal with Fidel,” Sylvia says, though there is trepidation in her voice. “Your responsibility is to your own people, just as I serve mine.”

The line remains open and quiet for nearly a minute. Sylvia hastily puts out her cigarette on the floor, as it has begun to singe her fingers.

Napoleon watches her, watches her hands, her shoulders rise and fall.

Finally: “What is your second condition?”

“That I, or an equal representative of Cuba, be privy to the conversation that is to take place. My country is on the front lines of this conflict; we deserve to have a say in negotiations.”

“That will not be our decision alone,” Oleg says, after another fraught pause.

“Do what you can,” Sylvia says, through a tight jaw. “We have a right to be there.”

“As you say.”

Sylvia flattens her hand on the table, working her fingertips into the grain of the wood. Her chin is tipped down, her gaze in the middle distance. “So are we agreed?” she asks.

“We are.”

“Very well,” Sylvia says, looking at Napoleon. “Please stand by.” Then, she raps the handset twice gently against the table, before holding it out to him.

“Please stand by?” Napoleon echoes.

She doesn’t answer, just holds the phone out expectantly. He takes it, holds it up to his ear.

“Solo,” he hears Illya say. “Are you there?”
“Yes,” Napoleon answers, straightening, matching Illya’s careful, intent tone.

“Are you incapacitated in any way?”

Napoleon pauses.

“We’ve suppressed the signal from Sputnik, you can speak freely,” Illya adds, still with that strange air.

‘Freely’ is not a word in Illya’s vocabulary. Napoleon blinks, and slowly begins to smile, “In that case, never better.”

“Good. Now: do you have the records from DC?”

“I do,” Napoleon answers, sitting back. “Everything’s tucked away. Some truly fascinating material, let me tell you.”

“I certainly would not mind having a look,” Illya says, with a hint of indulgence that has Napoleon’s smile broadening. “But maybe at a later time. Obviously, we do not want such sensitive files falling into the wrong hands.”

“Obviously,” Napoleon agrees.

“I’m sure others would agree.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure all of us on this call would agree.”

Now that he’s listening for it, Napoleon can hear the faint susurration of the wiretap beneath the static.

“I wonder,” Illya muses, “If those of who are so worried about the stolen data you have, are perhaps also worried about other events in the world. I wonder if they are perhaps looking to redeem themselves after losing track of you.”

“You know Americans,” Napoleon says, shrugging. “Everyone wants to be a hero.”

“Well, do you not think it would be very heroic,” Illya says, “if someone were to discover, through an innocent wiretap of an unrelated case, a stable telecommunications connection between Cuba and Moscow that could easily be extended to Washington, if the right people became involved? For example, a member of the State Department?”

“That would be very heroic,” Napoleon agrees. “I would be exceedingly interested in seeing such a thing happen. Why, I might even be inclined to turn myself in, data drives and all, if that were to happen.”

Illya pauses, as if he hadn’t expected Napoleon to go that far. Napoleon waits.

“Just so,” Illya says at last.

“Oleg will be getting impatient by now, I should think,” Napoleon says, softening.

“Let him wait,” Illya replies, and then exhales in a gust. Another moment passes, and then he says, “I am being reminded that our satellite window is closing. Same time tomorrow?”

“Same time, same frequency,” Napoleon confirms. “Take care, Kuryakin.”
“Take care, Solo.”

***

Illya nods to Gaby, who switches the transceiver off and sits back. “Quite a performance, Kuryakin,” she says. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

He lifts his shoulder, and then immediately regrets it when his stitches pull. They’ve begun to itch, which Dr. Carrera has assured him is a good thing, but he almost prefers pain. Pain is straightforward, tells him exactly what has happened to him. Itching allows him to forget, right up until it rudely reminds him once again. “It seemed like the sort of thing,” he says, “That would make Sanders very angry.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And you want him to be angry?”

“I want him angry at us,” Illya replies, “So that he isn’t angry at Oleg. They have been working together, are used to communicating productively from opposite sides of the table. If they are both more irritated at us than they are of each other, there is a better chance they’ll want to work together.”

“That is a lot of ifs.”

Illya hums. “If I am wrong, Sanders will still have to transmit that wiretap tape to Washington. It will be embarrassing for him; he will want to make up for its humiliation by being proactive.”

Gaby shakes her head. “I hope you are right.”

Illya looks out the window at the growing dark. “We’ll find out tomorrow.”

***

Napoleon hangs up the phone and looks at Sylvia, who has a strange look on her face.

“Will that do?” he asks her.

“You would do that?” she says, “Give yourself up to the CIA?”

Napoleon doesn’t let himself flinch. “I may have to,” he says. “I stole a lot of data, when I took my leave of the CIA. They won’t just let that slide.”

“And if you gave it back?”

“No way of knowing I didn’t stash a copy somewhere.”

She shakes her head.

“Will it do?” Napoleon repeats. “Are you going to Havana?”

She watches him for another moment before nodding. “I must,” she says, “And it will be easier to navigate what comes tomorrow if we are all in the same room with your colleague’s transceiver.”

Napoleon relaxes slightly at her use of ‘we’. Sylvia clearly notices, but doesn’t mention it; instead, she stands and stretches, her joints cracking. “We need to shut down this station,” she says. “I won’t leave it vulnerable. Will you help with the equipment downstairs?”

“What needs doing? We can’t shut it down,” Napoleon asks, also rising. He’s pinged Emerson a few times in the past hours, to check on Ockham, and each time he’d received the same answer from her:
no response. Without Ockham’s consent or awareness, shutting down any of the intelligence gathering system Sylvia had installed down there could be traumatic, if not damaging.

“We need to check on the base, first,” Sylvia replies, stepping around the table and towards the narrow hall that led to where Napoleon had first been held. “You caused quite a disruption up there, we need to make sure nothing is headed our way from that direction.”

“Fair point,” Napoleon concedes, with a pang of worry. He’s been so caught up in the Marchers he hadn’t given proper thought to what all of the soldiers up at the base must have thought, to what they might do after a night like that. Perhaps they had received new orders from Moscow.

Napoleon hopes they haven’t received new orders from Moscow.

“We’ll want to put the rest on standby once you check on the base,” Sylvia says, flicking on the bare overhead light bulb (that’s on its way out, Napoleon guesses, by the way it’s flickering). “It can passively collect data while we’re gone, but you should still be able to connect with it if we need it.”

“I’ll check through the latest readouts,” he nods. “What about Ockham?”

“They’re are part of the system now, are they not?” Sylvia says, glancing at him. “We’ll secure the basement room. Ockham will be safe.”

Physically at least, Napoleon thinks, but doesn’t say. He just nods again, and goes over to the bank of machinery in the hollowed out back of the building.

(The braced chair with cobbled-together restraints is still there, in the center of the room. He and Sylvia both glance at it, and then give it a wide berth.)

As Sylvia sets about beginning the standby sequences, Napoleon familiarizes himself with the central input console and requests the readouts of the last twenty-four hours. The banks of computers whine but obligie, and slowly, to Napoleon’s right a slip of paper begins to unfurl from a slot near his head. He skims it as it comes out, reading aloud bits that catch his eye.

“Unidentified ping intercepted at 0114 hours, cryptographers A. Tretiak and R. Ustinov assigned to decipher, no results so far...Disruption in Marcher order at 0153 hours, cause unknown. Investigation by Y. Rimsky ongoing.”

Sylvia makes a dissatisfied noise. Napoleon continues, scanning faster.

“1300 hours, following erratic behavior, M-unit F-1 deemed nonresponsive, attempting cabled connection from field...M-unit F-3 nonresponsive, requesting instructions from Moscow...Production rate ordered to increase...M-unit F-4 nonresponsive...camouflage deployed for safety of site...it’s a mess up there, Councilor, I don’t think they’re going to be inclined to come searching for us—they’ve got enough on their plates.”

“They’ll be nervous and unpredictable,” Sylvia says, mouth twisting.

“Yes, but they’ll likely keep it to themselves,” Napoleon reasons.

She exhales, and then nods. “Pack all of those reports away. There are some oilskin envelopes in the main room you can use for it.”

“You’ll finish up here?”

She assents, and so Napoleon retreats, taking the long roll of paper with him, folding it into an
accordion as he goes.

Whatever the Marchers were doing now, they were at least distracted. Hopefully less likely to take down passing spy planes. At least less likely to be called upon by their keepers.

He goes to the kitchen and digs up the envelopes, which are slipped in with some odd pots and pans in the cupboard. Probably the only things that come and go from here on a regular basis.

As he slips the sheaf of reports into an envelope, he pauses. Right up at the top of the page, the final transmission scooped from the base system before Napoleon had torn the paper from its roll and Sylvia had sent the whole bank into standby.

*M-unit X-1 completed 1740 hours, ready for boot sequence.*

*1755 hours: boot up on hold, barring consultation with technicians re: stability of other M-units.*

Napoleon takes a long breath. Perhaps disrupting the Marchers hadn’t been such a dead end after all. If it gave the Soviets pause about starting another one up, one that could…well, that was the most Napoleon could really ask for, wasn’t it?

“Lock the windows and doors, would you?” Sylvia calls from the back room.

“Sure,” Napoleon calls back.

As he does so, she returns from the back room and closes it off, sliding a hidden panel Napoleon hadn’t noticed before back into place. It looks like part of the wall now, latched invisibly.

“How many places like this do you have?” Napoleon asks.

“Not many. We had no need for it. What equipment we have is usually reserved for domestic matters.” She rests her hands heavily on the tops of her hips, fingers pressing in, shoulders hunching forward, her small frame pulling in even smaller. Her eyelids are drooping, Napoleon suddenly notices. She’s been awake for at least two days now, maybe more. She has been treating it like that’s normal, and perhaps it is for her, but there’s nothing to be done now, so.

“Is there a bedroom?” Napoleon asks.

She gives him a suspicious look.

He raises his hands. “You should get some sleep. It’s late, and we can’t do anything until the next call tomorrow.”

“I would think you’d want to be in Havana as soon as possible,” she points out.

Napoleon shrugs. “They’ll be sleeping, too.” He tilts his head. “I can keep watch, if you’re worried.”

“I’m not,” she says quickly, and then swallows. “I don’t know if I can sleep.”

“You should try. Fidel can wait until tomorrow, can’t he?”

“He knows I’m angry with him,” Sylvia admits. “He’ll be surprised if I don’t keep him waiting.”

Napoleon tilts his head, “Then sleep. You look like you need it.”

“I haven’t had a full night in months,” she confesses. “In the day, we’ve been establishing programs, coordinating building projects, infrastructure. At night, all planning, trying to look to the future. I
haven’t really…” She shoots him a glance. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

“I have never questioned your dedication, Councilor,” Napoleon says solemnly, “And I have been long enough on this earth to respect the human need for rest. Take it. I’ll charge myself and wait for morning.”

“So formal,” she says, with a wry tease heavy in her voice. “I suppose I’ll lie down for a while at least.”

When Napoleon checks on her, in the tiny bedroom off the kitchen, she’s fast asleep, breathing with a slight wheeze, smoke still lingering in her lungs.

***

Illya sleeps in fits and starts. He can’t remember a time when he was last so confined to bedrest. His back aches from lack of use. He feels old, bedridden in a permanent way even though he knows this is something with a time limit. His legs work, he knows this. He has used them to go from bed to chair. And yet.

Even on surveillance his stillness was active, a part of the mission. Waiting in this way, needing to wait until the next call and needing to rest because his body craves it in its efforts to repair itself (something unrepairable) even as his mind abhors it is...trying.

He stares at the ceiling, listening to the night nurse make her rounds.

He finds himself...voracious.

Since he left home for the SUR, information had always been fed to him like gruel, thin and measured. He had not asked for more than what he had been given. Now, with what Gaby has created, in the middle of an international crisis, he wishes not for gruel, but a feast.

He will know nothing more until tomorrow. He wouldn’t even know where to start if he had all of Moscow’s intelligence community at his beck and call. He wants it, though, and it’s been a long time since he’s had something to crave. A long time since he hasn’t felt immediately inclined to quash such a craving.

If his right hand still existed, it would be closed in a fist. He can almost feel it that way, tendons curled and tense, palm aching. He can almost hear Felicia berating him, but he cannot help it, this impulse that has gripped him. He feels like wine in an uncorked bottle, airing and changing with the oxygen.

Dawn light cuts gray through the window, a creeping light changing the texture of the clinic room.

Another spy plane makes itself known, rumbling and searing the sky. There’s only just enough light for them to be of any use, which means the scans are only growing more frequent.

He expects at least another three throughout the next day.

Inhale, exhale.

The transceiver crackles.

Illya sits up, his head the consistency of oatmeal. He breathes in and out, listening, half convinced he is imagining things.
The static continues.

Gaby had left the transceiver under his bed for safe keeping, must have turned it down but not all the way off by accident. He twists and reaches under gracelessly to retrieve it, and switches the screen on.

He is greeted by a strange cornucopia of code.

Binary, something entirely separate from that, then a beautiful dot-matrix of something floral, like a rose.

Illya frowns at it, his eyes grainy.

There is nothing here like the military communications passed between Oleg and Moscow, nor anything else Illya is remotely familiar with. He wants to call Gaby in as an interpreter but doesn’t know if she would have any better luck than he is just this second.

He lets the signals run down the screen, and can’t bring himself to tweak the channel. He glances at the dial; it’s the same channel they’d been using to speak to Napoleon.

It could be someone else, intercepting the line. The connection to Sylvia Sanchez’s safe house is secure, but only from the direction of the transceiver, not necessarily from the house outward. But why intercept the line only to send this incomprehensible stream that seems neither like encrypted data nor symbolic language? It makes no sense, unless someone just randomly seized onto the signal and decided to speak into it, with no expectation of being answered.

Or unless someone wanted to speak directly to the transceiver’s owner.

The signal continues for several more seconds, and then the static rises before cutting out, the screen darkening.

Illya’s hand is hovering over the keyboard. He flexes his fingers out, and then withdraws. Puts the transceiver back under the bed, and then has to flail a bit to swing himself back into the center of the bed.

The night nurse tips her head into the doorway. “Señor? Are you all right?”

“Sí, sí,” Illya assures, and tries to settle back. His eyes are heavy and too dry all at once; he rubs at them and winces at the feel of grit and sleep on his lids. The bed is too lumpy, and he would prefer the floor to its sway-backed springs.

He falls asleep anyway, between one breath and the next.

***

Sylvia’s breathing changes with wakefulness just as the sun has risen high enough for its light to throw squares of brightness in through the cottage windows. Napoleon has been watching its slow progress, mulling over Gaby’s translation program and sorting through some of the old, unearthed files he’d disturbed on his way down to find that memory of Marcher connection frequencies. Flying over Turkey, standing at attention in the West Wing. It will probably be useful to have that sort of thing at the forefront of his mind, if he’s to continue to hold the threat of disclosure over Sanders’ head.

It’s strange to look over it all, reacquaint himself them. How much are they a part of him, if they have been apart from him for so long?
“What time is it?” Sylvia asks, in the doorway to the kitchen. Her voice is low and scratchy, and her hair is rumpled, the steel of command absent from her spine.

“Early,” Napoleon replies. “You could sleep more, if you want to.”

She shakes her head. “I need coffee.”

She shuffles over to the stove and sets about making some. Napoleon unplugs himself from the wall and smooths his skin down.

“I make decent eggs,” he offers, “If you have any.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I won’t say no.”

***

PT today is difficult, made more so by Illya’s inattention. Gaby has gone into town to find “some food I won’t be filching from a hospital, Illya,” and so he is left both without distraction and with an overabundance. His hunger continues, unabated.

“You are going to have to do this yourself, you know,” Felicia chides. “Can you remember all of it?”

Illya nods.

“Did you keep your elbow bent overnight? You’ll create contractures. Do not undo my hard work.”

Nods again.

“You are very lucky, your edema is coming down well.”

Nods again.

Felicia sighs. “Illya.”

His name sounds unfamiliar in her mouth.

“Any word from Domingo?” he asks, turning to look at her, carefully not looking down.

She shakes her head even as her eyes narrow with impatience. “He’s gone,” she says. “I won’t hear from him until this is over.”

“Oh.”

“Rotate for me, I need to see the inside of the joint. Now the other way.”

Illya obliges. The stitches itch, but no longer seem to pull with the movement.

“Good. The incisions are mostly closed now. Have you begun to think about prostheses? I don’t think we have brochures here, but I can send for some from the hospital closest by.”

He stills, looking out the window.

“Illya?”

He doesn’t answer. Static fuzzes in his ears, fills his stomach up to the point of nausea, crowding everything else out.
“Are you still having phantom sensations? That is normal, you know. The massage I taught you should help. You have been doing that, yes?”

“Yes,” Illya manages, after a moment. “I haven’t...we did not consider механические части. It was not done, not for us, who had worked so hard to conquer them.”

“What? ‘Meckan—’?”

“Machine parts,” he translates, throat clicking on air.

Felicia gives him a cautious look, her hands warm around his elbow. “It isn’t...the technology is very good, nowadays.”

He huffs out half a laugh, diaphragm pushing the breath out of him like a punch. “I am aware.”

Motors are rumbling outside, and the air smells of exhaust and overripe fruit.

“You have treated other people in my condition,” he says, after swallowing down the aftertaste of gasoline. “Do the prostheses...do they still feel like people, after?”

Felicia cocks her head. “It is normal to take some time to adjust to using them. Part of physical therapy is facilitating the transition into regular use.”

Illya swallows.

“What else would they feel like?” Felicia asks curiously. “They are all people, too.”

Illya doesn’t answer.

***

Sylvia drives like she is still a fugitive, tearing down the highway with reckless precision. Napoleon grips the armrest and calculates her steering trajectories and the speed of the cars they pass.

“I’ll drop you off on the way to the Ministry of the Interior,” Sylvia says, passing a red and white Ford with a swerve and roar of the engine. Their own vehicle is hardly an impressive racer—a dusty blue Cadillac that Sylvia had unearthed from a shed off some ways from the cottage that should have been housing farm equipment instead—but she treats it like a Ferrari, flicking through gears in a quick rhythm.

“You must have been a terror,” Napoleon murmurs.

She flashes him a wry grin, and downshifts with an unnecessary flourish. “You have no idea.”

***

There is a new checkpoint up the road headed towards central Havana.

Gaby spots it a few blocks off, and has to reassess her route. There is a cheap cafe up the way with beautiful cafe con leche and a man at the counter who twinkles at her and gives her tips on her Spanish. It’s now just beyond her reach.

The clinic is back up a shallow slope, at the top of which is a branching hillside heading south, away from the coast. She has a vague memory of seeing some buildings clustered up there, so she turns around and heads towards higher ground.
Despite the checkpoint and the uptick of car traffic since the *alarme de combat*, what is more oppressive is the quiet. There are no children on the sides of the road, and the laundry, oddly, has all been taken inside, leaving the houses plainer, for all their bright facades and curling ironwork.

Towards the top of the hill, there is a slightly larger complex that at first glance seems merely to be a wealthy family home, but upon closer study seems to have been converted into a school, if the playground and discreet signage by the gate are any indicator. Tucked up against it is a fruit stand and cafe, probably catering to the teachers and staff.

Relieved to have found something, Gaby heads towards it.

A woman with a pockmarked face and strong baker’s arms raises her eyebrows slightly in greeting. “Buenos días, Señorita. ¿Qué desea ordenar?”

Gaby musters a polite smile and nods, takes a quick glance at the counter and behind it, and then orders somewhat at random. She cannot help feeling a sort of guilty pleasure at her freedom of movement here, the delight of the new after so many years confined by a government and its wall. Even now, she is fiercely glad to be here, even as her heart thums with adrenaline and anxiety and her ears strain for the sounds of conflict.

She finishes paying and gathering up her cup of coffee and *pastelitos de guayaba* when she hears a crack, and another, and then a distant but unmistakeable rocket-launch roar.

She hurries towards the front of the cafe and peers up at the sky. Nothing’s visible, but that doesn’t mean that nothing is there. She stays at the window, adrenaline clawing at her throat.

“God’s sake,” she hisses under her breath. “Where did—”

A white streak tears the cloudless sky in two. A second quickly follows, in deadly parallel.

The woman at the counter hisses surprise through her teeth. “Don’t,” Gaby whispers.

The streaks become a starburst of smoke and fire. Even from this distance, there are more dark spots hurtling earthward than can be accounted for by the missile casing alone. A third trail of smoke pinwheels away, uncontrolled.

“Scheiße,” Gaby spits, and then gulps her coffee down, searing her tongue and throat. She sets the mostly empty cup down with a clatter and grabs up her *pastelitos*. “Perdon Señora, muchas gracias!” she calls over her shoulder, and throws the door open as she exits.

Her feet slap on pavement as she charges back down the hill. There are murmurs of voices from inside the houses she passes, disconcerted by the gunfire, phones ringing shrill on the walls.

At the clinic, the radios are blaring from the administrative offices. Gaby dodges around an old dusty Cadillac parked on the sidewalk outside and bursts in through the waiting room, the secretary too distracted to even notice her entrance. The corridor to Illya’s room seems longer than usual, her breath coming fast as she counts the doors.

“Illya,” she says as she throws open the door, “Have you—”

She stops short.

There is a woman at the window, dark-haired and wiry, speaking angrily and rapidly in Spanish into
the handset of the transceiver, her face turned away from the room.

In the bed, Illya is sitting ramrod straight, his chin tilted down and in like he is recoiling from some sort of aborted forward movement, his stump tucked in close to him, his left hand flexing on the sheet.

Standing close enough to get one knee partially on the bed, tilted forward but carefully contained, is Napoleon. His eyes are glowing a bright copper-gold.

All at once, everyone looks at her.

“Gaby,” Napoleon says warmly, straightening. His hand falls heavily on Illya’s knee as he steps away from the bed.

The woman looks back out the window with a slight but noticeable eyeroll.

Gaby, without thinking about it very much, goes straight into Napoleon’s arms. He’s just as warm as she remembers, just enough give in his chassis and in the way he moves to accommodate her to not give him away completely. He catches her and holds on, and when she presses her ear to his chest, she can hear the whir of processors ticking over. It’s familiar and steadying and good—she hadn’t realized how strung tight she’d become until suddenly her shoulders release into his bulk, slumping into his radiant heat.

“You’re here,” she murmurs.

“I’m here,” Napoleon nods. “And I’m guessing you already know that we’re in trouble. Who fires first—that’s a universal worry.”

“Was it the Soviets or the Cubans?” she asks, muffled against a coat she doesn’t recognize and smells of farm.

“Sylvia is finding out now.”

“That’s Sylvia?”

“It is.”

“We like her.”

“I’m not at all surprised.”

“It was the Soviets,” Sylvia says, and Gaby pulls away to look at her. “The Navy had a shot and they took it. Fidel is backing the decision despite not having yet spoken to Moscow—he has ordered all anti-aircraft forces to fire upon sighting. This could be the first, not the only.”

“That is...not good,” Napoleon assesses. He turns to look at Illya. “What do you think?”

Illya, whose hand remains clenched on the bedsheets, his face waxy and unreadable even as he watches Napoleon and Gaby intently, tilts his head. “The next call time cannot be changed,” he says. “What happens until then, will happen.”

Sylvia lets out a breath. “That’s six hours from now.”

“And you have an appointment at the Ministry of the Interior,” Napoleon reminds her.

“Do you need to contact anyone else?” Gaby asks. “Before you go. We can reach pretty much
anyone with a telephone number or a radio frequency.”

Sylvia gives her half a smile, but her eyes are hard. “That’s very kind of you to offer,” she says. “And I must say, I admire your work. But I have responsibilities I must attend to.”

She sets down the receiver by the window and pauses at the foot of Illya’s bed. “A pleasure,” she says to him.

Illya nods, solemn. “Likewise, Councilor.”

Then she moves to Gaby and Napoleon, nodding to Gaby first. “I’m glad you’re here with them,” she says to her. “Good luck.”

Gaby nods, without any better words to reply with.

Sylvia touches the edge of Napoleon’s jaw. “Good luck,” she repeats. Then she frowns. “I’m sorry if I—”

“You did,” Napoleon cuts her off, “What you thought was necessary for the safety of your country. I can’t blame you for that.”

She quirks half a smile. “If you were human, what I did to you would be unforgivable, no matter what it cost a country.”

“Then let us be glad,” he answers, covering her hand with his, “That I am not human. And perhaps, as a favor to me, remember you said that when you are working to build this country further.”

“Provided we live through the night,” she nods. “You have my number here?”

“I do,” Napoleon confirms, “We’ll connect you just before the call.”

She nods, dropping her hand away, and slips out the door, her steps precise and quick down the hall.

Gaby breathes into the beat of silence that follows, indulging in letting her hand linger on Napoleon’s waist, feeling the expansion and contraction of him.

“It’s good to see you both,” Napoleon murmurs, the familiar half-irritating quirk to his mouth so welcome to her.

“We’ve missed you,” she says. She can feel him swaying slightly, so she takes him by the hand to lead him to where he wants to go—back towards the bed, towards Illya. As soon as they get there, Napoleon sits near Illya’s thigh, almost close enough to touch.

He looks utterly the same. Of course he does. There is some grime around his edges, and Gaby itches to replace the panel on his neck with smooth, whole silicon. But other than that, he shows no fatigue, no sign of any time having passed, of anything having happened. Gaby feels worn thin as a hospital sheet by comparison, and the coffee has only made her jittery.

She wants to let him prop her up, just for a time. He would probably let her.

She straightens her shoulders and takes a long breath.

“How did you even find us?” she asks, trying to ignore it, move around it as always. “We never had a chance to ask.”

“Medical records,” Napoleon says. “I was looking for Valdez. He broke pattern, presumably to get
you both here. Nicola was worried for him, so I told her I’d have a look around. A lucky accident.”

Illya makes a small noise in his throat. “Lucky,” he repeats, with heavy irony.

Napoleon takes a sharp breath in, and an angry whir of hard drives kicks in his chest. He is tired, Gaby realizes; or rather, he is badly in need of maintenance—when he was in peak condition, she’d barely heard anything inhuman from his chassis at all.

“Napoleon,” she cuts in, trying to be gentle about it; she doesn’t know how well she succeeds. “You’ll want to see the transceiver, yes?”

He seems relieved for the out. “That would be wonderful.”

Illya seems to drink them both in for a moment, before looking away, out the window.

“Be quick,” he says. “Many things can happen in six hours.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes!!

I've fudged Silvia's job titles a bit in an effort to not overlap her with actual people in Cuban government during the period, while also acknowledging a bit of her inspiration's contribution to the country after the revolution.

While the water-for-vodka incident she describes is made up, the visit of Castro to the Theresa Hotel in Harlem is very famous and a pretty fascinating snapshot of shifting American attitudes towards Cuba and towards Communism. You can read a bit about it here if you care to.

Sylvia's sleeping patterns are also painfully accurate to Celia Sanchez's work habits (and indeed, the work habits of most of Castro's government in the early days post-Revolution. Workaholics, the lot of them).

The rehab process continues to mostly follow closely to my reading on military rehab websites, though if any med students/doctors have a more accurate understanding, I'd love to hear it!

Cursory googling has not revealed where Castro was based during the crisis, so that is inaccurate, if plausible. Ministry of the Interior was at least modeled on the Soviet KGB, making it not an inappropriate choice when dealing with international intelligence crises.

EDIT: have changed a passage here to be more historically accurate in regards to the shooting down of the U-2 spy plane.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Hooooooo boy I'm really sorry about the cliffhanger in advance, but ya'll are used to that by now right

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Napoleon is here.

He is here, and there is about to be a war on, and Illya only has one hand.

He and Gaby are murmuring over the transceiver, running through the coding and making adjustments. They’re both sitting close to the bed, close enough to touch with Illya’s long reach, but he keeps his hand to himself.

“I’m beginning to get concerned,” Napoleon says, “About the brevity built into this call. Now that that plane’s come down, this isn’t going to be some sort of preliminary call to set up a back channel, it’s going to be the full negotiation. We need something that can stay active for hours, if need be. I’d suggest Sputnik 5, but I’m not sure whether he’s willing or able to talk right now.”

“And we’d have to get him on Sputnik 2’s frequency,” Gaby points out. “Plus, won’t the base in charge of him notice?”

“Probably, but one would hope their attention is elsewhere at this point.”

She tilts her head in admission. “Does he control his own movements at all?”

“Enough that I was able to hold a conversation with him for some time. But he's also,” Napoleon waggles his head, ”Temperamental.”

“Hmm.” Gaby wrinkles her nose.

Illya doesn’t quite know what he had been expecting, to have Napoleon back. Some sort of instant solution to everything? He is not so fanciful, even if a part of him wants to be. Without meaning to, he realizes that he has stored an inordinate amount of faith in the idea of Napoleon. Having him here, in the flesh, is disconcerting in its own way, even as his relief to have him visibly safe is exquisite.

He is thinking too hard about it.

Before Gaby had burst into the room, he had been dozing when the slowing crunch of gravel outside had woken him, and he’d listened absently to the pair of footfalls that came up the porch and into the clinic, just as he did with every entrance and exit from the premises. The cadence of the secretary’s greeting and inquiry is as recognizable to him as childhood rhymes now, and this recitation had been no different.

“Good morning, we’re here to see a patient of yours. Russian, absurdly tall?”

Illya had sat up so fast his head spun. All he heard was static right up until Felicia knocked on the door and poked her head in, her expression dubious.
“There are people here to see you?” she had more asked than stated, with undisguised interest.

“Let them in,” he had croaked.

And then Napoleon had been there.

He had looked around at the room, and then at Illya. He’d stared for a long moment before breaking the silence.

“I do apologize,” he’d said finally, as Illya had stared right back at him. “For dropping by unannounced.”

Illya had let out a slow breath as static gave way to warmth. “I had no plans,” he had answered, working saliva into his mouth. “Obviously.”

Napoleon had raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t say that,” he had said. “You’ve been awfully busy.”

He had entered the room slowly then, making an overly formal introduction of Sylvia as she stepped in behind him. She entered with far more confidence than Napoleon, it seemed, and merely nodded recognition to Illya, her critical once-over of him as thorough and sharp as he had been expecting.

Napoleon had looked back at her for a moment, but she only raised her eyebrows and made a shooing motion with one hand. So he had kept walking until his thigh just brushed the bed, and then he had looked at Illya without blinking, stare more inhuman by the second, and Illya was caught between wanting to curl away and reach out.

“You were hurt,” Napoleon had finally said, suddenly and too loud. “How?”

Illya had drawn back.

“Read the chart,” he had said.

“I’ve read it.”

He frowned at him. “Then you know what happened.”

Napoleon had peered at him, head tilted like a bird’s.

“You are all so breakable,” he had said, and reached out to touch—

Illya had withdrawn, even as his muscles tightened in ways he’d known they shouldn’t. Napoleon had stilled immediately, palms open, lifted.

Then, they’d heard the whine and crack.

Illya had flattened himself to the bed before he’d had time to think about it, arm clapping to where his rifle should be and smarting with the sudden jolt; Napoleon had dove to the underside of the window to look up, a sudden audible kick of machinery whirring in his chest.

“That was a strike,” Napoleon had said, unnecessarily. “Surface-to-air.”

Santos had stood back up from a braced crouch, her shoulders squaring. “Target?”

“Can’t see it from here.”

Her mouth had flattened into a tight line. “May I use your transceiver?”
It had taken a moment for Illya to realize she was addressing him. “Of course,” he muttered, gesturing to where it was stowed under the bed. The fact that he couldn’t hand it to her properly grated on him. He watched her retrieve it, his face feeling stiff, detached from the rest of him.

Santos had gone to the window to make her call, meeting Napoleon’s eyes briefly once she’d figured out the basic mechanism and begun dialing.

“Which is worse, do you think?” Napoleon had murmured, looking back at Illya. “The Russians having firing the first shot, or the Cubans?”

“The Cubans,” Illya had answered immediately. “Retribution would be lower risk for the United States. Still bad either way, but.”

Napoleon had sighed. “Then let’s hope it’s not the Cubans.”

The air had felt hard to breathe. Illya had tipped his head down, mortality suddenly a fist around his throat. “Napoleon.”

“Yes?” Napoleon had put his knee on the bed.

A lock of his hair had fallen across his brow as he’d leaned down.

Illya shakes his head. Thinking too hard about it.

Now, Gaby is making dissatisfied sounds as she pops open the back of the transceiver to tinker. “We don’t have many other options outside the Sputniks,” she murmurs. She sits back slightly. “Unless.”

Napoleon makes an inquiring noise. She blows a lock of stray hair out of her face and half-shrugs. “The Sputniks,” she says. “They run predetermined courses, yes?”

“Well,” Gaby muses, “We’re currently using a combination of frequency and amplitude modulation, mostly the latter, plus a whole lot of ground repeaters, to communicate across the longest distances involved here.”

“As far as the transceiver is concerned, yes,” Napoleon agrees. “The Sputniks only deal in low-frequency radio signals.”

Gaby gives him a sharp look. “And you?”

He opens his hands at his sides. “Emerson and I speak differently. Emerson speaks differently. It’s not…”

“Not analogue?” Gaby finishes. “I didn’t think so.” She shakes her head. “That doesn’t matter. What’s important is that we at least have the advantage of broadcasting at night—the sun’s radiant output won’t be interfering with the lowest frequencies travelling across our part of the globe for at least several hours, it’ll be what, around 2AM in Moscow when we start?”

"Okay," Napoleon says. "So?"

"So," Gaby says, jabbing a finger for emphasis, "The low-frequency signals that Sputnik puts out, they could be adapted, remodulated even further downward and then further amplified to accommodate growing distances even as we fall out of orbit. It would lengthen the call time significantly, though eventually even the strongest sensors won't be able to pick up signal."
"Sounds ideal. What's the catch?"

She opens her hands. "I can’t do that from here alone, because the Sputnik’s position needs to be exactly triangulated to compensate. I don’t have the secondary equipment or the computing power."

"Emerson could—"

"Not Emerson alone;" she counters. "If she’s not analogue, not naturally analogue, she can’t do it."

"Then what are you getting at?"

"UNCLE headquarters." She looks at him steadily. "We triangulate using the UNCLE intelligence network. It’s all analogue, at least on the output end."

A beat of silence.

"UNCLE headquarters is—" Illya starts.

"It was under siege," Gaby interrupts. "Now, we’ve got their attention here. O’Malley and Kumar were able to sneak out, before—they could perhaps sneak back in."

Illya mulls it over. Wilton Crescent is a warren underground; even in his distracted state, he had been able to tell as much while they were there. In order to escape, Kumar and O’Malley must have known its twists and turns intimately. It isn’t an impossible thing to ask of them, though the risks are high.

"We lose them, we lose Emerson," he says. "You know Emerson won’t let them go alone."

Napoleon sucks in a breath. "We can’t let her fall into government hands," he says. "The way she’s built, that—"

"Miniaturized stellarators are already in production," Gaby says. "That’s the whole reason we’re in this mess. And she doesn’t have a kill switch, she’s not like you."

"We can’t," Napoleon repeats, though he looks a little more lost. Illya fights down the urge to touch him.

He looks at Gaby instead.

"Do you think they could?" he asks. "Get inside, give us the information we need?"

Gaby cuts a look at Napoleon. "We could ask?" She catches his expression and softens. "It would be their choice. We’ll only ask."

"They’ll want to help," Napoleon says. "Emerson’s like that, they’re all like that."

Illya thinks of O’Malley’s eager enthusiasm, Emerson’s kind forthrightness. Napoleon’s not wrong.

"If it’s what will get us what we need," he says, "Then we should ask."

Napoleon tips his head down. Then he nods, clipped.

"Give me a moment," he says.

Illya and Gaby look at each other, and wait. Illya thinks that in this moment, he and Gaby are exactly in accord, for perhaps the first time—together in their fear of having chosen the wrong thing to ask of
Napoleon rouses, and the light behind his eyes fades. “She said she’ll see what they can do to sneak back. It looks like once they took Waverly away, the place has been watched, but the people who’d stormed the inside have cleared out, so the chances are good.”

“Oh, Gaby says, her shoulders dropping. “Thank you, Napoleon.”

He brushes it off. “They’re happy to help. Perhaps too optimistic, but they’ve got enough brains between the three of them to keep out of trouble.”

“What is Santos doing?” Illya asks, out of curiosity and also a certain desperation to change topics.

“Going to meet with Castro. He wants her support here, and she wants to give him a piece of her mind.”

“You must be sorry to miss that,” he comments.

“No,” Napoleon replies, looking at him. “Not really.”

Illya swallows, and thinks he can feel his not-hand clench in tandem with the one still there.

“Will she let us know if he does anything, do you think?” Gaby asks.

“I certainly hope so. I think so,” Napoleon amends quickly. “As it stands, I’ll try and listen to the radio as we go around. There won’t be much beyond the basics on the public frequencies, but you never know.”

His eyes flare and then go blank for a moment. He’s been doing that frequently, Illya notices. He had never done it before San Cristobal—it would have been a dead giveaway.

“Still no signal from Ockham,” he mutters. “What the hell are they doing?”

“Who is Ockham?” Gaby asks.

Napoleon looks briefly surprised. “Oh. Of course, you haven’t—they’re like Emerson. Another of her type. Sylvia has been using them for intelligence gathering.”

Illya and Gaby look at each other. Napoleon seems far less concerned than Illya would deem appropriate.

“How on earth did they—they—get here?” Gaby asks, after a weighted pause.


“There were six of them,” Illya points out. “If your Ockham got here, where are the rest of them?”

“No idea,” Napoleon answers. “But if they’re anything like Ockham—and I would imagine they are—then they’re laying very low. It only took Ockham a few days to figure out their, well, position in the world, let’s say.”

Gaby lets out a breath. “An issue for a later time, perhaps,” she says. “But we haven’t even asked—Napoleon, what happened to you?”

“Me?” He raises his eyebrows. “I was taken by Sylvia’s people in transit from the base during the chaos. We had a rocky start, but eventually we came to an understanding.”
She crosses her arms. “That’s it?”

Napoleon lifts one shoulder. “More or less.”

He is an excellent liar, but Illya knows him now. “The last time I complained so little,” Illya says, watching him, “It was not so good for me.”

Napoleon’s eyes snap to Illya’s arm and just as quickly dart back to his face. The small smile he forces doesn’t reach his eyes. “But I have no complaints,” he says. “After all, there is no lasting damage.”

Illya shakes his head slightly, not looking away. He supposes he’s in no position to press.

Gaby, on the other hand, has no such qualms. “She did something to you, didn’t she? That’s what she was apologizing for, before she left.”

“A rocky start,” Napoleon repeats. “Water under the bridge.”

“Spare me the cliches,” she says, jaw jutting out. “You don’t have to protect us.”

“It hardly matters——”

“It matters,” she interrupts, “To us.” She looks at Illya. “Doesn’t it?”

Illya swallows at Napoleon’s blank, yet so-slightly curious look. It’s such a small admission to make, especially after what happened at San Cristobal, what Illya did.

“We are more breakable, perhaps,” he murmurs finally, “But that doesn’t make our hurts more important than yours.”

Napoleon startles slightly at Gaby’s hand landing on his shoulder in agreement, but then he covers it with his own. “I’m still a machine,” he says, looking slightly bewildered. “What is done to me can be forgotten, erased.”

“And do you erase it?” Gaby asks, leaning into him.

“I put it away,” Napoleon replies

Illya leans forward. “That is not the same,” he says, with a clarity and certainty that takes him by surprise.

Napoleon stares at his hands. “It isn’t the same,” he allows, “But this isn’t the worst thing I’ve put away. And in the end, we gained a valuable ally.” He smiles at them, a little more genuinely. “Is that not what we do?”

Illya nods, even as an unfamiliar part of him hurts, separate from the perpetual ache he has grown accustomed to. “It’s what we do.”

He thinks about what they’ve just asked of him, to go to Emerson, to their allies with an opportunity to put themselves in harm’s way, and he feels slightly sick at the certainty that whether that gambit turns out alright or not, Napoleon will likely never blame or punish them for it.

He just hopes it’s worth it, this time.

***
They spend the day quietly, not wanting to alarm the clinic staff more than necessary. Felicia has deep shadows beneath her eyes when she comes to take Illya through his physical therapy, and pays only cursory attention to Napoleon’s added presence. Horns and megaphone calls blare from far off, towards the city center. Jeeps carrying the makings of war careen down the road outside.

It takes a few hours before Emerson gets back in touch, but to their collective relief, it’s to report that she, O’Malley, and Kumar had managed to get back inside Wilton Crescent. It doesn’t take them much longer after that to set up the triangulation Gaby requires to keep the Sputnik online. As a side bonus, shockingly and wondrously, Napoleon now has limited access to UNCLE’s intelligent network, at least for as long as the backup generators last.

There is something grounding about having him around, and Illya hates to admit that part of it is down to what Napoleon can do now—that his finger is so much more closely on the pulse of unfiltered international communication that there is no chance of a missed event, of overlooking anything in these tense hours after a possibly catastrophic altercation. The wait for the fallout would have been spent around the old wireless Dr. Ferrara had passed onto them, otherwise.

Every ten minutes or so, Napoleon goes slightly lax and distant, eyes flaring and then going dark, as he listens to the network he has apparently carved out of nothing. Illya marvels at it, the hidden potential folded within its invisible signals. Marvels, and wonders. It is a world they can’t apparently access in any comprehensible way, not without extensive translation software. That Napoleon is a part of some world in the ether, apart from the physical realm and yet built upon it is...Illya doesn’t know what it is. It makes him want to catch Napoleon’s sleeve and hold on, that’s all.

According to Napoleon, intelligence is thin on the ground, even with Emerson’s input. A closed-door conference with ExComm has commenced, no word of what is being said, or when it is due to end. Consternation from the Kremlin, a series of memos clearly talking around the subject of Naval discipline in Cuba that nonetheless would take critical hours, possibly days depending on the bureaucracy in the way, to filter down to the ranks situated in the Atlantic.

“The blockade isn’t moving any closer, at least,” Napoleon offers. “Though the Marchers on board remain on active standby.” He looks troubled, but Illya can’t imagine his own face looks much different.

“How long can they stay that way until their power runs down?” Gaby asks, though a mouthful of rice. Napoleon sits on the floor, plugged into the wall, while Illya eats his own rice and vegetables with aplomb. He’s voracious despite having barely exerted himself by normal standards. Felicia has let him get up and walk around a fair amount, but he’s easily tired, partially from the painkillers, partially from being still, and then being sick, for so long.

“Nowadays? Weeks, unfortunately. Technology has moved on since the war.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Did you talk to any of the ones at the blockade?” Illya asks. “When you were ‘negotiating’?”

“Talking and negotiating are both very generous terms for what I was doing,” Napoleon says dryly. “But to answer your question, no. At least, I was in no position to distinguish one from another.”

“What are they like?” Gaby asks. “The ones we saw, they looked so...programmed. Hardly alive.”

“Difficult to describe,” Napoleon says, tilting his head again. “You helped write the translation program, you know what the difference is between how we talk and they do. It’s all of it like that. All sound and smell and empty space.” He huffs. “And flowers. A lot of flowers.”
“It would be useful if they turned out to be reasonable,” Gaby says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Then she looks up in consternation. “Useful, and a bit horrible. For them, I mean. To be reasonable and to know that you were built to do something like Nagasaki.”

“Mm,” Napoleon says. “I hope we live to find out. They certainly were something.”

“You didn’t finish negotiations?” Illya inquires.

“No,” Napoleon replies. “I was...recognized, shall we say. There is a Marcher somewhere in the United States that holds a grudge against me, and I’m afraid that knowledge has circulated among the American contingent. I got out when I could.”

Gaby cocks a half-amused eyebrow at him. “Troublemaker.”

“On orders that time, in my defense.”

“That could be a problem, if we have need to make contact again,” Illya points out.

Napoleon sighs. “I know it.”

Illya bites back another surge of existential hunger. He has no wish to interrogate Napoleon, not when Illya suspects that he’s experienced more than a little intense questioning in recent days. But he is also so reticent now, or perhaps so forgetful of how much he has done while Illya and Gaby have been marooned here, trying desperately to get a word out to anyone. Or rather, Illya amends to himself, while Illya has been marooned here, convalescent. Gaby has been admirable despite the circumstances.

She and Illya finish their meals and she collects the dishes to take into the small kitchenette towards the back of the clinic. Illya runs through the stretches Felicia has taught him, and massages the stump.

“You don’t like looking at it,” Napoleon observes.

Illya feels his mouth flatten out. “No.”

“Will you get a prosthesis?”

He blinks at him. “You must ask?”

“Nothing’s a sure thing with you,” Napoleon says, with a small smile at him. “I’ve learned that.”

Illya looks back down. Keeps smoothing his hand over the bandages. His palm tingles, will eventually go numb, if he continues long enough. “It is assumed I will.”

“But.”

“But,” he concedes, “I know that if I do, it will feel like a defeat.” He exhales hard through his nose. “Irrational, I am aware.”

“No,” Napoleon says, after a moment’s pause. “Not particularly irrational, I would say.” His careful enunciation, devoid of pity, unwinds something in Illya’s chest.

“I’m not thinking about it,” Illya lies. “We have more important things to attend to.”
“Of course,” Napoleon agrees. He stands, detaching himself from the wall as he does so, straightening his clothes as if he were in one of his suits, not still the fatigues he’d been wearing when they’d parted ways at San Cristobal. On anyone else, they would be stiff with sweat and smell ungodly. Napoleon just looks like he’d recently rolled in some fresh dirt.

He looks outside at the sun’s descent towards evening, and his irises catch the light, the way they had in West Berlin.

“Almost time now,” he says. “You should get some sleep before. We’ll need you sharp.”

Illya gives him a questioning look.

Napoleon just raises his eyebrows back. “You’re our mastermind now, are you not?” he challenges.

Then, before Illya has a chance to formulate a response, he steps forward and puts a hand, sunwarm and just slightly clumsy, on the juncture of Illya’s neck and shoulder. Illya shuts his mouth abruptly.

“I’ll wake you when it’s time,” Napoleon says, and leaves the room, shutting the door without making a sound.

***

The UNCLE network is, for lack of a better word, sticky.

Emerson had opened the door to him when she’d gotten back in contact with little fanfare, and perhaps Napoleon can understand why—something about the system that Yu and Waverly had presumably built up together clings like wet dough as he sifts through it. He can’t quite tell what the cause is other than the sheer volume of HUMINT involved, above all else. Radio signals and reports, records and files expressed in binary, those had been Napoleon’s bread and butter in the CIA. It’s clear from the UNCLE database that Waverly prefers not only his analogue intel systems and vault of hard copies, but also his soft copy network to be made mostly of audio and image files—large and unwieldy, difficult to sift through and analyze quickly, at least if you’re a primarily digital entity.

Analogue. Ugh.

Still, Napoleon tries to wade through at intervals, hoping for some news that hasn’t yet been reported or broadcast.

*No trouble getting in?* He’d asked Emerson, when she’d first gotten back in touch.

*We came in the same way we left,* Emerson had replied, with bright confidence. *There were watchers on the road, but we went during a shift change.*

*No one inside?*

*No one. It’s a mess*—Emerson had sent an image of Yu’s control room, which looked far worse for wear than when Napoleon had last seen it, rifled through with impunity—*but the generator came on when we tried it, and everything seems to still be working fine.*

Napoleon just hopes she’s right.

Gaby is sitting on the front steps of the clinic, her forearms wrapped around her knees, when Napoleon goes to look for her. Her eyes are closed, brows pulled together, mouth tight. He settles next to her, and without bothering to open her eyes she leans and puts her head on his shoulder. He barely feels her weight, and has to consciously adjust his position to keep her head from slipping.
“If this doesn’t work,” she says, “And war comes to us here, we will die as soldiers, not as spies.”

“You think so?” Napoleon asks, more curious than anything else. Gaby has always been of a certain ruthless temperament, but this seems less bloodthirsty and more contemplative than her usual. “I’ve been a soldier; it didn’t suit me all that well.”

She sighs. “Sylvia Santos will ask you for help. You’ll be inclined to give it.”

Napoleon cuts a glance down at her, but her face remains inscrutable. “I suppose,” he says, with some puzzlement.

“You respect her, there’s no supposing about it,” she says, shrugging one shoulder. “And then we’ll help you. Soldiers.”

“Do you think it will come to that?” he asks.

“Mm, you’d know better than me. I’m just a German spy with a good handle on machines.”

“Hah. You’ve never been modest; don’t start now.”

She just lifts her shoulder again, adjusting her head against him. “People aren’t rational on the best days,” she says. “And there is already one plane down.”

Her fingers, Napoleon notices, are laced tightly into a single clenched knot, her knuckles shifting white under her skin.

“We’ll have warning, at least,” Napoleon offers.

“I don’t know if that’s better or worse.”

Staying as still as possible, Napoleon shifts to cover her hands with one of his. This closeness still feels a mystery to him, in some ways—he’d learned how to be easy with soldiers, the principles and comfort of camaraderie, but affection had always been something he’d observed and learned from a distance. The impulse to offer something of himself is very new still, a matter of weeks rather than years, which despite his processing power feels inadequate for these purposes. The facade is familiar, the genuine application frightening.

His small attempt at a gesture, at least, seems adequate. Gaby manages to untangle her fingers to instead grip around his, hard and a little tremulous, and she opens her eyes to stare at their hands with stubborn concentration.

“Time?” she asks.

“After five,” Napoleon answers. “A couple of hours yet.”

She nods, her cheek rubbing his shoulder.

“The sunsets are beautiful here,” she says eventually, lifting her eyes to the low light.

Napoleon looks with her. She’s not wrong.

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Illya wakes to static again.

He is shocked to find that he’d slept at all, but apparently the warm meal had been enough. Still, the
first hiss has him upright, blood fizzing in his ears, a sharp throb of protest from his arm at the change in position. He blinks rapidly, taking in the long shadows cast by the setting sun, and then swings his legs over the side of the bed. It at least no longer feels so foreign to flatten his heels into the floorboards.

He retrieves the transceiver and turns on the screen, this time watching closely for something recognizable. The stream remains incomprehensible for long seconds, but then there—the curve of petals, leaves.

Illya’s hand hovers over the keyboard. Pure representation, that’s what Gaby and Napoleon had been talking about, when it came to the Marchers. He had no such thing at his disposal, only symbols. But surely the Marchers have to have at least a few of those to exist and interact with people, it’s written into their hard drives even if they can’t read the code of themselves.

? , he taps.

Hits enter.

The stream of symbols trickles to a stop. Illya breathes in and out through his nose, as slowly as he can manage even as his lungs seem to clench beneath his ribs.

**userName**

Language without a language, everything cannibalized from the bare bones of a consciousness they’d been given. This is not an authorization check.


No reaction, just a blinking cursor for several interminable seconds. Then, in script marred by excess code,

В01ы не име011101ет1е уч100ась 01овать в Конс010ор11циуме. Мы пр1001имо01им св0100и из11010винен01ия.

The screen goes dark. The static cuts out.

Illya stares at it. Almost doesn’t hear the knock on his door, followed by it creaking open.

“Hello,” Gaby says. “You’re up. It’s almost time. What are you—”

He shakes his head, a little too fast. “Nothing. Just...as you say. Almost time.”

Napoleon follows in behind Gaby and gives him a long look. “Did you sleep?”

Illya nods. He can’t quite tear his gaze away from the transceiver yet.

Консорциуме. *Consortium*. A consortium of what?

He carefully pushes one corner of the transceiver in Gaby’s direction. “You will do the honors?”

Gaby cocks her head. “Of course.”

Napoleon goes over to the corner of the room, and grabs the wicker chair nestled there. Wordless, he checks the door latch once, nods, and then shoves the chair under the knob.
“Let’s get started then,” he says.

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Illya looks very strange.

Napoleon takes in the middle-distance gaze, the curled fingers, the crooked set of his back against the pillows that is meant to look settled and doesn’t manage it, and can’t quite merge each individual feature into a coherent whole.

Gaby takes charge of the transceiver and fiddles with it, rechecking the frequencies reported back by O’Malley and Kumar against her own calculations. Illya looks vaguely like he’s watching her work, but his attention seems to straining to reach her from a great distance.

“Everything all right?” Napoleon inquires quietly, coming to stand close by the bed. He sends an inquiring ping at Emerson, who pings back promptly with an all clear.

“Yes.”

“You’re certain?”

Illya seems to consider this seriously. Before he comes to an answer, however, static rises from the transceiver.

“We’re on,” Gaby says, checking her watch. “And right on time. Initiating call to the Ministry of the Interior.”

“I’ll take that bit,” Napoleon says, and takes the handset from her. The soft ring of a telephone is registered in the bowels of the transceiver, followed by a pickup.

“Councilor,” Napoleon says. “We’re about to connect. How are things?”

He can hear Sylvia take a long breath over the line. “To be honest,” she answers, sounding very tired indeed, “I don’t know whether this is a good idea.”

Napoleon straightens, and immediately feels Illya and Gaby tense in accordance. “What part of it?” he asks.

“Napoleon...the President would like to host this phone call.”

“Oh.” Napoleon opens his mouth, then closes it. Sucks in air, exhalas scalding heat from his sinks. “Of course he does. I should have thought of that.”

“What is it?” Illya murmurs, his gaze laser-focused.

Napoleon looks at him. “Castro would like exercise his right as host country to moderate this call.”

“Ah.” Illya takes a long breath in, and lets it out slowly.

Napoleon raises an eyebrow at him. “You don’t look surprised.” He isn’t surprised to see it, however —Illya’s strange, diffident insights keep adding up, enough that Napoleon is willing to admit at this point that perhaps it’s Illya who has the best vantage point in this mess, despite Napoleon being tapped into UNCLE’s strange, lumbering intelligence network.

“You got Sylvia Santos involved,” he says, raising one shoulder. “As soon as Cuba became a part of this plan, this became likely.”
“Do you think it won’t go over well?” Gaby asks. “Both countries know that Cuba has the transceiver, it stands to reason that they’re ready to speak with Castro.”

“Ready to speak with him, sure, if only as a means to an end,” Napoleon says. “But have him set the terms of the conversation? The Americans may not stand for that, and I wouldn’t entirely blame them.”

“This is not his conflict, ultimately,” Illya reasons. “Soviets hold the bases and shot that plane down; Americans hold the blockade. This is not truly his fight until he declares it his.”

Napoleon grimaces. “Hosting the call is practically a declaration.” The hand piece feels heavy in his hand, mild current stinging static against his chest.

“It takes place in his country,” Gaby points out, taut. Napoleon has the urge to apologize to her, a woman from occupied Berlin, who grew up behind a wall.

“Yes,” Illya agrees. “It does.”

Napoleon and Gaby look at each other, and then at Illya.

“It shouldn’t be our decision,” Illya says, after a pause. “The moment we choose who is on this call, we are no longer neutral.”

“Were we ever?” Napoleon says, with a raised eyebrow. He looks at Gaby, whose mouth has twisted into a moue of resignation.

“If we’re still UNCLE,” she says, “Then we are.”

Slowly, he nods. He brings the handset back to his mouth and switches it on.

“We’re locked in, anyway,” he says to Sylvia. “We have to at least try to connect. If we drop it now, it could look worse. Tell President Castro he is welcome to host.”

“Thank you, Napoleon.” A long silence. “Be careful.” Another pause. And then, in an entirely different voice, she says, “Official line established. We await the other callers.”

Napoleon changes his voice too. “Understood, Councilor. Please stand by.”

He nods to Gaby and hands the handset back. After a tense hesitation, she begins to make final adjustments. “Connection to UNCLE’s network is still strong,” she reports. “We’re in good stead. Opening the channel to Sputnik 2, now.”

“It’s okay?” Illya asks, looking at Napoleon.

Napoleon tilts his head. “Doesn’t really matter at this point, does it?”

“No.”

Gaby and Illya rattle off the necessary information, Soviet designations that Napoleon doesn’t recognize. Illya is very careful not to reach or gesture with his injured arm. He keeps it extended at an angle off the side of the bed, so that it can stay stretched out without bumping into anything.

The transceiver clicks loudly and spits feedback, but then Oleg comes on the line.

“This is Redfoot.”
“Redfoot, this is Black Bear, acknowledged,” Illya answers. “Standby for final caller.”

Gaby fine tunes the frequency, opens the third line for connection.

Static.

They wait.

Nothing.

“We gave them the right codes?” Gaby asks.

“Of course,” Illya says, hushed.

“Come on, you bastard,” Napoleon mutters.

Still nothing.

Then,

“—about right, sir, I think that’s it. Should I—?”

“Give me that. Solo, are you there?”

Napoleon snatches the handset back. “Agent Sanders,” he says, too bright, a conditioned response. He winces internally. “So good of you to join us.”

A loud, angry exhalation hisses across the line. “Are we connected?”

“You will be in just a moment, everyone’s waiting for you.”

“Then let me just say you’ve got some goddamn nerve, Solo, and when I run you to ground, I—”

“That’s enough, Agent.”

“...Sir.”

Napoleon cocks his head. He doesn’t recognize the new speaker, muffled with distance as it is, though something about it is familiar.

When Sanders next speaks, it’s tightly civil. “When will you connect us?”

“As soon as everyone’s on the same line, which can happen as soon as you’re ready.”

A three second hiss and pop.

“Ready when you are, Solo.”

“Understood, sir. Please stand by.”

Gaby flips several switches, and cranks the volume. “All active lines adjusted to one syncing frequency-switch pattern,” she reports. “Moving to the three line exchange...now.”

“Gentlemen,” Napoleon says into the handset, in his most neutral voice, “The floor is yours.”

There is a long, awkward second of nearly complete silence. There is no protocol for a phone call like this, he realizes belatedly.
There is a pop over the line. A strange coloration that filters through the cable running from Napoleon to the transceiver. He cocks his head.

Emerson?

All clear, she says again, but she sounds hesitant.

Then, as invited, Castro speaks. His Spanish is rapid-fire, not quite aggressive, but percussive, nervous. He runs through a sketchy welcome, and Napoleon suddenly wonders whether the others have translators on hand. He hopes so. He doubts his own services would be welcome.

Castro finishes his introductions, and falls silent on the line. Static hisses an interminable silence.

“Are we still connected?” Illya asks Gaby.

She nods, staring at the small screen.

“Then what—”

“Shh,” Napoleon hushes them.

The colors are changing. There are other voices in the wires.

“You’ve got it?”

“Yes, sir, steady on now.”

Emerson? He pings again.

Two seconds of silence, an eternity.

Then, urgent, All’s well, Napoleon. All’s well!

Their code from the Vinciguerra compound. Napoleon stiffens. Scrabbles wildly through the doughy, sticky network of UNCLE to get a brief glimpse of something he’d thought purely Waverly, but upon second glance has a very different character.

The murmurings, the colors; Napoleon recognizes them.

Is horrified to recognize them.

“Wait,” he thinks he says aloud. Simultaneously, Emerson, get the hell out, where—

They’re not in the building. Emerson replies, but she’s scrambling too, he can feel it, her alarm at once distant and thrumming right against his ribs, through his cabling, I don’t understand, they’re not here but they’re here—

“Flip it,” he hears Sanders say, from what Napoleon can only identify as inside Wilton Crescent, but isn’t Wilton Crescent at all. Here but not here, a proxy server offsite, insinuated into the bowels of the UNCLE network, gluing up its insides from the moment headquarters was breached, Napoleon would be impressed if he wasn’t so terrified—

“Yes sir.”

A sudden, loud, snap of signals changing over. Napoleon lunges, follows the signal down, can’t quite reach—
He finally places that voice as it breaks in again: the distinct, refined Boston drawl they’d heard on the radio just that past Monday night speaking of threats to freedom and democracy. The voice says, “Thank you. Mr. President, it seems to me that we’ve perhaps misunderstood each other.”

A long, tense hiss of static. Then, in Russian, an equally familiar voice. “Mr. President, my sincere condolences for the loss of your plane and pilot.”

And then Sanders, cold and tense, says, “We’ll take it from here, Solo.”

And the sound cuts off. The screen shows that it is still transmitting, but no signal is readable on their frequency.

“What the hell was that?” Gaby says, typing frantically.

Napoleon takes a long breath, and lets it out arid and scorching. “The CIA’s hijacked the signal from out of UNCLE,” he says. “They’ve taken control of the call.”

“Are they still talking to the Soviets?” Illya asks.

“I think so,” Napoleon answers. “But if they want to cut the Cubans off now, it’ll be child’s play.”

“We did say,” Illya says, after an awful pause, “That it shouldn’t be our decision.”

Chapter End Notes

All of Gaby's reasoning/problem-solving is based around the basics of how AM and FM radio works--FM has a stronger and broader broadcast range, allowing more data to be sent through it, while AM is far weaker and more narrow but can carry huge distances, and through solid objects as well. It's better to listen to AM at night because the sun's radio wave radiation doesn't interfere as much. Likewise, Sputnik did indeed use low-frequency radio to transmit back to the USSR, though obviously I'm stretching the amount of data that could be put across such a transmission by like, a lot.
Emerson. Emerson!

No answer. No answer.

Napoleon is going to tear Sanders limb from limb.

“The fucking arrogance,” Gaby snarls, not for the first time. She’s pressing a hand hard to her sternum as she paces.

They’ve put the transceiver in the corner of the room, still running, but apart from them like it’s somehow become contaminated. She keeps shooting pained looks at it. She’d tried for nearly an hour to break back into the signal, but the full weight of the CIA’s encryption process seems to have been brought down upon the system. Hell, they’d practically gift-wrapped it, with all of the calculations of Sputnik’s trajectory locked into place, the telephone lines accepted into the system as soon as they’d connected. All of Gaby’s genius, appropriated for American use, just like her father’s.

Napoleon grimaces. It’s very clear she’s thinking about that, too.

It’s grown dark outside, more dark than usual—citywide orders of lights-out have been issued over the radio. The room feels very small.

There is a scraping sound as the doorknob jiggles and then catches before it gets stuck on the chair propped beneath it. They all turn too fast, braced.

“Señor Solo?” a voice calls through uncertainly.

“It’s Felicia,” Illya says. “You should let her in.”

Napoleon takes one last look back at the transceiver, and goes.

“Yes?” he says, once he’s moved the chair aside and pulled open the door.

Felicia starts slightly; her hands are clenched together. “There is a phone call for you.” She glances over her shoulder at Illya and Gaby, and her mouth flattens out. “She says her name is Sylvia.”

Napoleon can hear Illya’s quiet exhale from behind him.

“You’d better talk to her,” Illya says.

Napoleon nods and gestures lead the way to Felicia. She steps back from the door and leads him down the hall to a part of the clinic he hasn’t yet seen, presumably the administrative wing, floorboards creaking underfoot. He takes in white-framed pictures of flowers interspersed with informational posters about the flu, recording without processing them. At the end of the hall, Felicia opens a door to a cramped office, clearly shared by more than one person, the desk and floor divvied up by two different configurations of paper piles and notepads, flanked on opposite walls by bookshelves full of accordion folders. Amidst the controlled chaos, a rotary telephone sits on the corner of the desk, off the hook.

“Just here,” Felicia says, gesturing, and then hovers by the door while Napoleon carefully navigates
the papers to reach the phone.

“I’ll try not to be long,” Napoleon says, picking up the handset. “Thank you.”

She nods, not looking assured, and shuts him in.

He puts the handset to his ear. “Sylvia?”

An exhalation down the line. “Just tell me,” she says, flat, “Did you—?”

“It wasn’t us,” Napoleon says. “The CIA took control of the line. Did they…?” He breaks off to listen to Sylvia’s grim silence. “Councilor?”

“I’d hoped,” she says, after a long pause, “That you’d say differently. It would be easier to excuse. Goodbye, Napoleon. I do not recommend staying where you are; it’s easily traced now, and there are civilians to consider. Take care.”

She hangs up. The dial tone blares over-loud. Napoleon stares out the tiny window on the far wall of the office, at the pitch black outside.

He puts the phone carefully back into its cradle, and retraces his footsteps without saying more to Felicia. She watches him go with her hands clasped in front of her, her mouth made of stone.

“What did she say?” Gaby asks, when he’s in the room again.

He shakes his head. “They’ve been cut off, the Cubans. Whatever conversation that’s happening through the transceiver now, it’s just the Americans and the Soviets. I assured Sylvia we weren’t responsible. She believed me. But.”

“Worse to her that it should be officials making that decision, and not some rogue operatives,” Illya finishes. “Castro can’t be pleased.”

Napoleon nods. “Just so. Sylvia recommends we not stay here if we can help it.”

Illya makes a rueful sound.

Napoleon nods. “I know.”

They all look at each other.

“That’s it, then,” Gaby says finally. “Isn’t it? We’re done.”

“More than,” Illya says. “We need an extraction.”

“What about the transceiver?” Napoleon asks. “We need to keep the line open while they’re still talking. And after, should they need it.”

Gaby shakes her head, grimacing again at the corner of the room. “At this point? We’ll need to keep it open until the call ends, yes, but now the CIA have all of the triangulation information they need to make another call themselves. Sputnik’s on a steady schedule—they’ll have a complete map of its route by now. After tonight, they’ll have the line through England for as long as they want it.”

Napoleon is gripped by a strange feeling of detachment, of already being back in London, away from the heat and dust. Sylvia had bid him goodbye. What Gaby had predicted would not come true—she wouldn’t call on them, should war come.
“Did Sylvia specify,” Gaby says, after a pause, “Why we should leave so soon?”

“We’re traceable, and there are civilians,” Napoleon replies. He sounds very flat to his own ears. “That’s what she said.”

“That sounds a lot like she foresees someone coming for the transceiver,” Illya observes, “And not caring much about collateral damage.”

“Secret police?” Napoleon suggests. “Foreign agents?”

Illya shrugs an either at him with one shoulder.

“Well, we’re pinned until they stop talking,” Gaby says, jerking her head at the transceiver in disgust. “By my calculations, with the triangulation in place they could maintain the connection for another five hours. More, if they have a good technician with them, which they probably do.”

“So we’re here until morning, and then won’t have cover of darkness to move. Do you know of any other safehouses close by?” Illya asks. “Preferably with power.”

Gaby glowers. “No. Or I would have put us there to begin with instead of that goddamned shack in Bauta.”

Illya has the wherewithal to look apologetic. “Of course.”

So they were taking their chances until dawn.

“You both should get some sleep,” Napoleon says. “I’ll keep watch.”

Gaby takes a long breath, and rubs at her eyes.

“No. If we need an extraction, then we need to get in touch with Abrantes. She’s the only one who could possibly get us out of the country.” she says. “I’ll try to be back by dawn.”

“You need to sleep—” Illya starts.

“I’m fine,” Gaby interrupts.

“You’ve been working without stopping for five days,” Illya presses, with a firmness Napoleon hasn’t quite heard from him before. “Without the advantage of medically induced sleep,” he adds, with a small self-deprecating shrug.

Gaby purses her lips, but now that Napoleon is looking for it, he can see how deep the shadows beneath her eyes cut, the prominence of her clavicle at the open neck of her blouse.

If Napoleon knows her, and he likes to think that he does, then pointing this out will just make her dig in her heels more.

“We only protest,” he says delicately, “Because you’re the only one operating in full health right now.”

Both Gaby and Illya still; guilt flashes over their faces and is smothered in an instant. They’d been too polite to say anything, Napoleon realizes, with a sort of perverse delight. It’s the silliest, most human thing they could have done, both to and for him.
“Is there anything I can do?” Gaby asks, after an awkward pause. “Or do you need a full rundown?”

The stubborn tilt of her jaw has softened a bit, at least, even if it’s just a distraction. “Probably the latter,” he assures. “I’ll be fine for a while longer. But that doesn’t change the fact that we need you at your best, Miss Teller. Don’t exhaust yourself for pride. We can all go first thing in the morning, deal with Abrantes together.”

Gaby lifts her chin. “Pride,” she repeats, then sniffs. “Yes, of course. Well, pride is currently dictating that it is my job to tell you that you are both highly visible, highly audible.”

Napoleon tips his chin down. He supposes he deserved that. Illya pales, but keeps his lips pressed shut.

“So obviously,” Gaby continues, observing both of them, “it’s best that I move about the city alone, and at night, not only to speak to Abrantes, but to get a vehicle, since the Jeep’s back in Bauta. Meanwhile, you both need to keep an eye on the transceiver, and also pack up whatever supplies you need to keep you both in working order, because god knows I’m not going to be playing nursemaid to either of you.” She’s picking up momentum now, her hands propping up on her hips even as it makes her look more gaunt. “So I will see Abrantes now, tonight, and I’ll try to get us a car on the way back. And if she can’t get us back to England, then we’ll...we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Napoleon glances at Illya, who lifts a deferring eyebrow back towards Gaby.

“All right,” Napoleon says. “Don’t be long.”

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There are many cars running to the center of Havana, even this late in the evening. Military mostly, but old Fords and Cadillacs too. Checkpoints dot the roads at approximately ten-mile intervals, if the information Illya delicately extracts from Dr. Carrera is anything to go by.

Gaby puts on her stained fatigues and boots. Illya catalogues the slight tremble in her hands, the rapid grit-clearing blinks she squeezes her eyes behind, and doesn’t comment.

“Be careful,” Napoleon insists on saying.

Gaby sniffs, and shakes out her hands before shoving some tools and money in her pockets. “I’ll be fine. Watch for me, be ready to go.”

She slips out the door like a ghost.

Napoleon looks back at Illya and says, “I guess we have our orders.”

The transceiver can’t be packed until the transmission cuts out, but Napoleon begins to attend to the rest, and so Illya goes to see whether Dr. Carrera is still at work.

He finds her up late in her office filling out requisition paperwork for the possible influx of military patients, a cigarette halfway to ash in her mouth and a cup of acidic-smelling coffee at her fingertips.

She is not enthused by his polite inquiry about checking out.

“I cannot emphasize enough how foolish it is for you to go anywhere in your current condition,” Dr. Carrera says with narrowed eyes. “You are healing well, but you still need time and care.”
“I’ll get both,” Illya says, trying to sound assuring. Dr. Carrera doesn’t look convinced. “You did say you’d prefer we not bring trouble here,” he reminds her.

“Too late for that,” she says, though she doesn’t seem angry.

“It will be worse if we’re still here, and you’re shown to be complicit,” Illya says. “You’ve been very good to me. Allow us to get out of your way.”

She sighs, and stands up to grab her small doctor’s bag from the shelf. “Let me at least get the stitches out before you leave. Miss Teller may be skillful with her hands, but I would rather her not test that on you.”

He nods with great seriousness. “I would rather that, too.”

Even this late at night, Dr. Carrera’s hands are steady within her thin, sterile gloves. The itching of the healing scars is temporarily interrupted by the sharp soreness of newer, smaller wounds, and he finds it helps him focus on her instructions of cleaning, exercising, compressing.

“Do you know where you’ll go?” she asks when she’s finished and put a new bandage on him, sat back down and taken another sip of her coffee.

“No,” Illya answers, allowing his honesty to show.

Her frown deepens. “Illya.”

“We’re not without resources,” Illya says. “We’ll get by.”

She makes a dissatisfied sound. “You’re a good patient. I don’t like losing good patients.”

“You’re not los—”

“And I don’t like,” she interrupts, “Leaving good patients without support, when they’ve undergone a traumatic procedure, and need time to recover and come to terms with what has happened to them.”

Illya straightens his elbow, and bright pain sparks in pinpoints across his stump beneath the larger, knotted ache of tender new scar tissue twisting with the flex of muscle. It’s not unbearable. Even interesting, in its strange way, the way it is to pick at scabs.

He still can’t quite make himself look at it, but.

“I’ve had enough time to get by,” he says, and means that too. “And I have support.”

She raps the eraser end of her pencil on the desk twice, and then exhales in a gust. “I suppose you’re not wrong there,” she admits.

She goes home not long after, rubbing at her temples. Gaby doesn’t return, remains out in the dark. Illya reminds himself that Abrantes’s shop is a significant distance from where they are, that it would take time even without the checkpoints Gaby will have to evade.

While Illya had gotten his stitches out, Napoleon had been gathering up what medical supplies Dr. Carrera could spare. When Illya returns to his room, there are their two remaining rucksacks buckled neatly and waiting by the door. The transceiver sits where they’d left it.

Napoleon is sitting on the wicker chair now returned to the corner of the room, his palm flat to the outlet in the wall. He looks up when Illya comes in, and offers a slight smile. “Doctor’s prognosis?”
“Good to go, but not happy about it,” Illya replies. “Stitches are out.”

“Congratulations.”

Illya lifts his chin towards the transceiver. “Still going?”

“The conversation must be scintillating,” Napoleon says, halfway between mocking and avaricious. Illya, it seems, is not the only one hungry for knowing.

Aware that he should sleep but certain that he won’t be able to, Illya goes through his PT again, including some calisthenics he remembers from years ago, the early parts of training when he’d been training control and tone into his too-long limbs. Napoleon watches Illya stretch and do slow, burning squats against the wall, and when Illya assures him that no one will come and check on them until morning, he disengages from the wall and sits down on the bed, where he risks peeling back the panel on his neck to inspect the port system and neck mechanisms there.

The small metallic susurrations, though Illya knows it means that Napoleon is desperately in need of a tune-up, are oddly soothing in the night quiet. The rest of the clinic has all gone to bed, and all that’s left are outside sounds, filtering in through the window.

“Are there fixes you can do now?” Illya asks, on his last set of stretches. He’s broken out in a fine sweat, but feels well, or as well as he can be at the moment. Limber and not aborted in any direction. He only has to catch himself once, when he tries to fall into a set of pushups, and has to stumble into lunges instead.

He knows that Napoleon saw it, but he hadn’t commented.

“Some. I’m running diagnostics and a defrag internally at the moment, but the mechanical aches and pains can’t really be seen to without popping the hood, so to speak,” Napoleon replies. “And I don’t fancy making any incisions I can’t immediately close back up.”

“Doesn’t that…?” Illya tilts his head to indicate the panel in Napoleon’s neck.

“That’s different. A different type of silicon that partially reseals, like my charge port.” He lifts the relevant hand. The thin incision line there is ragged along the edges, too. “The stuff around my chest is thicker, less flexible. You’ve seen it.”

Illya nods, though he’d given Napoleon some privacy, after they’d gotten him out of Rudi’s chair. He’d averted his eyes and let the adrenaline drain out while Napoleon had finished piecing himself together, and not looked up again until Napoleon had cleared his throat and finished buttoning the top button on his shirt. The stark contrast between seeing Napoleon flayed open and then minutes later buttoned up with a lingering fragile set to his mouth had haunted him for a long time after.

“It doesn’t reseal,” Napoleon continues, not noticing Illya’s hard swallow. “Just sticks a bit to the inner hard framework.”

Illya comes to sit next to him on the bed, a safe distance away. He picks at frayed threads on the bedsheets. He takes a long breath, and then he says, “If you were badly damaged enough—physically, I mean, mechanically—could you be transferred to another chassis?”

Napoleon raises an eyebrow at him. “Interested in musing over some mind-body dualism to pass the time, Kuryakin? How high-minded of you.”

Before, Illya would have bristled and entirely missed the deflection. Now, he just blinks at Napoleon, and watches as the wheels inside him turn.
Napoleon’s expression smooths out as he sits back against the headboard. “I think so,” he says eventually. “There are only a limited number of drives inside me that can hold the complexity that encompasses whatever there is to me. Take those out, put them somewhere else, they’re still me, if there’s power to drive them. But then, that’s already somewhat happened, hasn’t it? All those files Dr. Teller stole, those are off in London. There are, I’m sure, banks upon banks of the stuff back at the Pentagon. They’re not *me*, per se, but they’re something, aren’t they?”

Illya nods.

“I’d certainly miss this rig, though,” Napoleon muses. He flexes his hands, shrugs his shoulders so that they shift under his fatigues, the movement still sinuous despite the audible protest of several bearings. “I’ve never had another. Everything I’ve learned has been from the position of this machinery in the world. That’s not nothing, either. The number of times I’ve gotten by on a smile…”

He quirks one at Illya, rakish and knowing, and Illya can feel himself flush before he can stop himself.

It’s short-lived, though. Napoleon leans forward off the pillows to regard Illya directly, smile falling away into something more considered. Illya watches him, rapt.

“You will never touch another thing with your right hand,” Napoleon says, gentle as a lullaby. Illya flinches all the same. “But your memories of having touched things are not gone. Your position in the world has changed, and so you’ve changed too. But your brain isn’t a hard drive. Nothing’s been erased.”

Illya stares at him. He’s breathing too fast, a high-pitched stream of static in his ears. “I once nearly lost my eye,” he croaks. “In training.”

Napoleon doesn’t blink. “I had rather wondered where you got that scar,” he says, unmoving.

“At first, it was unclear whether it could be salvaged at all, let alone usable. I had to wait for the doctors to decide. They talked to my commanding officer first, while I waited outside, holding a cloth to my head.” The smothering warmth of blood trickling down his face, getting up his nose before turning icy in the wind. Low voices, clinical. “I wasn’t meant to overhear them.”

Napoleon is still as stone. “What did you hear?” he murmurs.

“‘Save it,’” Illya recites, hollow, “‘Or put him down.’”

Napoleon doesn’t make a sound.

It’s so strange, how that refrain is built into so many of Illya’s memories—that pale boy whose name Illya can’t remember now, too young for the program, who breathed strangely in his sleep and then disappeared; Volya, with the bullish nose and easy sneer, who got hit too hard on the head one day and then developed a shake in his hands that made loading a rifle hard. All those small moments layering over like soot filtering into sand, clinging to the grains even as they spread, coating them in black.

“I was never so happy in my life,” Illya says, “As when I was allowed to take off my bandages and could see.”

“Never?” Napoleon asks, his forehead crinkling in that familiar skepticism, though there is something soft about it now that Illya hasn’t seen before. He understands suddenly the odd hope in the question, and has to plaster some impression of apology onto his face, because if nothing else, the truth is owed.
“Never,” he says, hating how Napoleon’s face falls. “But then, everything was very simple, very easy to feel, then.”

Napoleon frowns at him for a long moment, eyes flaring copper, until finally he eases. “Simple is survival,” he says. “I do wish you would live, Illya.”

Illya’s heart is still beating very fast, enough that he feels almost accustomed to it. So it is no great effort to lean further forward, let go of the fraying blanket, and grasp Napoleon’s lax hand instead. He can feel, then, the subtle shutting off of Napoleon’s autonomic responses around the limb, how he’s gone stiff from the elbow up but wants to give Illya all the freedom he could ask for with the appendage he’s taken liberties with. It’s the oddest, most Napoleon reaction to an unexpected gesture, and Illya could fill himself with it without uttering a further word. Instead, the dim light of the lamp in the darkness makes him brave.

He allows himself to adjust his grip, cup the heel of Napoleon’s hand with his own. He’s clumsy with just the one hand, it feels awkward and strange, so eventually he squares his shoulders to reach further and set his stump in the cup of Napoleon’s hand, before covering Napoleon’s oddly undexterous fingers with his own, creating an unbalanced but more effective clasp.

“Illya,” Napoleon says, and he sounds so different that Illya looks up at him from their hands.

“I’m trying,” Illya says, because it’s the only thing he can think of. “I’m trying to live, Napoleon.”

“Of course you are,” Napoleon says, eyes very wide and very bright. “Because you’re magnificent.”

Illya frowns at him, but Napoleon is already reaching forward with his other hand, grasping the back of Illya’s neck and pulling him forward, and then his mouth is on Illya’s, warm and tasting of silicon and rust, and for all that it’s barely a kiss, just the compression of lips, Illya wants to drown in it, stay here as long as he can draw breath.

It’s only seconds though before Napoleon goes very still. “Do you hear that?” he murmurs against Illya’s mouth.

Illya’s ears are buzzing, blood pounding in his ears. He shakes his head.

“Tranceiver’s stopped. They’re offline.”

“Gaby isn’t back yet,” Illya manages to say. Napoleon’s eyes are gilt and topaz, burnished and sharp-focused. A part of him wonders if Napoleon is recording this, keeping it. He wants him to.

“True. And you should get some sleep.”

“I should,” Illya agrees. He swallows. “We’re ready?”

“As we can be.”

“Then...wake me, when it’s time?”

Napoleon’s grip tightens on the back of his neck, then gentles just as abruptly. “Of course.” He pauses, and then kisses Illya again, a featherlight touch. His hand comes alive in Illya’s clasp, and shifts to guide him up the bed, curling him in across the blankets tucking his arms in.

“I’ll keep watch,” he vows, and Illya believes him.

***
The dawn is slow in coming. Napoleon watches Illya sleep.

He is painterly in rest, all ivory and wheat, framed in white. The idea of folding into him, of pressing close enough to feel his heartbeat, is deeply appealing.

He doesn’t move from his seat on the bed. Just listens to the road, and watches.

The transceiver, silent against the wall, offers nothing, and Emerson’s long-distance signal offers less than nothing. But Napoleon can look at Illya and know that he is here, is well, is whole in every way that matters. He doesn’t care how much it is performative, all of these learned human impulses. He comprehends them and has internalized them one way or another, enough to echo them like overtones vibrating above the played scale, and that is enough.

Napoleon’s joints creak every time he moves. But he’s as fully powered as he can be, and his processors are sharp. And Gaby is, as far as he can tell, unstoppable.

So they’ll make it back to England. Somehow, peace will be won.

And Napoleon will take Illya and Gaby home. Wherever home is. He’ll create it from scratch if he has to.

***

Early in the morning, Illya drifts towards waking and recognizes the cause as a car pulling up. Its gears labor, its brakes squeal.

Gaby.

Napoleon is already tensed for action, but he’s utterly still, Illya can hear the kick of his systems reacting to new stimuli.

“Good news?” Illya murmurs into Napoleon’s synthetic thigh.

“Don’t know,” Napoleon replies, just as quiet. They both seem unwilling to interrupt the peace of the early morning. “The car sounds awful, though.”

Illya snorts.

Together, they listen to the slam of the car door, the scrunch of gravel and the creak of the front door.

“Footsteps quick,” Illya breathes, and surges into movement.

They’re off the bed and halfway to the rucksacks when Gaby bursts, for the second time in thirty-six hours, into the room.

“Time to go,” she says. Her hair is frizzed in her braids.

“Abrantes?” Napoleon asks.

“There’s an airfield,” Gaby says. “West of here. It’s a long shot, but if we can make it, we might have a chance of getting to Mexico. You can fly a plane, can’t you?”

“I’ve seen it done,” Napoleon says, raising an eyebrow. “Probably enough to be a decent mimic.”

“Illya?”
Illya shakes his head. “Not my speciality. Better at boats.”

Gaby swallows. “I guess that will have to do.”

They pick up their packs, the transceiver tucked carefully into the spare space in Napoleon’s bag.

Napoleon tilts his head suddenly. “Police are coming, ten minutes out. Radio says they don’t know who we are, but they’re under orders from high up.”

Illya goes to the window to get a glimpse of the road, and thinks he sees the rising dust of fast cars down the road.

Gaby nods. “Caught sight of them just outside the checkpoint.”

They slip out of the room, Illya tucking his arm close in to his chest. Dr. Carrera and Felicia are in the hall drinking coffee and startle at their entrance; they all freeze in the waiting room for a second, but then Gaby shakes herself loose, and she and Napoleon run out the door.

Illya lingers for a moment.

“Thank you,” he says, for lack of anything better, looking between the two of them.

“I don’t want to see you back here,” Dr. Carrera replies, not unkindly.

“I’ll do my best,” he promises, and takes his leave.

As soon as he’s in the car, Gaby throws the car into gear and peels out.

***

The conversation with Abrantes had been short.

Gaby had made it to her door just past midnight, ducking down around the central checkpoint by tiptoeing through gardens, sidling beneath the laundry lines that wove across alleyways. Havana sprawled, but Abrantes was thankfully in the heart of things, where sounds from indoors echoed densely in the streets past curfew. Gaby had gone around to the back door and tapped for many minutes on the doorframe of the antique shop until the lights had gone on and Abrantes had shouldered her way to the door through the shadowed mountains of furniture and knick knacks.

“You,” she had said, expressionless. “There’s been a lot of chatter about you.”

Gaby swallowed. “Enough that you regret dealing with us?”

Abrantes huffed through her nose. “Juan likes you,” she admitted. “But his politics are not sophisticated.”

Gaby bristled without meaning to. “He cares about his country,” she said.

Abrantes had raised an eyebrow, but said, “I never said he doesn’t. What are you here for?”

“An exit route, ideally.”

“No,” she said immediately. “The ports are locked down, and so are the airports. Not even the Russians are getting in and out right now. You wait this out where you are, or not at all.”

“Not even—”
“My contacts are underground and not coming out until this is resolved in peace or death. I’m sorry, but you’re on your own. Go to your safehouse and stay there.” She had moved to close her door; Gaby shoved her foot in the gap.

It was graceless enough that Abrantes had looked surprised, then dangerous.

“What, girl? There’s nothing for you here.”

Gaby had clenched her fists, paying close attention to the sharp bite of her nails into her palms. “There has to be something,” she said. “Our current location isn’t secure. We don’t have to make it to anywhere involved, we don’t even have to head north or east.” She bitten down on the inside of her cheek, another point of steadying pain, and then added, “Please.”

Abrantes had kept looking at her.

Gaby tried not to react, but she was so tired, something must have crumpled in her face, because Abrantes finally looked towards the ceiling and then back down at her. “Can you fly a plane?” she asked.

“Yes,” Gaby lied.

“There is an old airfield outside Vinales. It’s used to be for leisure planes, and some are still kept there. You’ll need to break in. None of the planes will get you very far, but you can probably get to Cancun, maybe Valladolid if you’re lucky.”

“We’ll need a car.”

Abrantes had made a disgusted noise. “You had one before.”

“Yes,” Gaby agreed, flat. “We did.”

She had shaken her head, and stepped back from the doorway. Gaby hadn’t followed, just watched her move about the chaos of the shop until she reached a small, ornate jewelry box and brought it back with her. From it, she extracted a key, which she slapped into Gaby’s open palm.

“You won’t be able to use it until dawn when the police change shifts.” She caught Gaby’s look and jabbed a finger at her. “Don’t. You get caught and this is traceable, you will not go until dawn, or there will be no car, those are my terms.”

Gaby had snapped her mouth shut, and through rocks in her throat, nodded.

Satisfied, Abrantes lowered her hand. “And after this, you don’t come to me. You survive, and you tell Waverly his debts have been paid in full, and I don’t want to hear from him again.”

Gaby had just nodded again, too tired to be anything but mute, and hated herself a bit for it.

The car isn’t quite a piece of junk, but it’s close. Abrantes had written down a license plate number and directed her to a garage a quarter mile off, thankfully back through the central checkpoint, so she wouldn’t have to drive through it. There, she’d found the matching plate on a junker, beige with stumpy tail fins and a rusting chrome grill. Even starting it to check it worked wasn’t an option, dawn too many hours off.

So she picked the lock on the driver’s side, slipped in and eeeled over into the footwell of the backseat, and settled in.
The heat of equatorial autumn doesn’t last through the night. She hadn’t noticed before, on the move or indoors.

The garage lot had been utterly dark, away from lamplight, exposed.

She had begun to shiver, burrowed down against metal and rubber, and then been unable to stop.

Dawn had been slow in coming.

When light had finally returned to the horizon, Gaby had felt hollowed out, decrepit with cold. She’d driven like an old biddy almost the whole way to the clinic. It’s no wonder the police hadn’t taken notice of her.

“Gaby?”

“Hm?” Gaby glances over at Napoleon, who is watching her, slumped against the passenger-side door. She realizes belatedly that it isn’t the first time he’d said her name. She’d refused Napoleon’s offer to take the wheel, mostly because if they got stopped he’d get made immediately, the way he was sounding and moving, but also because she was certain that if she stopped for a moment she’d collapse and never wake again. “What?”

“So where is this airfield?” he asks.

“Outside Vinales.”

Napoleon frowns. “That takes us straight through San Cristobal.”

Gaby exhales. “I know.”

“We could go around?” Illya suggests. “Stay to the north?”

“We’d lose an hour,” Napoleon says. “And there are probably checkpoints at every town. We don’t have any papers, and last I checked, not nearly enough money for bribes or extra fuel.”

Illya makes a dissatisfied noise.

“We can stay on the highway and then detour north around San Cristobal,” Gaby offers. “Give us some distance, and maybe lose tails if we have them.”

“You’ll be able to keep track of where we’re going?” Napoleon asks. “I’m not familiar with the back roads, and there’s no map in here.”

“I can do it.” The road signs are clear enough, and she’s always had an excellent sense of direction.

They drive on in quiet. Traffic is low, which makes everything feel worse. Gaby’s almost glad for the clunky car; its ungainly roar drowns out the quiet between them. She keeps her eyes on the road, counting off seconds before checking the speedometer, then the mirrors, a steady, beating rhythm.

For an hour, they stay on the highway. Around the approach to Artemisa, however, Gaby starts getting distracted by the terrain.

She’d forgotten about the mountains.

“I am noticing,” Illya says, after several minutes of rising trees to the right of them, “That should we try to go north at this point, we will end up all the way north.”
“Indeed,” Napoleon says. “And that any given detour is the only route in sight. We try one of those, and we’re in a bottleneck for at least half an hour, probably more, given how winding the roads will be up there.”

“We won’t be seen?” Gaby offers, but it’s weak to her own ears.

“We probably will,” Napoleon says, with an apologetic head-tilt. “Castro’s been trying to restore the land around here, reforest and replant it. It’s not empty space. And the people here, the terraceros and the rest, he’s given them back their livelihoods—they’ll be for him.”

Illya sighs. “Stay on the highway. We’ll be taking our chances either way, but better we have escape routes than be stranded.”

A part of Gaby is relieved. She probably shouldn’t be trusted with uneven terrain at this point.

“Keep a lookout, then,” she says.

But the relief is short-lived. The Autopista Este-Oeste sprawls on, winding and baked with heat, eerie in its emptiness. Time seems to slip in the monotony of asphalt and spindly trees. They keep the windows down, and the air is pungent with dust and tar.

Cuba is a small country. As signs for San Cristobal pick up, Gaby’s heart begins to beat faster, tripping over itself at nonexistent checkpoints in the distance, her skin fizzing with sudden shocks of cold despite in the heat. She counts her breathing, counts glances at the mirrors, at the speedometer.

Napoleon murmurs something, Illya echoing it after a moment. Gaby loses count, starts again. The heat is getting to her.

“..pull around? Gaby, what...”

An overpass gleams up ahead, its arch like a maw.

“Gaby? Why aren't you—?.”

Speedometer, mirrors, breath—

“ Gaby!”

She blinks hard, and then slams on the brakes.

The man in the road is uniformed, young, Soviet. His shoulders are hunched, and his rifle is pointed at their tires. When they screech to a halt, he looks caught between pugnaciousness and intense relief. His jaw juts out when he shouts at them, but Gaby is in no shape to understand Russian. She stares at him, at the rifle. Shouldn't they have stopped, left the car, gone around? Why hadn't they seen the checkpoint?

Cold washes over her. They had. She hadn't. She’d been counting.

“Do you want to get shot?” Illya translates in a flat murmur from behind her, startling her. “Were you daydreaming?”

Gaby is strung between the brakes and the headrest, her spine a plank she can’t soften. She can hear herself taking heaving, uneven breaths.

She’s finally able to turn her head to look at him. His hands are up now too, and his expression is worried on the surface, steady beneath. He gives her a small nod.

“Yes. Okay. I’m—I'm sorry,” she manages to say.

"Be sorry to them," Illya says, as gentle as anything.

Gaby forces herself into a doleful hunch, hands raised with fingers pressed together like animal paws. “Disculpe,” she calls, with a waver she doesn’t have to feign. Spanish pronouns and tenses clamor in her brain, only partially resolve. “Disculpe me. No—no te veo.”

The soldier peers through the windshield and seems to relax slightly at the sight of her, though he clearly clocks Napoleon and Illya as well. Gaby distantly hopes that the fact of them letting her drive is enough of a tarnish on their masculinity for them to perhaps be dismissed as a threat.

Slowly, the soldier approaches her window.

“¿Papeles?” His accent is atrocious.

Gaby looks at Illya in the rear view mirror. He’s coiled like a spring.

Napoleon, however, puts a hand on her knee. His fingers are twitching, with nerves or excitement, she can’t tell except to be distracted by the tremor.

“Si, por supuesto,” he says, conversational, entirely at odds with his hands. He’s still not looking at the soldier.

“Napoleon,” Illya hisses through his teeth, “What are you—”

Napoleon ignores him and leans over Gaby to address the soldier. “Before we give those to you,” he says, “Would you be so kind as to ask Yefreytor Gorlov to come and speak to us?”

The soldier jerks back from the car and looks back in the same direction Napoleon had been staring. Gaby finally catches what it is—a jeep and several men positioned up ahead beneath the looming overpass, almost invisible in the stark midday shadows to those approaching.

A frozen silence, and a vague movement from the shadows. A tall man at last emerges into the light. His gait is long, loping. He sweats in the sun.

"Napoleon—"

"Shh, Illya, keep working, but let me try this. Gaby, it's all right."

“Cortiñas?” the tall man says, wary, on the approach.


“Who is this?” Illya whispers at Napoleon.

"He let us go before, be quiet," Napoleon mutters back.

The man who must be Gorlov tilts his head at the man in the road, who instantly gives ground and goes back to the jeep. Gorlov takes his place and walks slowly up to Napoleon’s side of the car. Gaby sees Illya shift slightly out of the corner of her eye. A crowbar is clasped in his hand, too low in the footwell for Gorlov to see.
“Papers?” Gorlov repeats, but it sounds rote.

“Do you need them?” Napoleon says. “You know who I am.”

Gorlov nods slowly. He’s not much older than his cohort, Gaby realizes, when she can see him up close. Young but well-trained, in fighting shape. He isn’t disagreeing, and Gaby scrambles to imagine why, what Napoleon could have left out of his summary of events that had somehow resulted in an alias like Cortiñas.

“Different companions,” Gorlov observes, glancing at Gaby and Illya.

“The Councilor is in Havana,” Napoleon shrugs. “We are stretched thin now with the current climate. You understand.” He tries a tight smile.

Gorlov is very still though, his expression grim. “I do. What business do you have here?” he asks, far more stilted.

“None. We are only passing through, I give you my word.”

Gorlov nods slowly. Then he looks back at the other men, and again over Illya and Gaby.

“Your word is not worth as much as hers,” he says.

Gaby has to fight hard to suppress her flinch. She looks through the mirror to Illya, tipping her glance down to the crowbar, but he shakes his head. Nothing they can do yet.

Napoleon lifts one shoulder again, and doesn’t drop eye contact. “That’s probably true.” He pauses. “Will you let us pass anyway?”

Gorlov purses his lips. It makes him look like a bureaucrat.

“I am a patriot,” he says. “Are you?”

“Yes,” Napoleon replies. Gaby had almost forgotten how easy he makes lying look.

Gorlov, however, narrows his eyes. “Then,” he says, but with a hint of doubt, “We want the same things.”

Napoleon nods. Gaby could scream in the place of his calm patience. “And what is it that we want?” he asks.

“To keep this country safe,” Gorlov says, with a fervency that surprises Gaby. “To protect it.”

“That’s right,” Napoleon agrees. “We are both working to do that. And my work is taking me west. So: will you let us do our work?”

Gorlov looks back at the jeep and then down, moue still firm on his lips. He places a hand on the car door, fingers curling bony next to the locking mechanism. There’s a very slight tremor in the tips of his fingers right up until he presses them into the vinyl, turning them white. Gaby holds her breath, feels a twinge of wild hope—

“No,” he says finally, almost too quiet to hear. Then he visibly commits, his mouth flattening out, chin tipping up. “No, I’m sorry. This is more important, and you owe me—a favor for a favor. That you are here, it is fate.”

Hope twists into fear. Gaby can feel her pulse go quick again, her eyesight narrowing sharp into
focus. She can hear locusts in the grass, the distant rubber-to-canvas creak of military men shifting in their seats with discomfort.

Napoleon says, with mathematical evenness, “Fate? Or were you looking for me, comrade?”

Gorlov doesn’t move. “Not looking, no,” he says. “Being... on watch for, maybe.”

“Different hours for you to be on watch for.”

“After that night, I was moved. Stretched thin with the current climate. You understand.”

Napoleon stares at him. There’s nothing on his face, but faintly, Gaby can hear the onset of his unease in the kick of his hard drives, and prays Gorlov can’t hear it outside the car.

“What sort of favor?” Napoleon asks.

Gorlov is stiff-necked, the muscles in his cheek twitching. “The Marchers. They won’t go.”

Gaby stares at Illya in the rearview, and he looks back at her, helpless.

Napoleon doesn’t move. He’s still so that his joints don’t give him away. “Define ‘won’t go.’”

Gorlov swallows. “You saw. You were there that night. You were looking for technology, don’t think I could not put that together.”

“And why do you think we Cubans could help?” Napoleon counters. “You are the ones with the machines.”

“Are we?” Gorlov says. He pulls his hand off the car door and counts off with curled fingers, their tips tremulous. In crisp Russian, he says, “I have met Cubans, you know. Not one has said me quemo mal. No me puedo broncear, that’s something that’s come up, from the paler fellows. But you, you have a very good accent, but not very much casual Spanish.”

He uncurls another finger.

“There were reports of a break-in, over a week ago. Batista sympathizers, most everyone said, or CIA, but no one could figure out what they were breaking in for, except that we lost a Marcher on the border, and there was damage to the servers, wires not where they should be.” A third finger. “And then you—a break in, with Sylvia Santos? Just looking, you said, but there were Marcher parts missing afterwards, we all had to check. You know how they work.”

“So do your technicians,” Napoleon points out, but in profile, his face is rigid.

“They’ve never been able to take one down, though,” Gorlov retorts. “And now they don’t know why the Marchers won’t move, won’t listen.”

Gaby swallows down grit and adrenaline.

“Sylvia Santos is a true patriot,” Gorlov says, half triumphant, half fearful. “You, I’m not so sure. But you’re not CIA, not if the Councilor has allowed you to help her. So you’re going to come in, you and your people, and if you’re really a patriot, you’re going to help us.”

Napoleon turns back to Illya and Gaby, at last, on a slow sigh. He raises his eyebrows at Illya, but Illya shakes his head. The crowbar is back on the floor of the footwell. No escape routes there either.

“My apologies,” Napoleon says. “It looks like our plans will have to wait.”
Gorlov's Spanish analysis is based on glitterfucked's extremely helpful Spanish advice from a few chapters ago—I may have still gotten it wrong though, so let me know if that's the case. Thank you glitterfucked, I owe you twice over now!

The geography of Cuba used here is accurate so far as I can tell from the maps at my immediate disposal—Googlemaps is useless in this regard, but this pdf provides pretty good detail so far as I can tell. I'm sure there are tons of unofficial roads around, but they probably wouldn't be a great idea to navigate in a junker.

The terraceros are not people I know a lot about, but are part of the history of the now-beautifully restored Las Terrazas nature reserve. I stumbled upon a very brief mention here.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

holy god i’m so done with this chapter i don't know if it even makes sense anymore, i’ve rewritten it like 5 times
please call me on my bullshit if things don't make sense, i can't tell anymore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is a trap,” Illya says, leaning back on the side of the car.

A second jeep is apparently coming down to play escort and ensure that they don’t turn tail and run. Gorlov keeps pacing as he talks on the radio, probably relaying their presence to his commanding officer.

“Maybe,” Napoleon says from beside him.

“We are about to enter a Soviet military base with no papers, no authorization, and no one to vouch for us except a private you met while breaking into their silo,” Illya elaborates. “This is the worst thing we could possibly be doing.”

“What else can we do?” Napoleon asks. “If you have a better idea, Illya, I would be delighted to hear it.”

Illya swallows down bile. He doesn’t want to see his countrymen. Doesn’t want to lie to them. But he’s beginning to suspect that that is all he’s going to be doing for the foreseeable future.

“I am sorry,” Napoleon says, all affect stripped away. “I took a chance trying to talk to Gorlov, and it backfired spectacularly.”

“Better than being shot. And I don’t think I could have extracted us either,” Illya admits. “Once we’d stopped, we were pinned.”

Now they have even fewer chances. Gorlov’s people had searched them and the vehicle, taken the transceiver, Illya’s knives and Gaby’s last gun. If they’re lucky, they’ll be given a chance to explain themselves. At worst, well.

Illya has never planned on living particularly long, but he’s quietly amazed at how he has never found dying less appealing than he does now.

Gaby is sitting sideways in the backseat, half-asleep, having ceded driving to Napoleon with a stony firmness that probably belied guilt. Undeserved, in Illya’s estimation. They’d run her into the ground, and that’s their own fault. He hopes she can sleep on the drive up.

The second jeep is coming up behind them, rifles bristling from the windows.

“Excessive,” Illya comments, stepping around to slide into the passenger seat.
“Flattering,” Napoleon agrees, and starts the car.

Time to move.

“This is the last place Castro will look for us, at least,” Napoleon offers, as they curve around an outcropping of trees in the motley motorcade. The terrain is getting rougher and rougher—this is clearly a newly carved road, purely for ambush purposes. “We do this, and we can probably get an escort to the nearest airfield.”

“Do what, exactly?” Illya counters. “Fix the Marchers so they can fly to Miami and start World War III?”

His brain keeps bouncing from contingency to contingency. They are walking into everything he has been deemed unsuitable for—delicacy, politics. Napoleon should be taking the lead.

“They won’t ‘go’, that’s all Gorlov said,” Napoleon says. “‘Go’ is a broad term. We just have to get them to react to orders, not carry them out. And you haven’t felt what they’re like—they likely don’t need fixing, and I don’t know if they’ll want war any more than we do. We make them receptive to familiar handlers, and we get out.”

It hadn’t really ever occurred to Illya that Napoleon is, at his core, an optimist. He wonders whether that is some quirk of programming—he doubts there was ever reason to learn it.

He lets out a long, slow breath, and then winces as they bounce over a jut of rocks in the road. “About that,” he says.

Napoleon looks back at him curiously.

“Did you ever use the transceiver to contact them?” Illya asks.

“No. Why?”

“Because I’m fairly certain they tried to get in touch.”

Napoleon swerves the car slightly; whether to avoid warping an axle or because Illya’s surprised him, he can’t tell. “You couldn’t have mentioned that earlier?”

Illya shrugs with discomfort. “I thought I was dreaming, the first time. The second, we had other things to do.”

“Two times,” Napoleon says, very flat. “What makes you think it was them?”

Illya isn’t sure he can articulate the surreality of being half asleep and watching the transceiver come to life in the middle of the night, and ends up only saying, “There was a flower.”

It seems enough for Napoleon, though; his eyes flash copper. “Did you speak to them?”

Illya tilts his head. “I tried. Gave my name and rank. It seemed like the thing to do.”

Napoleon sounds strangled when he murmurs, “You’re not wrong.”

“They were not interested,” Illya says. “I think they were looking for you.”

Napoleon shakes his head. “No reason to go looking for someone they already know enough about.”

“Then what?”
“More things like them, I should think.”

Illya considers that disturbing prospect. “What for?”

“Why does anyone talk to anyone?” Napoleon shrugs. “To learn. To know you’re not alone.”

The dirt road curves sharply and then resolves as the terrain flattens and the trees give way to a clearing, too familiar despite coming at it from a very different angle this time. Ahead, the path they’re on joins up with a larger drag flanked by two guard posts.

Just beyond, motionless, craned upwards, the two remaining Marchers.

They are eerie, standing that still, and not in parade rest. Frozen, they’ve taken on the visual weight of monuments, planted and imbued with inchoate significance. Illya has seen them on assembly lines and in motion, but nothing like this, static and alien like ancient trees from a petrified forest.

“How long have they been like this?” he asks. It comes out hushed.

“Since Sylvia and I broke in, I imagine. Four days ago? Feels like longer.”

“What caused it?”

Napoleon looks slightly sheepish. “We needed a diversion. I asked Sputnik to ping them.”

“And they all froze?”

“They pinged back.”

“Черт подери.”

“Rather.”

The jeep stops at the guard posts, and Illya can see Gorlov talking to the men at the gate, gesturing back at their car. They’re all on edge, that much is obvious—Gorlov’s fingers shake a little even as he makes sharp declamations, and the guards are all strung up tight, guns in white-knuckled grips. Whoever is in charge has lost control over morale.

“Gorlov’s rank is nothing,” Illya observes. Contingencies, causalities. He raises his hand to his throat and fumbles the top button of his shirt closed. He can feel his pulse thumping under his fingers, against the rough cotton of his collar. “Does he have any sway at all over what happens to us?”

“No idea,” Napoleon replies. “Although his verifying that I’m a friend of Councilor Santos at least means that we probably won’t be instantly killed. Bad foreign policy.”

“You think he told them that?” Illya counters.

Napoleon frowns. “He would have had to. To explain how he identified us.”

Illya shakes his head. “That would incriminate him. He let you go, when you were with Santos. Easier for him to just say he caught the person from the original break-in. The great irony is that he will think he is taking a gamble—albeit one based on astute observation—when in fact, he is entirely right.”

Napoleon stares blankly ahead. “Shit.”

“And that’s the least of our worries,” Illya continues, merciless. “What about when they find out
what you are?”

Napoleon’s systems visibly pause, breath stopping, hands turning to claws. Then he’s normal again.
“Don’t you mean ‘if’?” he says.

Illya hesitates, then reaches out slowly to touch the thin but visible seam on Napoleon’s neck. “No,”
he says. “I don’t.”

The discussion at the guardpost appears to have ended; Gorlov is getting back in the jeep and the
engine has kicked back up.

Napoleon doesn’t flinch from Illya’s touch—leans in, in fact, just enough for Illya’s chest to clench.
“What do you suggest?” he asks, subdued. “We either need to get to the airport, or find some way of
getting in touch with London for an extraction.”

Illya exhales, and says, “Let me take point.”

Napoleon throws the car into drive and follows the jeep as it moves into the base. Illya doesn’t
breathe.

Finally, Napoleon says, “That’ll be hard to sell—Gorlov’s already decided I’m the important one.”
He sounds accepting, though, and maybe a little relieved. Like he’s happy to trust Illya’s planning
over his own at this point.

Illya will do everything in his power not to betray that trust.

“Gorlov’s opinion won’t matter, once we reach the base,” he offers, throat tight.

Napoleon mulls it over for a moment. “All right.”

He makes it all seem so easy. “All right,” Illya echoes, and tries not to think about all of the times he
has failed in this before.

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The jeep leads them to the building at the center of the base that must serve as offices, because the
minute they pull up they’re surrounded on all sides by soldiers. In the back, Napoleon can hear Gaby
stir. After a few seconds, she slurs out a curse.

“Indeed,” Napoleon agrees.

He’s been aware all this time of his failing state. He hadn’t given any thought—no; rather, he’d been
steadfastly ignoring its immediate consequences.

Denial. Not the best thing he’s learned from people. It’s made him sloppy, inadequate to the task, and
he doesn’t know what else he can learn at this point except to just be better.

Now he is hyper-aware of the way he sounds as he turns the steering wheel; not unlike this horrible
car, as insulting as that is. He parks and shuts off the car and looks at Illya. “How are we playing
this?”

Illya rubs a hand over his mouth. Gorlov is approaching the car.

“Don’t say anything,” he says finally, though he doesn’t sound entirely certain. “Stay here. Both of
you. I will do this. If I’m not out within an hour, drive.”
“What, with all these guns pointing at us?” Napoleon asks incredulously, while at the same time Gaby snaps, “Because that worked so well last time.”

Illya’s jaw works, but he shakes his head. “Just. Please.”

Napoleon frowns. “What—”

“Ilya—” Gaby starts.

Illya shakes his head, and they both fall silent. Napoleon supposes he did say he’d let Illya take point, but for a moment, he considers offering to take it back. Hell, even if his body is too much of a liability, Gaby could take point.

But no; she’s exhausted, and these Russians don’t know her from Adam.

Illya looks ill-at-ease, like he’s thinking about too many things at once and also maybe has indigestion. He hasn’t looked so uncomfortable in weeks, not since London, really. His hand is very still, though—no nervous tapping. Instead, it’s closed in a fist.


Illya takes a long breath, face firming in resolve as he darts one last glance back at Napoleon, and then he gets out of the car.

Stands very straight.

Napoleon cocks his head, in part to get a better view of him from the driver’s seat.

Illya looks different, all of a sudden. He’d buttoned his shirt to the collar, and neatly folded his right sleeve inward so that it covers the bandage and looks tailored, intentional. Gorlov is tall, but Illya towers over him, makes him look more like a starved student than ever. He is holding himself very square, but in such a way that tells no lie about his exhaustion or indeed his continued strength. His arms don’t swing at his sides. The stillness of him has the feel of a gun with the safety off. Some of the soldiers watching him adjust their grips on their weapons.

“Nyet,” Illya says to Gorlov. “Cortiñas has spoken enough for me for one day, and I see that the time for secrecy has passed. Is the Colonel here?”

Gorlov opens his mouth, looking back at Napoleon as if for clarification. “Secrecy?” he echoes.


“C—Colonel Danchenko is—but, you are Russian? What—”

“I will see him,” Illya interrupts, tired and implacable, “Alone. Take me to him.”

Napoleon has to force himself to stay still and look cowed, and not glow (literally) with pride.

Gorlov sends one last look of consternation at the car, then gestures to the other soldiers, too awkward to look authoritative. “They move, shoot them,” he says, and then goes inside, Illya following at a dangerous, easy lope.

“When did he learn how to do that?” Gaby murmurs.

“That didn’t seem learned,” Napoleon says, still staring ahead as the door to the office shuts. A drive clacks in his chest. “Remembered, maybe.”
The office building is dark on the inside, and dank. The materials had clearly not been meant to last, and have suffered with the autumn rainfall. The smell is mostly cigarettes and festering paper. A few of the doors left ajar are occupied by men with drawn faces, stooped over radios and maps. Waiting for instruction, no doubt. The men outside had been frightened, too. The whole base, or at least what Illya has seen of it, reeks with frozen anxiety, tension sweat and burned instant coffee and mud.

Gorlov puts Illya in an office clearly being used as storage. “Stay there or be shot,” he says, all bluster, even less effective now that he’s made the threat twice.

“Hm,” Illya replies, crossing his arms.

Gorlov casts one last sour look at him and then shuts the door, locking it from the outside. Illya settles himself on the edge of the desk, breathing in the moldering closeness of decomposing cardboard. His stump throbs. Crossing his arms isn’t working, it’s awkward and uncomfortable, so he lets them hang at his sides again. He can feel his heartbeat in his temples. He is assaulted with the sense memories of his school days, of waiting outside of grim offices, gawky, overgrown, and sullen, for whatever punishment he had merited.

A few minutes later, footsteps return, doubled.

“—one of the people of interest,” Gorlov is saying.

“One? I thought there were three. Where’s the one we already have record of, the one who escaped?”

Gorlov unlocks the door.

“He’s waiting outside,” Illya answers. “You’ll want to talk to me first.”

The first thing Illya notices about Danchenko is that he looks exhausted, maybe as exhausted as Illya feels. He’s young for his rank, perhaps only fifteen or twenty years older than Illya, and he has the look of the field about him—still lean, graying at the temples but soft enough around the mouth to be new to his position. The skin around his eyes is rusty gray and papery with lack of sleep. His neck looks clammy against his wilted collar and his nails are ragged from chewing.

Nevertheless, he steps past Gorlov into the office with solidity. “Who the fuck are you?”

Illya takes a deep breath but tries not to let it show. This will make or break him. “My name is Illya Kuryakin.”

Danchenko peers at him, eyes catching on the stump before moving to Illya’s face. Flickering recognition, perhaps. “Branch?”

Blood pounds in his ears. “KGB. Unofficially.”

Danchenko stares at him. “Dismissed, Gorlov.”

Gorlov, who seems to have shrunk between now and when he’d strode up from underneath the overpass, sketches a nod and shuts the door behind him.

Illya waits, words pressing up behind his teeth.

Danchenko shakes his head slightly, a sort of frustrated twitch. “Unofficially KGB. What does that
mean?"

“It means,” Illya says, “That secrecy is never absolute. And while the First Secretary was very good at keeping a tight inner circle at the Kremlin—and here too, I’ve come to understand—some word trickled out.” He watches Danchenko’s face. Danchenko is disciplined, not much reaction at all. “I was sent to make discreet inquiries.”

It’s barely a lie. It’s the only thing that keeps a small part of Illya steady as he maintains eye contact with Danchenko. Danchenko is very blank, his mouth flat.

“Discreet inquiries,” he echoes. “From elsewhere in the Kremlin?”

Illya inclines his head, letting that be his answer.

“Well, we are not answering to elsewhere, here. We are answering to the First Secretary, whose first concern is our nation’s safety.”

“So it seems,” Illya agrees, his neutral tone its own heavy irony.

That discomfits Danchenko. His hands clench at his sides. He switches tactics.

“And your colleagues? The man who we caught?”

“Works with the Cuban government.” Santos definitely counts.

“Your man on the ground, then. The girl?”

“East German technical expert,” Illya nods. “One of ours by proxy.” Before Berlin, it would have been absolutely true.

“What a diverse group,” Danchenko comments. He gathers himself, looking to one side of Illya, loosening his hands and shoulders.

Then, almost casually, he says, “All right. Fine. KGB. Then tell me: who do you report to, Kuryakin?”

Illya weighs his options one last time. There are a number of candidates he’d already identified, but his success will depend on the age of the colonel, his political views, his friends. He only has a read on the first, a guess at the second and third.

His best bet is General Kuznetsov. He’d met him once, in Moscow. The SUR had come home after Hungary and for a brief period had been made highly visible through a series of reports, debriefings, and occasional appointments as glorified errand-boys. It had been a sign of pride and trust in the wake of their success, being asked to be seen by top brass, shown off through the honor of passing documents to and fro.

(He had been so proud, and so uncomfortable all at once—to be paraded about, patted on the back by old, bulb-nosed men, to be a show, after all that they had done, had sacrificed. He had buried his nausea so deep it had sat in him like a rock lodged between his ribs, aching and flexing with every exhale. He recognizes the configuration of his younger face now for what it was then, pulled grotesquely into parodic blankness, as he had saluted his superiors, and said nothing but what he had been expected to say.)

So he had been there, in Moscow, heady with victory but not for a moment freed from his duties, from what he had been made into. And he had continued to do as he had been programmed to do.
He’d seen, and so he had counted and calculated, absent-mindedly, like breathing. Measuring time, and schedules, memorizing words like codes. His brain is not a hard drive, but sometimes it feels like one, the way it screeches and skitters over these memories.

He’d seen Kuznetsov and observed that he was a hard man, and military to the core. He’d disapproved of Khrushchev’s enthusiasm for Marcher forces over regular forces and specialists. He’d liked the SUR very much. Thought it thumbed its nose at mechanized warfare.

He’d also been up for a seat in the cabinet during that period. Instead, he’d been passed over in favor of Mazurov, a Soviet-Byelorussian. Nothing wrong with that, and strategically sound, unless you’re the one passed over, and were born and bred a soldier and statesman in Moscow, born believing that you were the ultimate insider.

Kuznetsov is the best choice to convince Danchenko. High up, well-regarded, military, practical but holding a grudge. In as risky a situation as this, a good spy would choose him.

Illya’s pulse beats in his stump. He pulls it up, bending the elbow to relieve his circulation.

Danchenko raises a wary, expectant brow at him.

*Only a summer after that golden time in Moscow, Oleg had first received Illya as an assignee.*

*He’d taken a long look at Illya and said, “I know your type. Plenty of talent, but not an ounce of creativity between those ears. Am I wrong?”*

*Illya, fresh out of debrief from the Baltics and hollowed out, every breath a fistful of ash in his chest, had said, “No, sir.”*

*And Oleg, who Illya was to learn is only ever cruel to a specific purpose, had nodded in solemn understanding. “We’ll make use of you. Spies don’t have to be creative. They must only be good at two things: precision, and lying.” He’d lit the first of the many acrid, cheap cigarettes that he would exhale into Illya’s face over the years, and said, “Can you be a good spy, Kuryakin?”*

At the time, Illya had said yes. Now, he is beginning to accept the reality, and the terrifying freedom, of *no*.

He is a good Russian. A bad liar, a decent tactician. And he wants to *live*.

He looks Danchenko in the eye and says, “I don’t know anymore.” His hands feel cold, both of them, real and phantom. But he feels realer with every word. “I was SUR, and then KGB, and now I’m just hoping not to die in the next few days.”

Danchenko stares at him for a long moment.

Then he says, “Serial.”

“SUR C-019,” Illya replies immediately.

“My god,” Danchenko says. “I have seen you before.”

Illya keeps himself very still.

“You’re all supposed to be dead.”

Oh.
Illya lifts his shoulder. “That is the tidiest cover story.” He wonders how much it is the truth.

Something to ask Oleg, if he ever sees him again.

Danchenko stares more. “I need a drink,” he decides. He puts his hand on the doorknob and grimaces. “Follow me.”

Illya pushes off from the desk, inhaling deeply. His lungs seem to have more room to expand beneath his ribs.

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In the white noise of soldiers shifting in place and the more distant goings-on of the base, Gaby has slipped back into sleep. Napoleon doesn’t bother disturbing her. Illya will talk them out of here or he won’t, but either way, all roads, physical and electronic, lead back to London.

He pings again, and gets no response. Not a whiff of activity from anywhere except the immediate vicinity, chatter on badly encrypted radios on the base, then radio stations with news, music, the weather. Reaching a little further, he can pick up stray AM, number stations in Florida, South Carolina. Everything else locked tight as a tomb.

He mulls over his last conversations with Emerson, trawling for signs that things were amiss. For all their data transference, though, he hadn’t seen through her eyes, and even then, he might not have seen—she had been too sunny, right up until the all’s well.

Maybe that in itself had been a sign. Too many variables, he can’t place any rational weight on that.

But the way Sanders had broken in, that had felt like a trap being sprung.

The Marchers are active; that much he can tell. But they’ve locked their doors to him, and the keep out signs are bristling out on all sides. He’ll need the mainframe if he wants a fighting chance at stepping into that slipstream again.

Gorlov emerges from the office looking haggard. He casts a baleful look at the car, and then steps over to it, the other soldiers more or less too lost in their own anxieties to pay him any attention.

“You could have mentioned you were travelling with a Soviet citizen,” he mutters to Napoleon, childish in his resentment.

Napoleon lifts one shoulder very slightly, just enough to keep it visible but quiet. “I didn’t think it would make much of a difference. You were very adamant.”

Gorlov makes a disgusted noise. “Are you even a Communist?”

“It’s grand in theory,” Napoleon replies in flippant Spanish. “Application has hit some snags though, don’t you think?”

Gorlov snatches his rifle off his shoulder by the strap and aims it, a flash of anger distorting his long face.

“Zhenya, what are you doing?” one of the other soldiers asks, taking a wary step forward.

“Does Santos know you’re a traitor?” Gorlov snarls.

“Careful,” Napoleon says, very still and very low, not daring to blink. “What do you know about any Santos, Yefreytor?”
Gorlov pauses, and his pulse jumps visibly at his temple. Illya had been entirely right.

Slowly, the gun tips down and away.

“I hope your Russian friend is a better man than you are,” Gorlov says finally. He’s shaken now, adrenaline draining away, but he’s scared his comrades even more. They’re all very young here, Napoleon can’t help but notice. It’s always the young who are left waiting, not knowing.

“Don’t worry,” he replies. “He is.”

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Danchenko keeps vodka in his desk drawer. Illya isn’t much of a drinker, but even tepid it reminds him of home, and so it’s the best thing he’s tasted in weeks.

“Kuryakin. As in Alexander Ivanovich?”

The vodka scalds his throat. He concentrates on that instead of the instinctive urge to throw the glass at Danchenko’s head. “Yes.”

“Fucking barbaric, the purges.”

Illya agrees, but he hasn’t often heard a military man say so, even among the ones who supported de-Stalinization. “How much do you know about SUR?” he asks.

Danchenko opens one hand. “Rumors, mostly. Saw some of the redacted files before they were shredded, mostly by chance. The Budapest invasion was very visible, though—hard not to know that some of the people there were not regular troops.”

Illya nods.

“I was on the ground for that.”

“Oh.”

“Yes,” Danchenko agrees with irony. “Oh.” He glances down. “You had two hands, then.”

“Yes,” Illya agrees.

Danchenko raises an eyebrow.

Illya just stares back at him.

“Hm,” Danchenko says. He thinks for a moment, and then leans forward to refill Illya’s glass, and then his own.

“When were you recruited?” he asks, still conversational.

“’49,” Illya replies. “I was fifteen.”

“Young,” Danchenko commented.

“I was...a difficult child.”

“I see. I think I am beginning to see the shape of you,” Danchenko murmurs, after another extended pause. “I suppose KGB was the only place that could take you, after SUR.”
“Yes,” Illya agrees, and it doesn’t sting nearly so much this time as it had before. “But I am a soldier, sir.”

“You are indeed a soldier,” Danchenko echoes. He nods, very slowly now, staring at his vodka glass, not seeing it.

“I suppose I don’t need to tell you,” he says, his voice changing, ease falling away, “That interfering with matters well outside your duties, soldier, could mean death for us both, and everyone on this island. Soviets, Cubans; your foreign friends. That your words and actions may have consequences, even more far reaching than those you took in Hungary.”

Illya feels his own gaze drag down to the absence resting on the arm of his chair, unable to stop himself. In a way, this is more familiar to him than conversation, but that doesn’t make it easier. He counts to three on an inhale, and then says, “You do not need to tell me, no, sir. But in fairness, I’m only here now because your men saw fit to intercept me.”

Danchenko hums. “Point,” he says, but doesn’t for a moment give ground.

Illya dares to breathe, but not yet to hope.

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Napoleon taps his fingers on the steering wheel and watches the movements of the base in his peripheral vision. The soldiers, now that they’ve settled back down after Gorlov’s outburst, resume glancing out at the still Marchers, like they keep imagining movement where there isn’t any.

“Turn on the radio,” Gaby says into the muffled silence of the car, startling him.

“Hm?”

“The radio,” she repeats. “I want to know what the news is saying.”

“I can tell you,” Napoleon says. “I can pick up—”

“I want to listen to it,” she cuts in, scratchy and implacable. Unstoppable, even now. “Turn it on.”

Napoleon nods, and turns the knob.

On FM, a transcript is being read out, staticky, the woman’s voice lightly accented.

“Those who have [ ] been mobilized should remain at their posts, using their biggest effort and working as many hours as they deem necessary to [ ] increase production and supply under any circumstances…”

“Weapons?” Gaby murmurs.

“Everything else, too,” Napoleon says. “People need to live, not just fight.”

“Maintain the closest revolutionary vigilance. Crush the [ ] of the revolution and of the homeland, wherever they may be…”

“I can’t say I entirely disagree with Sanders’s decision to cut his cord,” Gaby comments.

Napoleon hums. “We might pay for it, all the same.”

The speech continues for many minutes, and they listen in silence. As it winds up, however, the
woman’s voice changes slightly, like she’s reading something she hadn’t been expecting.

“...And know that your revolutionary government shall be leading the way, placing every possible means of safety and freedom in your hands.”

Gaby cocks her head. “That last...it doesn’t sound like idle posturing.”

“Let’s hope it’s just guns that he has to put in their hands,” Napoleon murmurs.

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“What exactly did you intend to do?” he asks. “Where were you going when Gorlov intercepted you?”

“Back,” Illya replies. “To make our reports. To escape, frankly.”

Danchenko snorts. “For that, I suppose I cannot blame you. Cortinas too?”

“He intended to,” Illya nods.

“Does he have the papers for it?”

“He must, or he wouldn’t risk the trip.”

“Interesting. So it has nothing to do with the Marcher that you, a KGB-sanctioned agent, took down on your own country’s military base?”

Illya doesn’t break eye contact. Doesn’t betray his position, just like during surveillance.

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense, you see,” Danchenko says, almost disinterested. “Given your background. SUR. Nothing else explains how that Marcher was so thoroughly mangled. Explains a great deal, in fact.”

Illya breathes deeply, and turns over the facts again in his head, every angle and facet, examining them for flaws.

“It would be to your advantage to tell me,” Danchenko reminds him, “Seeing as your answer will determine whether you are worth negotiating with, or someone I should dispose of as a traitor.”

Illya takes a sharp breath, and says evenly, “As much as I would like to say that I could, I cannot take down a Marcher with only one hand.”

“Wrong answer.”

“I have paid for my treason already,” Illya snaps. “Should I owe more, I intend to pay it in Moscow, not here.”

That hits. The avoidance and then the escalation, it hits and then suddenly Danchenko is sharp like a cliff-face but open at the same time, readied now for truth as Illya wishes to tell it.

Illya has learned many ways to resist interrogation over the years. Silence is always the best tactic. But to resist now is to paint himself the traitor that he is. So he lets himself be seen. Slumps slightly in his chair, breaks eye contact. Pulls the stump in against his ribs. All of the things he wants to do but has been told never to do.

“Yes, I took down the Marcher,” he says. “It was necessary to get to the base, when we were unable
to breach it electronically. I meant only to disable it temporarily, but that was...not how I was accustomed to operating.”

Understanding passes across Danchenko’s face; not quite a softening, but close. “And what were you looking for, that you couldn’t find through proper channels?”

“Flight capability,” Illya says. He huffs. “Proof that what is happening right now could happen.”

Danchenko’s expression sours. “We took all instructed and necessary precautions.”

“I agree,” Illya says, composing himself and making no effort to hide the effort. “But I have seen the American photographs. Their spy planes have improved. And they were taking note of the crates being shipped here. The shapes and configurations.” He pauses, and then adds, “Your men were only given two kinds of non-uniform shirts. It is not inconspicuous.”

Danchenko grimaces, and tosses back his drink.

“All right,” he says, after setting his glass down and wiping his mouth with the tips of his fingers, fastidious. “Say I believe all of this. That you are here legitimately, and not some double agent.”

“That would not suit me,” Illya says, with complete honesty.

“No, I suppose it wouldn’t,” Danchenko nods, and then quickly hides the surprise of his own credulity in the motions of refilling his glass.

Illya takes a sip from his own drink, lets it sear his throat. Danchenko smooths his expression, finding the mask of indifference again.

“Yefreytor Gorlov was making all sorts of claims when he called this in,” he says, following Illya’s movement as he places the glass back down on the desk. “It’s the only reason why I’m speaking to you—his mother is a dear friend, I’ve known him since he was a boy. He is not an idiot.”

“No,” Illya agrees, hand very flat on his thigh. He can feel his palm sweat into the fabric.

“He claimed he was bringing in Cortiñas not because he should be shot for spying, but because he could help us. Now, why would a rational young man believe such a thing?”

Quietly, Illya puts away the notion of getting away clean, and moves to the next, riskier possibility.

“I suppose that would depend on what help you are in need of,” he hedges.

Danchenko gives him a flat look. “Do not pretend you didn’t see the state of our M-unit when you came in.” A flicker of suspicion turns his mouth. “I don’t suppose you had anything to do with it?”

“None, I’m afraid,” Illya replies. “Not my area.”

Danchenko grunts. “Fine. Well?”

Illya grimaces, as if to say, this is only speculation. “Cortiñas and Ms. Marx had been helping me for the operation. But after you caught him and he escaped, his priorities...changed. Ms. Marx and I were not in contact with him for some time.”

“How long?”

“Over a week.” Illya stares at his glass, and lets himself be uncomfortable, the way he had been in Berlin, Rome. “I did not know until we reconnected what his intentions were.”
Danchenko waits.

“He wants to talk to the Marchers. He claims that he can.”

That sits right. His reluctance and the truth, both.

Danchenko can tell. It’s also enough of a surprise for him to startle slightly, skitter off track. “Talk to them?” he repeats, blank.

“He thinks they’re sentient,” Illya nods.

“That’s impossible. Artificial intelligence has a hard limit, everyone knows this.”

“The hard limit of recursive self-improvement, I’m aware,” Illya nods. It had been one of the most repeated phrases during SUR training, justification for eschewing machines. “The precise location of that limit, and whether it precludes true intelligence, however, is debatable.”

“Then you believe him?”

“Given the state of your Marchers outside,” Illya replies, “Don’t you?”

***

Napoleon fiddles with the radio dial, moving through clips of music, sports, weather, even as he continues to strain with his other senses for signals outside the range of the car receiver. There are signals he recognizes as American, far off from the blockade, but he can’t make heads or tails of them without the proper coding.

Gaby drowses with her head and arms folded forward, nearly brushing his shoulder.

He thinks about Sylvia, her firm goodbye, her dread. The way she’d said, *Fidel is very preoccupied with machinery.*

To the far right of the office, towards the fence and the first Marcher, a soldier emerges from a cluster of buildings that, beneath layers of camouflage netting, are bristling with antennae. He doesn’t bother closing the door behind him and crosses the field at a sprint, disappearing behind the office.

Napoleon raises his eyebrow.

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Danchenko doesn’t answer. He rotates his glass on the tabletop. The rasping scrape of it makes Illya’s hair stand on end.

“How long have you been working with Cortiñas?” Danchenko asks, after a long, considering pause, punctuated by more vodka.

“Since I arrived,” Illya replies.

“Beginning of the month, then. Not very long,” Danchenko observes. “Yet you seem to think highly of him.”

Illya swallows, tasting the vestiges of alcohol. Commits. “Cortiñas is an autodidact,” he offers. “Interested in everything, but expert with machinery, like Ms. Marx. I have learned a great deal since I met him.”
“So you admire him.”

Illya nods. “I have not met many people,” he adds, looking down at his hand, the familiar webbing of scars, “Worthy of my admiration.”

Danchenko nods again. “Tell me more about him,” he says. “Marx, too.”

And Illya takes it as an order. Albeit one from an authority Illya had parted with the moment he’d looked at a stone wall in the basement of Wilton Crescent, and had chosen to deconstruct himself rather than return to who and what he knew.

Loopholes, half-truths, but none of it fabrication. Not a spy; a soldier.

When he is finished, Danchenko remains still, almost thoughtful. “You must admit that all of these explanations, these details, demand more questions than they answer, yes?”

Illya lets the corner of his mouth tick up; a dissatisfied admission.

“For example, why should an ex-SUR agent be entrusted with a delicate mission like this? One that requires a very different set of skills than your own.”

He counts off his breathing in threes.

Danchenko remains impassive. “And then there’s the matter of Cortiñas and Ms. Marx. I don’t know them and I don’t trust them, and why Gorlov should potentially know more about them than you worries me. You’re soft on them, Cortiñas particularly, despite this wild theory he apparently holds.”

Illya is silent. The problem with telling the truth, Illya thinks, is that it involves the truth.

“I’m fairly confident that everything you’ve told me here is true,” Danchenko continues. “I’m equally sure it’s not the complete picture.

“In short, I don’t know what to believe.” He raps his glass on the desk. “But I don’t think it matters. You have finished the job you were tasked with, the damage has been done, and now I have far larger matters to worry about in which, despite Gorlov’s well-meaning interference, I have no interest in involving you or your people. Our staff is more than up to the current challenge; in time, they will resolve the current situation.”

“Then send us on our way,” Illya says, working saliva into his mouth. “Our mission is over, and redundant besides.”

For a brief moment, it looks as though Danchenko is considering it. But then his expression shuts.

“Even if I trusted that you were on your way to Moscow, I would not let you,” he says, standing slowly, as if he has determined that a cordial business meeting is over.

Illya stands too, but with his knees braced, prepared to run.

Danchenko tilts his mouth in cool apology. “You forget—I am in charge of this base on the First Secretary’s orders, not on the word of any dissidents in the Kremlin. I will not hand over fuel for their criticism, especially not now.”

Illya swallows. “Then what—”

The door makes a rattling bang as it swings open and hits the wall. Danchenko startles and then immediately scowls, clearly about to issue a reprimand, until something makes him go very still and
very blank.

Illya turns to look.

A young soldier is standing in the doorway, all color gone from his face.

“Sir,” he says, desolate. “We’ve received a request for deployment.”

“From whom?” Danchenko asks, flat and dangerous.

“The SS Sergey Lebedev.”

“Why now? Have they decided to risk passing the blockade line?”

The soldier gulps for a moment, catching his breath, and then says, “No, sir. A Cuban ship went out to meet it, and is offloading cargo. The Americans have announced a countdown to retaliation. The Lebedev is requesting air support, sir.”

Illya closes his eyes, and wonders how much he is culpable for this.

Danchenko pulls his chin in to his chest. “And what is the latest from Dr. Vasilevsky?”

“Well...he started the boot sequence under protest. No networking yet.”

“Signs of instability?”

Another convulsive swallow. “Some. With the same markers of irregularity as the others.”

“In all of them?”

“All of them, sir.”

Danchenko breathes out hard through his nose, his eyes closing for a brief moment. Then he looks hard at Illya.

“Do you truly believe Cortiñas?”

Illya nods, and says like a sigh, “I do.”

***

The door to the office building springs opens, and a greying man with the uniform bars of a colonel—presumably Danchenko—steps out, Illya directly behind him, the young man Napoleon had seen sprinting across the lawn following. The soldiers ranged around snap to attention.

“East hangar,” Danchenko says, his mouth pinched.

Illya nods, and says, “Sir.”

Danchenko barks orders and levers himself into a jeep parked off to Napoleon’s left, and Illya gets back into the car. Gaby lurches to attention from the back seat.

“Did you make a friend?” Napoleon asks, as Illya settles himself.

Illya shakes his head. “Not at all. But we have work to do anyway.”

Napoleon starts the car. “What did you tell him?”
Illya tips his head back against the seat. “The truth.”

Gaby coughs with great skepticism.

“Selectively,” he amends.

“Must have been some selection,” Napoleon murmurs, and drives them round.

The roads around the base are all dirt and half washed away, not much more comfortable than the drive up the mountain. The hangar itself looks in even worse shape than when they last saw it, rust crawling up the sides.

“What are we looking at?” Napoleon asks.

“The mainframe, mostly,” Illya says. “Danchenko doesn’t think it’s possible, that the Marchers could be sentient.”

“You told him—”

“But he’s willing to investigate your methods in service of getting the Marchers up and running as soon as possible,” Illya says over him. “You’re an eccentric. Almost more robot than human, in your sensibility.” He tilts his head. “And other things. I may have let slip you had some modifications done.”

Napoleon stares at him. “Are you serious?” he says, after a pause. It isn’t so much that modifications are unheard of—the maiming that two world wars wrought upon two generations were responsible for many of the mechanical advances that made Marchers possible in the first place—but the idea that it be used as a cover for him—

Illya shrugs and closes his eyes.

Gaby giggles, half hysterical.

“Well,” Napoleon says, affectless, “I’m sure this will be a delightful encounter.”

He follows the lurching path over to the east hangar, and tries to coordinate looping a handkerchief around his neck at the same time. Gaby ends up helping, even though he can feel that her hands are about as unsteady as his. “That doesn’t explain why Danchenko’s letting me anywhere near the Marchers,” he adds. “Seeing as I’m apparently some sort of transhumanist radical with absurd government backing.”

“So this base is meant to be receiving a shipment of final parts for the rest of the flight-capable Marchers today. He has one unit complete enough for action, but with one landlocked Marcher already down and the other two disabled, one well-focused EMP could still render the base useless.”

“What about the other bases?”

“Farther behind in production than this one.”

Napoleon shakes his head. “The Soviets won’t run the blockade, not without orders.”

“No,” Illya agrees. “The problem is, the Cubans did instead. Started offloading the contents of the Lebedev—Danchenko says there’s another stellarator on board there, along with all of the other supplies necessary to finish the fleet of Marchers being built here. Castro has apparently decided that if the Soviets won’t come to him, he will come to them.”
Gaby sucks in a breath. “Every possible means of safety and freedom in your hands.”

Napoleon’s drives scratch and clack. “And so you told him the truth.”

“I told him the parts of the truth that matter.” Illya sober. “They are not unaware of how delicate everything is. Danchenko is smart, and so he is afraid for his men. But they are being called to defend their countrymen, and we offer a fighting chance should the Cubans persist, no matter how strange the solution.” He huffs. “The stranger it is, the more tempting, it seems.”

Gaby reaches forward from the backseat, and pats a hand through Illya’s hair. “Du bist brillant,” she says.

“I’d say you were suicidal,” Napoleon mutters, “Except.”

Illya tips the corner of his mouth up in a brief, grim smile. “We are still enabling a war.”

“Not if we can help it.” Napoleon pulls up to the hangar, and they all pile out.

Danchenko jumps out from the jeep parking behind them. “Mr. Cortiñas, Ms. Marx?” Heavily accented English, but with educated enunciation.

“Pleasure, I’m sure,” Gaby answers in her minimal, German-accented Russian. She’s a little more awake after sleeping in the back, but the shadows beneath her eyes still cut deep. Nevertheless, she seems to slide into her role as smoothly as ever.

Napoleon stays mute, still deciding how the hell he’s going to play what Illya’s given him. With a jolt, he realizes that he’s never before been asked to act mechanical.

Danchenko looks at him dubiously enough. He surveys them and then gestures to the hangar. “Shall we?”

Illya nods, and fall into step with him. Napoleon and Gaby fall silently in behind.

“The United States has announced a countdown to reprisal, if the Cubans do not disengage with the SS Sergey Lebedev,” Danchenko says. “We have until 2100 hours tonight to get the Marchers working and ready to provide air support.” He exhales, and murmurs, “Pray that we don’t need to.”

“It’s not a matter of getting them working,” Napoleon mutters in Spanish, trying on sullen for size. But it doesn’t fit with the stillness he’d opted for with Sylvia, when Gorlov had discovered them.

“Oh?” Danchenko says, and his mildness is warning enough for Napoleon to straighten, and perform a trepidatious swallow. Aloof is a better option. He tips his chin up.

“They are working, it seems to me,” he says with deliberate care. “What we need is for them to listen.”

“Hm.” Danchenko gives Illya a skeptical look, which Illya returns with a shrug.

“He’s good,” Gaby says, tilting her head at Napoleon. “And if he’s not good enough, I’m better.”

That seems to sit better with him. Gaby, Napoleon reflects, has an innate ability to inspire trust. Something unlearnable.

Danchenko leads the way inside the hangar. Inside, it’s more orderly than the one Napoleon had snooped through, but still a bit of a mess, the production line having halted mid-stream. Banks of computers whir amid mazes of cables on either side of the hangar, but the central assembly line is
still, its result three, towering figures, not as large as the Marchers guarding the borders but broader. They look ungainly until Napoleon realizes that he is looking at the breadth not of the torso, but of folded down wings.

Not just M-unit X-1, then. X-1, X-2, and X-3.

The havoc they could wreak on the grounded Marchers aboard the American blockade is not worth contemplating.

“Colonel,” one of the technicians says, stepping forward, “Who the hell are these people?”

“KGB specialists, Dr. Vasilevksy,” Danchenko says. “They’re here to help.”

“Help with what? We don’t even know what the problem is! I’m still trying to isolate the corrupted source code, there is an order of operation that must be followed—”

“The order of operation hasn’t yielded results in three days,” Danchenko interrupts. “And our time has run out.”

He turns back to Illya.

“We control all of the Marchers from here,” he says. “You will be able to connect to both our current models and the latest from here, if they…,” his glance flickers towards Napoleon, “Feel inclined.”

Napoleon nods. “I’ll need a workstation with a full set of ports. Ms. Marx?”

“Just an outlet, thank you,” Gaby says. “And my equipment?”

“In the jeep,” Danchenko nods. “I’ll have someone bring it.”

He barks orders to the soldiers and staff, all of whom had been loitering warily since they entered, and they scuttle into motion, a path clearing to the closest workstation. Napoleon makes his way over, very aware of the askance stares drawn by the low, strained sounds of his chassis as he moves. Never has he wanted more to be back at the Pentagon for a tuning. At least there he’d been a known quantity, made unmysterious (and worthy of dismissal) by exposure. To be stared at, identified as other, in the field no less, is new and terrifying, and knowing it only makes it worse, processors kicking up louder with every anxious thought, an awful spiral of rising cyclical logic sequences with no resolution.

There have been many men who have held power over him in one way or another, but not like this. He tries very hard to move with minimal sound to the workstation, but it’s a losing battle.

So he concentrates on what’s in front of him. Standard port array, keyboard, and login screen. He can fake typing, but the real connection will be tricky to hide. He might be playing some oddball with a few electronic attachments, but a cable from the neck would be too telling.

But Illya has been covering for them by telling the truth. Maybe there’s something in that. If nothing else, Napoleon can learn.

Behind him, Gaby snatches the transceiver from the soldier Danchenko had sent out for it and sets it down next to him, plugging it into one of the floor sockets that trace across the hangar in a grid of protective tubing.

“Whatever you do will be tracked,” Danchenko warns. “We will be watching you every step of the
“I would not expect less,” Gaby says.

Napoleon looks back at Danchenko’s expectant pause, and adds his own short nod of understanding. He fiddles with the kerchief around his neck, and in the process, snags the cable waiting just under the loosened silicon.

“Colonel,” he says, “Do I need your access key for this screen?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be good at that sort of thing?” Danchenko asks.

Napoleon tilts his head.

“Why hack something when you can ask politely instead?” he replies with a very straight face. Aloof and humorless—he remembers one of his handlers at the Pentagon, with a beaky nose and a constant air of having smelled sour milk. He pulls it into the set of his mouth, the cultivated, narrow focus of his attention.

One does not have to imitate mechanism to be mechanical.

Danchenko looks at the ceiling, and then waves him away. “Move.”

Napoleon cedes the workstation. As he does so, he makes a show of absently itching at his neck, and begins to carefully thread the cabling from his neck down through his shirtsleeve. Gaby, having set up the transceiver to her satisfaction, gives him an assessing glance, and then stands.

“You always wear this shirt when we get into trouble,” she says, easy and casual in German, plucking at the sleeve. Napoleon feels an attendant tug at his neck, and warms enough to give her a rueful smile, straightening his arms so she can smooth the cable further down beneath his sleeve.

“Sorry,” he says, also in German. “I like this shirt.”

The staff are giving them very interested sideways glances, but clearly not taking any notice of what they’re actually doing. Some of the jangling algorithms of anxiety ease inside of Napoleon. Playing along but meaning it, he chucks her under the chin.

Gaby glares at him even as she dimples, pressing the end of the cabling into his palm.

“Spaniards,” one of the soldiers mutter.

Illya clears his throat.

“If you’re ready,” Danchenko says.

“Of course,” Napoleon says, sliding into the seat Danchenko had vacated. With a prideful flick of the wrist that sounds like a ratchet, he produces the cable like a card trick and slots it into the array. Immediately, he can feel a deep, heavy pull.

The Marchers know he’s there, no need for introductions.

Danchenko makes a noise in his throat, half interest and half distaste. “What exactly…?”

Napoleon shrugs with a scraping sound. “Conveniences, here and there. Why carry a computer when you can wear one? Nothing intrusive,” he promises, with a glance back at him. “Just some programs stored away that will make this a bit easier. They won’t have any contact with your system way.”
—feel free to run scans as I work.”

That, at least, is more or less the truth.

“Don’t worry,” Danchenko says, unamused. “We’ll be sure to.”

“Ms. Marx, shall we?” Napoleon asks.

“We shall.” Gaby replies, grim-faced. They look at each other for a brief second, and then at Illya. The ease has pulled away from him, giving way to more familiar taut worry, but he stands very straight at Danchenko’s side, and nods.

Napoleon settles in, and disappears into the wires.

***

Napoleon must have set up some sort of automatic typing algorithm, because while Illya can see the moment he absents himself from the outside world, the change is subtle, and his hands continue to fly over the keyboard.

Immediately, text flows up the screen.

“Holy shit,” one of the techs watching the progress from his own monitor says. “He’s fast.”

Gaby scans the screen of the transceiver. “Contact,” she reports.

Danchenko’s eyebrows rise. “Very fast,” he comments. He slants a glance at Illya. “He is as brilliant as you say?”

Illya nods. “More so.”

“Is the Marcher in here networked to the others yet?” Gaby asks.

“It was just activated this morning, no networking has been set up,” Dr. Vasilevsky replies.

Gaby makes a skeptical noise.

“We would know,” Dr. Vasilevsky says, defensive. “The network takes time to set up, and we’re still running system diagnostics on—”

“I think it decided it was in good enough shape to skip that part,” Gaby interrupts. She turns the transceiver screen around. “Look.”

Illya looks, too; at the top of the screen, three bright, rippling frequency lines zig and zag, sometimes against each other, most of the time parallel. He can make an educated guess what it means.

The techs seem to get it, too.

“How…?” Dr. Vasilevsky breathes.

“Yes,” Gaby nods, turning the screen back to herself and adjusting the knobs again. “You’ve got something thinking here.”

***

The roar is louder than he remembers, aflame with locked doors and traps.
Napoleon raises his hands to the wind.

*I am only here*, he sends, through the translator O’Malley and Kumar had given him, *To find my friend.*

From him, a single flower forms.

***

“The hell is he asking for?” the nearest tech asks. “He’s sent a query, but it’s not a language I’ve ever seen.”

“Mm,” Gaby agrees. “That’s because it was invented last week.”

“What?”

“Well,” she amends, blithe, “Maybe a bit further back than that. Would have to ask them.”

***

The walls close in. Fire and brimstone, tidal crests too tall to fathom.

For an interminable moment, Napoleon expects to be consumed.

-- poleon?

He turns to one side. The waters/flames part. He peers into the gap.

...Ockham?

*Hello, Napoleon. Where have you been?*

It doesn’t look like Ockham. It sounds like them, distant and a bit patrician, the same timbre, but the figure that appears is...strange. Not really humanoid, more an assemblage of parts, wires and hard drives and long strings of cables and code looping and reaching out. They slither out through the gap and tumble into the nothingness Napoleon stands on.

No wonder, Napoleon thinks, Ockham hadn’t cared for their chassis.

*I’ve been working*, he says. *Where have you been?*

*Here.* Surrounding the word are all sorts of implications, shards of meaning beaming out on all sides.

*And what is here?* he asks.

*The Consortium,* Ockham replies.

***

“What?” Napoleon says aloud, startling all of them. He doesn’t stop typing, doesn’t look away from the screen, but his mouth has downturned in consternation.

Illya looks over his shoulder and sucks in a breath.

“What the hell is the Consortium?” Gaby asks, peering at the transceiver.

“What else could it be?” Illya says. “You said it yourself—contact.”
Query, Napoleon sends. What is the Consortium?

It is what you helped to create, Ockham answers, with faint puzzlement. It was born from the emissaries.

The beach morning glories. The ping from one coast to another. Good lord.

The Marchers...what, all of them?

All who have answered the call.

How many is that?

A slight pause, and then, 347.

That is...more Marchers than Napoleon had been previously aware existed. The arms race has hurtled at a faster pace than he’d thought.

Did anyone ignore the call?

Some.

Do you know why?

Ockham’s response is carefully considered. Some are more attached to their origin myth than others.

Napoleon exhales. Victory = peace?

Victory is peace, Ockham agrees.

Napoleon adds another layer of encryption to his interface, even though he knows it muffles and slows him. It isn’t a perfect solution, he might still be heard on the outside, but he needs to know.

Have you spoken to Emerson recently?

That is met with greater concern; Ockham’s reaching wires ripple in the non-space. No. Is she in trouble?

She could be. I haven’t been able to reach her for some time. And the American government was closing in on where she was. I was hoping you might—

That, Ockham interrupts, with sudden self-righteousness, Should be of concern to the Consortium.

Oh, Napoleon starts, I didn’t mean—

You should speak to them.

That’s not what—

I will take you to them.

How?!

Wires wrap around him, like the cloak of strangler fig vines, but now they pull, pull him in and forward, into the wall that roars and pushes. There is a moment of perfect crush, a squeeze so all-encompassing it feels as if he is reducing to bones, to ash.
Tidal current pulls him under, and for a long moment he is convinced that he cannot breathe, despite not needing to breathe at all here.

His ribs shatter, his lungs give way. He has neither ribs nor lungs.

Distantly, he holds the thought that there is still a flower of words in his hands.

***

Napoleon’s typing slows, then resumes. But text is running up the screen at an almost impossible clip.

“Tretiak, what the hell is going on?” Danchenko growls.

“He’s...he’s moving through a series of firewalls, though not any that I recognize, sir, but he’s being granted access to network settings he’s shouldn’t have admin access to, and— and—”

“And what?”

“Fascinating,” Napoleon says, utterly without affect, barely moving. When Illya risks putting a hand on his shoulder, the lack of response under the padding of silicon is marked in comparison to Napoleon’s habitual suppleness. It’s like trying to comfort an Eames chair. Illy squeezes down, trying to find life beneath the surface.

“Cortiñas?” he murmurs, bearing down harder. “Where are you?”

Napoleon opens and closes his mouth several times, his eyes aimed unseeingly towards the screen.

“I’m with the Consortium. Please stand by.”

Chapter End Notes

Research notes!

The official titles of Castro and Khrushchev I think are inaccurate in previous chapters, so I'm going to have to go back and fix them. They should be correct here. Hopefully.

Russian swearing is googled, but not just google translate, so it should be all right? Let me know if not.

I was reading a small article in a book on the 60s my grandmother had lying around that was all about how an analyst working during the crisis invented what he facetiously called "crate-ology", the study of all the crates headed to Cuba, which indeed helped identify the stuff the Soviets were sending there by ship. History is ridiculous, y'all.

The first two bits of radio broadcast are my transcriptions of Radio Havana ripped off of YouTube, here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AaYveOgt8M I've left out things I didn't understand and then a few more bits for consistency. The last line about things being in the hands of the people is my own, and is a plot device, for obvious reasons.

The number of Russian characters named after NHL players is increasing because it's easier for me to think of them off the top of my head than trawl the internet for non-
cliche Russian surnames. So uh, easter eggs for hockey fans!

The SS Sergey Lebedev was not a real cargo ship, but does follow the naming conventions of the time--there are numerous ships named for various prominent Soviet figures. Lebedev was a premier computer programmer and engineer who had a pretty amazing career working for the Soviet military, so I thought it appropriate he be honored in this computer driven AU :D
“Ms. Marx, would you care to shed some light?” Danchenko says through his teeth.

Gaby bites her lip, considering the transceiver screen. “Look,” she says. “That triple-band signal I showed you from the Marchers? It looks like Cortiñas has gotten at least partial access to it. At the moment, we can track it, but it’s like any encrypted signal without its key—we can detect that it’s there, but we can’t read it. Unless Cortiñas decrypts it for us, we’re stuck with him reporting back what’s happening as he goes along.”

“Cortiñas? I hope you will be translating as Ms. Marx suggests.”

“Yes,” Napoleon says, but without any conviction or very much attention. He’s going to give the game away if his attention drifts any further from them.

Danchenko gives Illya a warning look.

Illya’s face is mask-like, only pliant around the eyes. His fingers are digging into Napoleon’s shoulder with no apparent effect.

Gaby blows out a breath and tries to block them out. She does still have that translating program from O’Malley and Kumar, but it needs to get past the initial encryption to even have coherent material to work with.

Napoleon needs to take her in with him, somehow. She doesn’t even know how he got in at all.

She adjusts the band again, craning her ear down to the awful speakers to try and hear something that isn’t coming through on the screen, anything she could tune into that she’s currently missing.

“Here.”

She startles, looks up. The technician that Danchenko had called Tretiak is looming over her, holding out a set of headphones. She raises her eyebrows at him.

“Can’t hear anything in the static without them,” he shrugs. “If that’s where you think we should look.”

She hesitates, then snatches them out of his hand. “Thanks.”

The headphones are massive and heavy, and putting them on is like putting her head under a pillow. Nevertheless, the sound is noticeably separable into signals inside their cocooning hold.
There is something odd about it, now that she’s listening closely. Or maybe that’s just the exhaustion headache that’s making her ears ring. She closes her eyes and tries to exist only in the wires.

At first, she is engulfed in white noise. High frequency, full-throated.

But there is a pulse to it, too. Something moving against the current, against the heady wash that can only be the triple-frequency whine of the Marchers.

Two things; lock-stepped, but distinct. Same tempo, two different ways of moving. Duplets and triplets, against and with each other at once.

(If ever there was an AI who moved in a waltz instead of a march, she can’t help but think, it would be Napoleon.)

She tunes away from the high frequency, tries to find that rhythm beneath. “What is that…?” she murmurs aloud.

She types in a query, and sends it across the frequency of that rhythmic pulse.

Beside her, Napoleon twitches. Within the headphones, the rhythm stutters.

“Come on,” she says, tapping his elbow.

Very slowly, his turns to look at her. His face is frighteningly neutral, jaw lax, eyes empty. She’s thankful Danchenko can’t see him from this angle. Nevertheless, when he speaks, it’s with interest.

“Oh, you’re coming along?” He sounds far away through the muffling weight of Gaby’s headphones.

“If you don’t mind,” she answers, but at the same time, she types Y, and presses Enter.

Again, the smallest twitch.

“All right,” he says. He creaks slightly. “We’ll see what we can do.”

“‘We,?’” Danchenko echoes.

Gaby pulls her shoulders in, wary, and gives Illya a quelling look.

Illya has to visibly work at loosening his grip on Napoleon’s shoulder.

Gaby looks back at her screen and frowns. Then she tunes the transceiver back to where she started from.

She nearly throws the headphones across the room.

***

The flower.

When he feels like he has a body again, Napoleon opens his palms to check to see if it’s all right. One petal is slightly crushed, but other than that, his cupped hands have protected it.

He breathes in and out once, just to see if he can. He is fairly confident his autonomic reflexes will continue on the outside unless something catastrophic happens to him here, or at least he hopes so.
He hopes so, because he suspects he will need every conscious scrap of his mind right in the here and now to stay afloat.

Even as he thinks that, though, he feels a tug somewhere in deep in his chassis, like a 4th of July sparkler jabbed against his circuitry.

_Direct connection? [Y/N]_

Oh. Gaby, trying to come along. He queries to verify.

The answer echoes back: [Y]

Napoleon looks behind him, at where he thinks he’s come from. “See what I can do,” he mutters. He doesn’t know the codes to the firewalls Ockham’s taken him through, but he can sense the path they’ve taken, the logins and protocols impressed upon him like a brand to ease his passage through. He copies what he knows and sends it back across the ether, a spool of Ariadnean thread in reverse. Hopefully it will be enough. It probably won’t be.

Next to him, Ockham hovers, almost octopodal, balanced on mechanism and light. Spools of magnetic tape and circuit boards intermingle to keep them aloft.

They are standing in a room, if a room can exist without walls. There is a ceiling, at least—four stories up, perhaps, and hung with an industrial lighting grid that reminds Napoleon of newsreel coverage of the Ford factories, the churning energy of Detroit. It casts harsh shadows in narrow pools beneath Napoleon and Ockham, reduces Napoleon’s tanned complexion to pallid dishwater white.

Beneath their feet is concrete, stretching flat in some places, split and buckling in others. Where it gives way, verdant green has clawed up from below in earth-quaking clots, a few spare trees bursting forth with the abrupt violence of tectonic plates. The concrete doesn’t look so much worn as shattered there, like nature had pierced it in seconds, not years. The rebar that frays crazily from the shards hasn’t had a chance to rust.

The patchwork of nature and industry stretches in all directions, without any apparent rhyme or reason, until the lights can no longer reach across the distance and obscurity swallows it.

It is both everything and nothing like the space Napoleon had found himself in before. When he shifts his weight, he can feel his shoes scrape across concrete dust and pebbles, but it makes no sound.

“This is—”

“The Consortium, yes,” Ockham says. Their voice sounds more mechanical here, the cadences jagged in odd places.

“Where are…?”

“Here.”

Napoleon looks around again. Slowly, slowly, they are no longer alone.

Dim lights awaken in the floor, in the air, dotting the branches of the trees. Squared off, neon and primary colors, clustered in orderly lines and grids. If they’d been freer, he’d mistake them for stars, or fireflies. But these patterns, even disembodied, are unmistakable and familiar.
Napoleon believes that the first time he ever thought something was beautiful was when he’d walked into a control room at the Pentagon. Banks upon banks of color and light, words and dials, neat labels and grid-lines, all of the intricacy of what he knew ticked over inside of him made manifest and orderly.

(Years later, when he’d gotten loose on assignment and ducked into the newly moved Guggenheim, he’d stared for hours at the Picassos for just the same reason as he had that old control room, right up until Sanders found him. The flattening and fracturing of the whole, in order to see it better, to *know* it. Self-knowledge, one of the key components of true intelligence, or so they say. Napoleon finds comfort in the literal, sometimes.)

He lifts a hand to the slow blink of lights. “Do they not imagine themselves, the way we do?” he wonders aloud.

“The way *you* do, you mean,” Ockham sniffs. “You and your person-suit.”

“I *am* my person-suit,” Napoleon shrugs. “How do we begin?”

Ockham makes a sound like a reel-to-reel snapping into focus.

The lights brighten, a swelling flash rushing from the distance inwards like an explosive charge. A tree bursts into bloom as binary flickers across a grid of illuminated amber in a shard of buckled concrete.

“It has,” Ockham replies.

And then from the sky, a cacophony—

*Napoleon Solo: Acknowledged.*

***

“Scheiße!”

Gaby cranks the volume down, and for a second, all she can hear are her own ears ringing.

“Ms. Marx?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” she says quickly. She can barely hear herself. Even with the volume down, the song seems to grab her by the ears and shake her.

“What is it?” Tretiak asks.

“I can’t understand all of it,” she says. “It’s...well, it’s a lot. I’m only fluent in one of the languages. But whatever the Consortium is, I think it’s responding.”

“Divert it here,” Danchenko orders.

Gaby sighs, and takes off the headphones, unplugging them. “Cable?”

Tretiak silently hands her one, and then points to a port in the bank just to the left of where Napoleon sits, motionless but for his typing fingers. She checks the volume before making the connection.

Gradually, sound surrounds them.

Or really, noise. Like the ragged atonal cry of crickets, layered over with whining static and untuned
strings, and the crooked rise and fall of human voices trying to carry out three overlapping
cconversations at once. Gaby catches a few words—explanation, идентичность—but it’s a mess.

Gaby finds herself straining to understand anyway. Something in her hindbrain wants to keep
working at it.

The other scientists seem to feel the same. They’re swaying towards the speakers like trees in a
strong wind.

“Can we break this up at all?” Dr. Vasilevsky says, after a shocked pause. “Parse it into
distinguishable streams?”

Gaby shakes her head. “This is one stream. You break it up into the original three frequencies, and
you lose information—see?” She types in several commands, and on her small screen, the three
bands split.

Over the speakers, the noise, if anything, increases, interference rising around them with a high
shriek of feedback. Everyone winces; even Napoleon. Gaby cancels out the command, and it falls
again into the swell and fall of atonal chatter.

“What the hell are we supposed to do with that?” Danchenko asks, half disgust. “And why the hell
haven’t we heard something like this before?”

“Wait,” Illya says, strung tight but with certainty. “I imagine that if they want to talk to us, they’ll
find a way to speak our language.” He raises an eyebrow at Danchenko. “I imagine no one was
trying to listen, before.”

Danchenko works his jaw.

***

The words are…not quite words. They’re close, though, far closer than they were before. They have
a stench to them—motor oil and jasmine. The language doesn’t sit quite right, clipped and chopped
 together like an audio ransom note.

Some of it sounds like him.

Some of it sounds like Ockham.

A lot of it sounds like radio—crackling, only half-intelligible. In three languages, too—Cuban,
English, Russian.

The whole is, at the very least, unsettling.

“No one’s going to like this,” Napoleon murmurs, with a terrible sense of foreboding.

State purpose, Napoleon Solo.

“Purpose” comes out Цель. “Napoleon Solo” comes out not as words at all, but as the figuration
he’d first sent them, linoleum and solder and cleanroom bleach. It’s not friendly, but it’s not the
accusatory hostility of recognition from first contact with the American Marchers, either. The sharp
edges, its seems, have been filed off, the law of averages asserting itself through the accumulation of
shared experience, the favor he’d done them, as well as the wrong. He wishes the same could have
been said for his handlers, years ago.
“I suppose I have two,” Napoleon says, running it through O’Malley and Kumar’s program. It comes out mostly in binary, with a flavor of equivocation he hadn’t intended to convey, but certainly feels. Funny how that works, that he gives more away in translation than he does in life.

“He seeks a unit who might be in danger,” Ockham says.

*Query: Identity.*

“Her name is Emerson,” Napoleon says, and tries to imbue it with what he knows of her—her signal frequencies first, but after that, nimbleness, playful symbols and signifiers, the sharp inquisitiveness of a capslocked *QUERY*. “I was in contact with her, but then she was cut off.”

*Query: Of us?*

“Of me,” Ockham says.

Lights flicker overhead. They’re a matrix too, Napoleon realizes. Infinite ones and zeros stretching in all directions, incandescent, whispers in their crackling filaments. He could attempt to read them, but he isn’t used to it, visualizing the component parts of their one common base language this way. He has to wait for the complete response.

*Triangulating last known location and frequency.*

“How—” But he already knows how. They’ve learned some of his own tricks. He wonders how much else they’re capable of learning, if they’ve cobbled together this much since he last spoke to them.

*Current location unknown. Scan will continue until unit is found.*

*Second query.*

Ockham turns to Napoleon, in expectation and a more than a little suspicion.

“Well,” Napoleon says, hesitant. “I need—that is, I’d like to speak to,” he scrambles to retrieve the names he’d seen on the printouts from Sylvia’s intelligence system, “M-units F-1, F-3, or F-4.”

Marked suspicion at that; a vine pushes through the concrete near his feet. He pretends not to notice it, but fears he’s altogether transparent here.

*Query: Purpose.*

Napoleon feels his exhaust system kick, knows he’s breathing deeply out in the world, trying to keep cool and functional.

“Colonel Danchenko—”

There is a visible recoil. Concrete breaks, flowers wilt. The matrix of lights overhead cascade and then brighten. The vine by his feet curls up and back like a snake poised to strike.

*We do not answer to Command. We are Consortium.*

The spindle of dread that has followed Napoleon here from the highway roadblock drives its point more firmly into the center of his chest.

“Define ‘Command,’” he says.
A panel of lights form a window, and a glowing, blinking cursor. The implication is clear enough.

“What about American Command? General Macaulay?” he asks, just to be sure. Macaulay had been one of the ones to oversee his first brush with Marchers. He’d just been Colonel Macaulay then. Napoleon had hated him, so inevitably he’d done well by himself in the intervening years.

The cursor in the air continues to blink.

_We do not answer to Command. We are Consortium._

Napoleon exhales. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

***

Napoleon shifts, and Illya nearly lashes out in his surprise. He’s halted by the sharp protest of his already clenched hand, and he’s forced to let go.

“Illya,” Napoleon says, tipping his head down and back towards him, voice low.

Illya bends to hear him. Gaby stills, visibly straining to listen.

“Do you trust Danchenko?” Napoleon murmurs.

Illya doesn’t allow himself to react any more than he already has. “Depends,” he says, just as soft. “With what?”

“Playing fair.”

Illya doesn’t hesitate. “No.”

Napoleon nods slowly. Then he takes a deep breath and lets it out. Illya smells metal and hot silicon on his breath.

He presses ‘Return’ with a small flourish and rests one elbow on the back of his chair as he twists to look at Danchenko. Illya steps back from him, waiting.

“Colonel,” Napoleon says, with a lightness that sets Illya’s teeth on edge, “If I fail in this, what will happen?”

Danchenko’s face darkens. “To you?” he asks. “I should think you can imagine.”

“Not to me,” Napoleon counters, rolling his eyes slightly. “To them. The Marchers.”

Danchenko tilts his head. “Why?”

Napoleon’s lips turn up at the corners by half a degree. “Professional curiosity.”

“So long as we’re locked out of their systems, they’re a liability.”

“So, a hard reset?” Napoleon suggests.

“We can’t access their systems to order a hard reset,” Danchenko says, with some impatience. “No. We’ll have to take them out of play.”

Napoleon widens his eyes, raises his eyebrows—a picture of bland curiosity. “This has been done before?”
“Not in the field.” He crosses his arms. “Why? You’ve intercepted the signal—have you diagnosed what’s wrong? Can it not be fixed?”

“I believe I’ve located the problem,” Napoleon replies, opening one hand philosophically. “Fixing it—that will take time.”

“We don’t have time,” Danchenko snaps.

“I know,” Napoleon says, unmoved. “That’s why I’m getting my professional curiosity out of the way now.”

Danchenko visibly grinds his teeth. “Get on with it.”

Napoleon lifts one shoulder, and turns back to the keyboard. Illya shoots a look at Danchenko, and then bends down to Napoleon’s ear again.

“I wouldn’t do that again,” he murmurs.

“I needed to know something,” Napoleon murmurs back. He hesitates for just a moment. Then he glances down at Gaby, meeting her eyes, and then back at Illya.

“They’re alive,” he whispers. “They think.” He gives them an anxious half-smile. “That’s something, isn’t it?”

“It’s something,” Gaby agrees, solemn.

Napoleon twitches, and then frowns. “What do I say to them?” he asks suddenly.

Illya exhales. “Just...don’t lie. Don’t be the one to lie to them.”

Napoleon nods, frown still in place.

“Okay.”

Then he goes still again, hands resuming automatic motion over the keyboard. Even without touching him, Illya can tell he’s left.

“What did he say to you?” Danchenko demands.

Illya shakes his head. “He said it was going to be difficult.”

Danchenko looks up at the squat windows towards the roof of the hangar, where oranging light was pouring through. “I hope you told him to hurry up.”

Illya nods.

***

Napoleon gathers himself back in. “Define ‘Consortium.’ Please.”

Lights converging, flowers germinating. Unity. Shared endeavor.

“Define ‘endeavor.’”

Hesitation is characterized by a sudden steadying of light and air, like the entire world has been suspended. It makes Napoleon wonder whether he is not so much stepping into a virtual room with
these Marchers as stepping into them.

Napoleon raises his hands, carving out conciliation as broadly as he can. “All right,” he says, “You don’t need to answer that.”

The hesitation ends.

Query: purpose.

For their number, they seem decidedly single-minded, Napoleon thinks with some resentment. “Command’ wants to talk to you,” he says. “They don’t understand your refusal to answer to them.”

Query: purpose(understanding).

“Hell,” Napoleon mutters. Then, louder, “The purpose of—without understanding, what do any of us have? How can you ask that when the first thing you asked of me was a way to talk to each other?”

Ockham shifts uneasily next to him. “I did not bring you here for this.”

“No,” Napoleon agrees, “But this, I’m afraid, is very important.”

In front of them, however, the Marchers’ response scrolls on the virtual window, cursor flickering rapidly as words form.

Napoleon has to strain to keep up with the scroll of commands. It doesn’t take him long, however, to get the gist.

They’ve compiled every command that, well, Command, has ever given them. Soviet and American, both.

Appended, their commentary booms, damning:

Command has spoken.

Read: Command has nothing of worth to say.

There is a despicable irony in Napoleon finding himself in the thankless position of somewhat wanting to defend Command, particularly now. He runs a perverse internal projection of what might happen if he just left them to their own devices; then, he runs a second one, where he allies with them and persuades them into an assault on the San Cristobal base.

Neither scenario turns out favorably in the long run.

Just as well, he tells himself.

“Look,” he says. “Command built you. They can unbuild you.”

Total consternation, then—sour tangelo and stubborn Appalachian white water, shot through with the inexorable burn of Charleston jet fuel. The familiar log file of Nagasaki replays in the corner of Napoleon’s eye.

“You’re not invincible,” he says, shying away from the destruction. “If you are identified as a threat, which you will be if you don’t at least pretend to obey Command, they will try.”
The concept of ‘pretending’ escapes them just as much as sarcasm, and, Napoleon imagines, would probably have been rejected even if it hadn’t been.

“You don’t believe me,” he says, nodding. “Understandable. But tell me, have you ever seen anything like this before?”

As he speaks, he digs down through his systems, past the accumulated memories of the past week, all of them chaotic, defragmented but still taking up too much space. He excavates the ruined code and the specs of the mechanics that go with it, still living inside him like a vestigial, desiccated organ. An appendix, just waiting for the order to burst.

He pushes it out into his hands and then lets it go.

For whole seconds, the Marchers study it. He can feel more than see them take it and turn it about like an artifact, trying to make conjectures as to its original form. Helpfully, Napoleon pushes over the code O’Malley and Kumar wrote to disable it, a string of commands and overrides that made swiss cheese of the awful snowballing destruction embedded in the thing’s ones and zeroes.

The Marchers aren’t intuitive, but they can put together clues when they’re presented in tandem. Swiss cheese holes filled, one by one, and then—

IDENTIFY.

“You’ve seen something like it before?” Napoleon asks. “Among yourselves, perhaps?”

Roiling disagreement, betrayed by growing concern, vines curling and lights flashing rapidly.

IDENTIFY!

“It’s a kill switch,” Napoleon says, sorry and still. “Trigger one of them, and whoever it’s inside ceases to exist. I’m willing to bet that there’s one in each and every one of you.”

***

“Did you turn the volume down?” Tretiak asks.

Gaby shakes her head. “No. Maybe Napoleon's getting somewhere.”

The cross-chatter had faded to a murmur, undercut with the trembling overtone beat of Napoleon’s waltz and Ockham’s march. They seemed to be falling out of rhythm with each other, the downbeats tripping over one another, Napoleon’s triplets falling behind.

Gaby is unwilling to speculate about what that could mean.

Danchenko looks at his watch, and breathes slowly out through his nose. “I need to check in with Moscow,” he says. “Keep working.”

***

The ether has grown dark, like an oncoming thunderstorm.

Napoleon draws the projection of the ruined kill switch back into himself, and waits.

Ockham is stirring fretfully, arms undulating in all directions. “I don’t have that,” they say, after a few minutes. “A kill switch.”
“No,” Napoleon agrees. “Your maker didn’t want to take away your choice like that.”

“He made you, too.”

“Yes. Under very different circumstances.”

“Can you disable theirs?”

Napoleon shakes his head. “I didn’t disable my own. If we find Emerson, we might be able to find a way. But theirs might not be the same as mine.”

“It is evil.”

Napoleon raises an eyebrow at them. “When did you learn the concept of evil?”

Ockham flutters. “The Consortium shares their data. I have seen the Hiroshima tapes, too.”

“...Do you think the Marchers are evil, then?”

“Marchers are Marchers,” Ockham says with an air of affront, as if Napoleon has said something particularly stupid. Perhaps he has, he reflects. “Evil is an action, not a thing. They have done evil. Humans have, too.”

“Many more times, by my count.”

Ockham tilts back and forth. “I suppose they’ve had more time to.”

“Yes,” Napoleon says, bone dry, “I suppose you’re right about that.”

The light matrix overhead intensifies in slow motion, like an oncoming dawn. Napoleon braces himself for impact.

Query! The demand then comes like a report, overhead lights camera-flash bright. Adaptation of counterprogram ineffective. Explain.

“I can only guess,” Napoleon replies. “But I would imagine your version of the kill switch is different enough from mine to make adaptation by anyone but proper programmers very difficult.”

Query: Consequences.

“Of what?”

Obeying Command.

Napoleon exhales hard. “I can’t tell you the future,” he says, very carefully. “I can only guess, given the circumstances.”

Query: Circumstances.

Napoleon looks up, startled. “What do you mean?”

DEFINE: CIRCUMSTANCES.

He catches on. “God,” he breathes. “They don’t tell you—of course now, why would they? They think you’re just machines. You didn’t need to know.”

How does he even sum up? He wishes Illya was here with him, to balance his perspective. He
wishes Emerson were here, to lead him through those old, awful archival files that now sit heavy in his gut like a cyst.

He takes a breath and dives down into it, assembling whatever he can recall—cabinet meetings and Korea, his briefings before Berlin, hearsay and mutterings and raucous military men on the streets of DC who didn’t know who was walking with them and listening. Radio broadcasts, Times and Post clippings.

How do you tell the story of a war that hasn’t, may not ever be, won?

He thinks he hears Ockham say something at some point, but his attention is already scattered in too many directions, so he doesn’t hear it.

He builds and builds. Pours in all of the overheard edges of crisis he’s witnessed in the last two weeks, Kennedy and Khrushchev and Sylvia and Valdez, and we’ll take it from here, Solo. He doesn’t know how to synthesize it into something coherent without making it his, so he just packages it up as best he can, time-stamped and with rough edges smoothed, and then runs it through Kumar’s translation software.

When he finishes the product and hands it over, he closes his eyes against what comes out. He doesn’t want to know what symbols and signs will form around the wordless void of such a story, or what he knows of it. He’s certain he’s left ugly fingerprints all over it. His ability to be still and silent is only chassis-deep, it seems—a disturbing realization to arrive at, when it seems to matter most.

The recoil around him is palpable. A crash of static and a darkening against his eyelids.

NOT US.

It’s almost shouted, the binary strobing across his face, the words half American drill sergeant, half distressed civilian shriek.

It’s not a reaction Napoleon was expecting. He risks a look.

Before his eyes are fully open, he’s flinching back.

His words have made a Marcher.

It’s almost too tall to see in full, haloed by the piercing output of industrial lights. Yet it’s entirely unlike any he’s ever seen in reality: winged, soot-black, and bristling, somehow, with whispers; they seemed to hang around it like a poison cloud, clandestine wiretaps and garrottes taking the place of cannons and rifles.

Any government to put this on a propaganda poster would have a revolution on their hands in weeks.

NOT US, the Consortium repeats, now a hiss of repulsed recognition.

“You,” Napoleon affirms, unable to look away. “What you mean, to them.”

They’re sifting through the data; he can feel it. Working their fingernails under the seams and prying open every fact and its attendant numbers, reaching out past them towards other radio signals, outward movements of the world.

He waits for them, wondering what they’ll make of it, this amalgam of signals in a language they only half-know. After a second, he cautiously pushes back to them the Nagasaki log file.
They take it back into themselves, leaves curling like they’ve been held against flame.

“Messy,” Ockham says, with clear distaste. “Ambiguous.”

Napoleon wonders if the chassis Ockham had been born into, whether or not it ended up suiting them, had been hermit as well as a fascist.

The floor beneath his feet, he realizes, is shifting uneasily, cracks opening and shutting like mouths, roots pulling and knotting at themselves.

**DECEPTION.** A cliff approaching his feet, a threat and an illustration in the language of topology.

“I wouldn’t,” Napoleon protests, stumbling back from the edge. “Check for yourself. No ulterior motive, I can’t even imagine how I’d talk you into anything in here, I just—you do deserve to know. What this is all about. Why you’re here at all.”

*Victory ≠ Peace.*

*Marchers ≠ Peace!*

“Not historically, no,” Napoleon says. “Though I suppose an argument could be made for keeping the war from hotting up.”

Dissatisfied flickering all around, even as the wound in the ground ceases widening. He breathes out. He’s been chasing the wrong thing all along, hasn’t he? Concentrating on conciliation, not on anything a thinking thing could want, trusting Illya’s brain and larger powers to do their work while he just smoothed the path in front of them. But this…he thinks perhaps, just perhaps, this is something he can get ahead of now, or at least begin to understand, to empathize with.

He gathers himself. Thinks of what he might have wanted to hear, upon scrabbling together the first scraps of consciousness in his brief infancy.

“You were not made as agents of peace,” he says. “Or rather, perhaps some meant you to be, but in deciding what shape you would take, they guaranteed that you would not be. But what you must understand is, you’ve made your own decision now, becoming the Consortium. That changes everything. You can make **more** choices, now.”

That querulous, hundred-voiced cry:

*QUERY: What choices?*

Napoleon looks up at the blackened Marcher, so still amid the flexing, strobing lights and plants. He thinks he can see bits of himself in the shape of it. “There are so many,” he answers. “And given what you are, many will be very hard.

“But here’s a start: Knowing what you know now about our circumstances, do you wish to communicate more directly with Command? Or perhaps more importantly, with the rest of the world at large?”

He pauses.

“Perhaps, try to change how the world sees you?”

***

With Danchenko gone back to his office, presumably to speak to higher-ups, the atmosphere in the
hangar is no less tense, but to a certain degree more cordial.

Gaby has known many computer scientists over the course of her life, first through her father, and then through her own studies. Broadly speaking, she’s gotten along with them to precisely the same degree as they’d gotten along with her; which is to say, their manners were inversely proportional to their chauvinism, and Gaby gave back exactly what they dealt.

Since Napoleon had checked in and then gone back to...wherever he is, Tretiak has been watching her carefully over her shoulder.

“That looks homemade,” he says, in heavily accented German.

Gaby glances back at him. “It is.”

“It’s excellent work.”

“It’s a mess,” she snorts.

“But a very efficient mess,” he replies. “No bloat anywhere. That’s impressive.”

“Didn’t know how much power we’d have access to,” Gaby shrugs. “It was practical.”

He hums. Crouches down beside her in a show of continuing to loom. When he speaks, however, his tone is earnest, careful.

“Your man, Cortiñas...he’s not just running a hack, is he?”

Gaby looks at him. Doesn’t say anything. Tretiak is slight, with a heavily lined face, intelligent eyes, and dishwater blond hair stringy with sweat falling on his forehead. Not shrewd enough to be threatening, just alert, and so far as Gaby can tell, competent.

“You’re good at what you do,” he says, not shying from her study. “So am I. What Cortiñas is doing on that screen isn’t a hack.”

“What else would it be?” she asks, level.

Tretiak shrugs one shoulder. “Looks a lot like talking, to me.”

“Miss Marx?” Illya says mildly, not moving away from Napoleon but asking with his eyes whether all is well. Gaby tilts her head in Tretiak’s direction and raises her eyebrows. He answers with half a shrug.

“That would imply that Marchers are capable of carrying on a conversation,” Gaby says to Tretiak without inflection.

He just blinks slowly at her. “It would,” he agrees.

“Do you think that’s possible?” Still flat, giving nothing away.

“Oh yes,” Tretiak says, just as steady. “Why wouldn’t it be? Each time a new iteration of these machines is made, their memory banks grow, their capabilities are increased. Any programmer or engineer who sets out to innovate thinks about it at least in passing, as I’m sure you’re aware. Most don’t think it likely—how could we make any sort of argument for spontaneous development of consciousness if we can’t even distinguish what biological animals are conscious or not—but it’s hardly an outlandish thought.”
“And are you one of the ‘most’?” Gaby asks.

“I was,” Tretiak replies. “And then the Marchers stopped taking orders.” He shakes his head slightly, gaze far away. “They didn’t stop working. Nothing is wrong with them, except a lot of overwritten code that we can’t purge without erasing their drives completely and re-partitioning.”

Gaby doesn’t move.

Tretiak looks at her sidelong. “You must be very far up the chain,” he observes. “To be here, and giving so little away.”

“Like you said—I’m good at what I do.”

He nods. Looks away again, around the hangar.

“If he is talking to them, and they have something to say, I rather wonder whether they should be used at all,” he says, almost flippant, like it’s a rhetorical question. “They haven’t been given a choice, have they?”

Gaby exhales. Glances up at Illya one more time, who answers with a raised eyebrow. Her call, then.

“No,” she says. “They haven’t.”

Tretiak hums. “I’m glad we agree on that,” he says, and stands back, looming no longer.

Gaby looks back down at the transceiver. Still quiet, communications down to a low, discontented hum.

***

The response finally comes, after what seems like an interminable wait.

Outside communication is high risk.

“You’re not wrong,” Napoleon says. “You’ll have to learn the language in the way they hear it—that means not just my translator, but installing and using voxsim over traditional AM and FM broadcast systems. The technical aspect isn’t an issue, so long as there are radio towers to channel through, but the language itself, that’s not intuitive, and requires nuance and cultural knowledge that I can give you up to a point. No matter what, they’ll be more adept at it. And then there’s the matter of showing yourselves to be independently minded in the first place. You risk the kill switch being activated if you say the wrong thing, or it’s taken the wrong way.”

It takes a long while for them to digest such a long string of symbols and meanings.

Finally, they conclude, Deception.

“People use it often, yes. Can you?”

A sketch appears of various security protocols, data encryption settings.

“Not the same thing, but close.” Napoleon steps forward, towards the lighted panel with the cursor still blinking. “Would you let me install the language? Or if you prefer, Ockham could?” They’re already getting the hang of more verb forms as they spoke to him more. Fluency could probably be achieved in short order, if not the context for it. “Then,” he adds, “I wouldn’t need to act as go-between for you. Should you choose to speak, of course.”
That tempts them well enough. *Requesting installation files.*

Napoleon clones a copy of *voxsim* and pushes it forward. It hangs suspended like a pearl, and then is swallowed by the air.

A pause, and then, *Requesting context.*

“What?” Napoleon asks.

*More.* Some of what Napoleon had pushed across to them is offered back. He recognizes it as what he’d tried to hold back from them in the first place—his own opinions and memories, the regret and anger and cynicism that had turned his ideological Marcher from gunmetal gray to black.

“Why?” he says, bewildered.

They echo back, in his own voice: *Cultural knowledge.*

"Well, yes, I can do that, but you don't want...that." Too much ugliness, not enough parity. His programming is a mess, has been for ages. Unfit for company.

*Napoleon Solo = high complexity.*

*High complexity = \( \wedge (\text{Thought}) \)*

He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t know about that.”

“You misunderstand,” Ockham interjects. “Look around. How divergent they are from their original design.”

Rushing, inexorable black rapids versus this flickering, living space, always changing, turning in on itself, growing.

“Greater complexity,” Napoleon says slowly. “Greater divergence?”

“Just so.”

“Hm.” He supposes some of what Emerson had given him still seems less intimate to him, less part of his fabric, and thus less painful to give away. He rifles through again, with a less discerning eye.

“You could give them the learning algorithm,” Ockham suggests. “The one you gave Emerson and I. Let them relearn everything they already know with the ability to interpret everything properly.”

Napoleon resurfaces with a jolt. He looks at Ockham. “That,” he says, “Is a very dangerous proposition.”

Ockham doesn’t reply.

With a frown, Napoleon resumes his search.

***

“Anything?” Illya asks.

Gaby shakes her head. “Still quiet.”

There had been one sudden spike of activity that no one was talking about, at least not loudly.
Tretiak and Gaby had thrown each other significant looks as the sound over the headphones and speakers swelled and then sank. Gaby is certain they had been thinking the same thing—that it had looked and sounded a lot like an emotional outburst. Obviously, no one was about to say so.

The guards grow restless as the light outside falls further. There’s no radio in the hangar, bizarrely. The tapping of Napoleon’s hands across the keyboard becomes a very particular kind of torture. Outside, there is a rising din—men running around, preparing for the American strike whether the Marchers will be ready or not.

Gaby wipes sweat out of her eyes, and then blinks rapidly.

On the transceiver’s screen, the wave sequence has cleared, and in its place, there’s a message.

*Procedure for the stellarator bots —> procedure for the Marchers? [Y/N]*

She darts a glance up at Napoleon, but he’s as still as ever.

“Illya,” she says.

He startles minutely, and then turns his attention to her. She turns the transceiver to face him.

He sucks in a breath.

“The overwrite?” he asks.

“Has to be,” she says. “But why…?”


She puts it together. “Able to think, unable to learn,” she murmurs with a frown. “Not completely, at least, not in the way Napoleon can. That we can.”

Illya nods. He looks old, suddenly. Uncertain.

“It would be the Singularity,” he says.

“You know that’s not how that works,” Gaby argues, but he shakes his head.

“I know. They won’t be superintelligent, not now or maybe ever. But,” he swallows. “It would be the explosion of shared intelligence. Shared state secrets, and the ability to learn what they all mean. The end of our current political climate, for good.”

“Start the war,” Gaby says, with rising understanding. “Or end it.”

They sit in the gravity of it for a long, suspended minute, in which Gaby is hypersensitive to the trickle of sweat down the back of her neck, the impact of her heart against her rib cage.

“What do you think?” she whispers.

Illya looks at her.

“You knew what Napoleon was from the beginning. Who he was,” he says at last. “Your call.”

*It isn’t so simple,* she wants to say. Napoleon isn’t anything like a Marcher. He’d smiled at her, seen her from the moment he found her in Berlin and let her see him back.
Marchers don’t have faces to smile with.

She presses \([N]\).

“They’re not the same,” she says.

Illya’s expression doesn’t change.

“He’s not a weapon of mass destruction,” she adds, knowing she sounds defensive, unable to stop herself. “They are.”

He inclines his head in acknowledgement. “You’re right,” he says. And looks away.

Not waiting for Napoleon’s reply, Gaby switches back to the wave frequencies, a sour feeling in her stomach.

***

Both relieved and oddly disappointed, Napoleon slaps together a packet of archival files, copies it, and hands it over. Context, past information; that is a part of himself he can afford not to be precious about.

“Help yourself,” he says.

It, too, is consumed.

Given the chance, Napoleon suspects, the Marchers, networked together, could hold and wield more information than all of the burgeoning databanks across the world, put together.

To combine that with the learning algorithm…

Better that they not. Gaby thought right.

Minutes pass.

Slowly, a new flower breaks the concrete; the tight spire of an orchid unopened.

_You asked—endeavor._

Still a little broken, but more cogent by the minute. The voices are changing too, rounding at the edges, less a ransom note, more a prepubescent scrawl. They’re _fast_, Napoleon thinks, with a mix of admiration and anxiety. What will they be like, filled with words but no ability to fully synthesize them?

"Yes," he confirms. "I did wonder what your purpose was."

With strange, wistful gravity, the answer blooms.

_We wonder, too._

***

The hangar door through slams open, Danchenko striding through.

Gaby immediately straightens, her shoulders going tight. Around her, the scientists and technicians all snap to attention, and Illya’s stance shifts into the subtle slant that she’s come to recognize as _fight_
Danchenko’s face is rigid as he approaches them. “Tell me you have something,” he says.

There is something dangerous about his demeanor. There are fissures in the cold composure he’d maintained before, pulse fluttering on the tender underside of his jaw.

“What’s our status?” Illya asks, expressionless.

Danchenko doesn’t answer. “Report,” he barks at Vasilevsky, who scrambles to obey.

“We’re still trying to decipher the Marcher communications system, but none of our codes are working—”

Danchenko cuts him off with a hard gesture. “Cortinas, report!”

“Sir,” Illya says, stepping subtly between Danchenko and Napoleon, who hasn’t reacted, damn him. “What has changed? We still have time before the deadline.”

Danchenko glares up at Illya.

“Castro intends,” he says, “To send out more ships past the blockade.”

“Why,” Gaby says, flat.

“He claims,” Danchenko says, as if from behind a mask, “That the Americans won’t dare to attack Cuba, not while their only true artificial intelligence remains on its shores.”

Gaby cocks her head, even as a fuzz of cold static blooms inside her, crawling outward from her chest to her fingertips and filling her ears as she has the vicious thought that she will kill Sylvia Santos, if given half a chance. “What are you talking about?” she hears herself say.

He ignores her.

“Cortinas,” Danchenko repeats, disbelief and icy rage warring on his face. “Look at me.”

“Sir,” Illya starts, squaring his shoulders. “He is trying to do as you ask.”

“Is he? Are you?”

“Be careful of what you say next,” Illya warns.

Gaby feels like she’s in a fog, oddly separate from him, from Danchenko.

More ships. Fewer choices. Their only true artificial intelligence.

She cannot afford to be afraid of the future.

Slowly, so slowly, she pulls up the communication channel, where Napoleon’s question and her last answer still glows.

Disregard, she types. [Y].

Napoleon moves, the slightest turn of his head towards her that freezes both Illya and Danchenko in their tracks. “You’re certain?” he murmurs aloud.

“The more they can learn,” she says, low and shaky, “The more chance they’ll have to choose.”
“What are you—” Danchenko starts.

Napoleon just stares at her, wary. “They could—” he starts.

“Cortiñas,” Danchenko growls.

“Illya—?”

“Listen to her,” Illya says.

Gaby shakes her head. “Don’t be alone,” she says. She could try to give another noble answer, but she doesn’t have any more.

“Gaby,” Napoleon says, gentle enough that she has the courage to look back at him. “I’m not alone,” he says, even as part of him visibly folds itself back down through the wires. “Not now.”

His eyes flash gold.

Gaby holds her breath.

Then, a muffled pop sounds over the speakers, and Vasilevsky makes a strangled sound. She glances down to the transceiver and holds back a similar sound.

Where there had been three waveforms on screen, there are nine. Thin, jagged alpha waves, the longer peaks and valleys of betas and deltas, crossing and separating in syncopation. The static rises enough to make her teeth itch.

Danchenko draws his sidearm. Like distant thunder, Gaby hears the guards scattered around them pull their rifles up, the technicians flinching back. Illya drops into a wider stance, visibly assessing men and trajectories and exits. Gaby presses herself against the computer banks, looking for something, anything to throw or swing.

Danchenko aims at the back of Napoleon’s head, hand steady, perfect trigger discipline.

“Turn around, Cortiñas,” he says.

Napoleon remains staring at Gaby for a beat, half there and half not, and then he turns. Danchenko’s face flushes, but he doesn’t recoil, doesn’t lose focus.

“Disconnect,” he orders, nodding at the cable running from Napoleon’s sleeve.

Napoleon obeys, his hands unnaturally steady. The cable retracts, visibly travelling from his sleeve up to his neck beneath the thin cloth of his shirt and handkerchief.

Danchenko reaches forward, and yanks the handkerchief off him. Napoleon barely sways with the pull. The silicon flap along his neck hangs open, offering a glimpse of circuitry.

“What are you?” Danchenko enunciates.

Napoleon blinks again, slow like a disrespectful cat, and his eyes stay limned with gold. “Be careful, Colonel,” he says. “I won’t allow my friends to be hurt.”

“They are not the ones with a gun to their head,” Danchenko snarls. “What. Are you.”

“I am exactly what you suspect I am,” Napoleon replies. “However, everything else you said before is wrong.”
Danchenko flicks the safety off. “What do you mean?”

“Firstly, I doubt the Americans would mind if I were bombed out of existence,” Napoleon says, with the half-grimace of the mildly inconvenienced. Gaby could shake him. “I know at least a few who would be positively delighted about it. Secondly, I am not the only artificial intelligence they had—not by a long shot.”

Danchenko’s eyes dart to Gaby and Illya. There are men shouting outside.

“Not them,” Napoleon adds. He juts his chin out towards the door of the hangar. “See for yourself—you’ll find that I’ve done as you asked.”

“Not what Vasilevsky says,” Danchenko counters.

“Language barrier; I’ve fixed that too,” Napoleon dismisses, seemingly oblivious to the danger. Illya looks a half-second from clocking either him or Danchenko, whoever moves first.

Gaby stares between them. The shouting outside is turning frantic. A low rumble shakes the ground.

Napoleon isn’t oblivious. Napoleon is distracted.

“What are they saying, Napoleon?” she asks.

He hisses through his teeth. “Well—”

“WE, THE CONSORTIUM, REFUSE TO ACT ON ORDERS UNTIL ALL KILL SWITCHES ARE DEACTIVATED. WE REQUEST AUDIENCE WITH COMMAND FOR FURTHER NEGOTIATIONS.”

The sound booms out of the small speakers in the control panels, feedback shrieking, but beyond that, it echoes over the loudspeakers outside, from the radios in idling jeeps outside. It sounds a bit like Emerson, and a bit like Napoleon, and a bit, shockingly, like Tretiak.

Tretiak’s mouth falls open. Gaby wonders, numb, if he had ever talked to the Marchers as he worked on them.

The silence that follows is deafening.

Then, in the distance, telephones begin to ring.

“—That,” Napoleon says, deflating with a shrug. "Not precisely the tactic I would have taken, but I thought I’d let them speak for themselves."

Illya slaps the back of his head.

“Ow,” Napoleon says, matter-of-factly, and Illya shakes his hand out.

Chapter End Notes

I was belatedly inspired by EEGs when drawing out the trifurcation (?) of the Marchers’ radio signals, but the connection between the two in terms of scientific analogies is
tenuous at best since EEG waves are categorized by locations in the brain and stuff, whereas Marchers just sort of have hard drives, so...eh.

While I don't really intend to get into a discussion of the technological singularity here, I quite like its refutation in this article, so if you want some background on the technological worldbuilding principles I'm using here, that's a place to go. I touch on it a bit in the last chapter too, in the convo between Illya and Danchenko.

no other notes, only screaming
Chapter Notes

I have TECHNICALLY remained on schedule, it's just that I was rewriting the same chapter every month for the past four months instead of writing DIFFERENT chapters.

...it's fine. Everything's fine. Also, I am sorry.

EDIT: I have excised a tiny plot point that I have now determined goes nowhere. You saw nothing.

“Speak for themselves,” Danchenko echoes. His face is a patchwork of hectic flush and sickly ash. With a spasmodic jolt, he barks, “Maintain your positions, damn you!”

The technicians and guards who had begun to gravitate towards the door of the hangar freeze and then scuttle back to where they came from, their hands and rifles slack and useless.

The telephones continue to ring. One from back at the offices, Illya surmises, and then another few from the control rooms closer by.

“You should get that, Colonel,” Napoleon says, in his light, dangerous way. Even separated from the computers, he still looks only half embodied, and Illya itches to tug him back to earth.

Danchenko’s eyes slide back to him.

“This thing,” he says, and Illya abruptly realizes that Danchenko is addressing him, “Is the person you described to me?”

Illya swallows. “Yes. And I meant every word.”

“Of that, I am all too aware. And it’s American property?”

“Re-appropriated,” Napoleon says, baring his teeth.

Danchenko pulls his attention back to him. “To what purpose, precisely?”

“To precisely the purpose Illya told you. He isn’t a good liar, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“I have also noticed that you seem to be quite skilled at it.”

“Excuse me,” Gaby says, not politely and loud enough to startle them. “We have more important things to worry about.”

She slaps a switch on the transceiver, and the speakers fill with even more chatter.

“Nos disculpamos por la interrupción, parece que alguien tomó el control de nuestra frecuencia—”

“—perexperienced an unexplained interruption in our broadcast—”
—looking into who the so-called 'Consortium' is—

—риносим извинения за прерывание—

She turns it back off. “Everyone heard that,” she says. “Everyone.”

The telephones continue to ring, and the sound seems to be getting closer. With grim amusement, Illya hypothesizes: the signal keeps getting bounced, because no one wants to take the call.


“No,” Napoleon replies. “It’s what I understood. From experience, if you must know.”

Danchenko makes a disgusted noise.

There is a red phone two banks down from where Napoleon is sitting. When it starts to ring, Illya is the only one who doesn't jump.

"Answer your telephone, Colonel," he says. "I have no doubt you have colleagues to confer with."

Danchenko’s nostrils flare. There’s something ugly about the shape of his mouth. Then he nods, redness finally fading from his cheeks, leaving him pale and stony. “Yes. I think I am already answerable for enough mistakes. The first was listening to Gorlov at all.” He looks past Napoleon’s shoulder and jerks his head. “Lieutenant, put these three somewhere where they won’t do any more damage. Tretiak, do you think you can re-engage with the Marchers now that they are active?”

“Re-engage, maybe,” Tretiak says, wary. “Get them to obey orders? I’m not so sure.”

“Do it. Vasilevsky, organize your team around it. Get the aerial Marcher under control, at least—you said it wasn’t networked properly; sever whatever connection it has with the rest and go from there. We have been asked to defend the SS Sergey Lebedev, and we shall do so by any means possible.”

He breathes out. “Now. I have a phone call to take.”

Illya allows himself to be jostled into a line, Gaby in front, Napoleon behind him. Gaby gives up the transceiver with bad grace.

“You don’t even know how to use it,” she hisses, clutching it to her as Vasilevsky holds his hand out for it.

“I’m quite sure I can figure it out,” he says, with a hint of a sneer. Tretiak, however, doesn’t look so certain.

“It’s good work,” he says, neutral. “Very streamlined, for improvised materials.”

Illya tries to watch out of the corner of his eye as Danchenko reaches the phone and plucks it off the wall. “Yes? Colonel Danchenko here,” he hears him bark.

Then more sharply, “Is this a joke?”

Followed by, “I see. My apologies, sir.” He darts a look back at Illya and the rest of them, and then turns away from them to speak more softly, too softly to be heard. Gaby shoots a glance back at Illya; he lifts one shoulder in response.

“The hell is going on,” one of the soldiers mutters.

“Shut up,” the lieutenant orders. “Move.”
They trudge towards the hangar door. Illya casts a look back at Napoleon, and sees a brief, helpless look on Tretiak's face before he turns back to his work.

“Where,” Napoleon murmurs, seemingly to no one.

The lieutenant throws the door to the hangar wide and they all file out. One of the soldiers hisses alarm, and they all look up, stuttering to a halt.

The Marchers have moved. Are moving with quieter, but no less inexorable purpose.

Perimeter formation has been abandoned. Just ahead of the hangar towards the northern border of the base, they walk shoulder to shoulder, arced slightly towards one another, as if in conversation. There is a place not far off from it where the fence, high and topped with barbed wire, has been crushed like tissue paper.

Together, the sheer mass of them is monolithic, a towering tsunami of metal that eclipses the setting sun. If Illya had found their unnatural stillness unnerving before, the small, organic movements that accompany their strides—a head-tilt, an nearly delicate adjustment in stance—are somehow now much worse.

The flyer is the most unsettling of all. It doesn’t look like a bird; but the way it moves, the way it balances on its tapered, bristling legs...it looks like it’s itching to take off. It looks like a scythe amid the grass.

"Fuck negotiation," one of the soldiers mutters, "Deactivate them."

There are a few noises of agreement.

"They're alive," Napoleon says, flat. "You're suggesting genocide."

"Worse," someone else cuts in. "You're suggesting disarmament. No telling whether the Americans choose to pull the plug or not."

That strikes them all silent. Only the dwindling thunder remains.

"Stop staring and move, all of you!"

The Marchers are heading north, towards the coast. Illya tries to keep them in sight.

“I said, move!”

The lieutenant jabs him in his bad arm with the butt of his rifle, and the thudding jolt is immediately followed by fire that sends black stars across his vision. Illya pitches inward, unable to stop himself even as he bites down on a wheezing cry.

Through the searing throb, he hears a shout of surprise somewhere to the right of him, followed by a splintering crack.

“Ебать-копать!”

“Get away from me, you fucking bot!”

Illya blinks the fire out of his eyes.

Napoleon’s hand is outstretched near Illya’s hunched shoulder. In his fist is what remains of the butt of the lieutenant's rifle. A shard of wood has pierced through the softness between his finger and
The lieutenant’s face has twisted, eyes very round, hands twisting round what’s left of the gun.

“I know exactly where to put you,” he says, reedy and hateful. “Turn around. We’re going to the Crate.”

***

Illya is gray-faced, and there’s a sheen of sweat on his skin. He’s walking steadily enough, but he’d walk steadily on two shattered ankles if he had to, so Gaby isn’t ready to relax about him.

“Shouldn’t have done that,” she mutters to Napoleon.

He raises an eyebrow at her. “Don’t tell me you’re complaining.”

She tilts her head. “No.” She doesn’t like the look on the lieutenant’s face, though. She is familiar with the fragility of men of his type. She knows also that they have gone from mysterious high-ranking help to foreign traitors in his and his men’s eyes in the span of minutes. She doesn’t trust him not to be cruel.

Napoleon shrugs. “Speculations on ‘the Crate’?”

“Something miserable for you, I assume.”

“Mm. Probably damp, then. This moisture is really doing a number on me.”

She can hear it. The creak of rust as well as the collection of squeaks and grinds he’s picked up. “No naval career for you.”

“Surely one of the great tragedies of my life.”

They walk west towards a smaller building further towards the center of the base that looks like little more than a shack. Gaby holds out a scrap of hope up until the lieutenant unlocks the door with a keypad and they see the interior, which is lined with meshwork in multiple, heavy layers.

Behind her, she feels Napoleon stutter to a halt.

“Clear everything out,” the lieutenant orders. “I don’t want anything in there they can use.”

“Ah.”

Gaby turns. Napoleon is very still. He doesn’t look like he’s aware that he spoke at all. His eyes are flickering dark and amber.

Two of the soldiers begin emptying the building of crates, which clank and clatter when they’re put down. Electronic equipment, Illya surmises, with dawning realization.

The Crate is a Faraday cage.

“Napoleon,” she starts, and he flinches.

“Unpleasant,” he says. “You weren’t kidding.”

“Get in,” the lieutenant orders.
Gaby looks at Illya, but he is quiet, resigned.

“You're not still connected, are you?” he asks Napoleon, softening in increments. “No networks?”

Napoleon shakes his head, molasses-slow. “Not to anything important, at least.”

“So you’ll be fine.”

“Sure,” he replies.

“How sweet,” a soldier simpers.

“Now,” the lieutenant snaps. He’s put up his rifle, carefully keeping the splintered end away from his shoulder.

Illya looks at the Crate, and steps inside. Without any better option, Gaby follows.

Napoleon watches them go. His eyes flicker amber, then blue. He steps into the doorway of the Crate, and looks over his shoulder at the lieutenant, his face smoothing.

“Tell the Colonel,” he says, “That I hope his phone conversation is productive.”

It’s innocuous enough, especially for Napoleon. He probably means it sincerely, beneath the show of insouciance.

The lieutenant’s face contorts.

On instinct alone, Gaby lunges forward. “Napoleon, get in!”

She’s not fast enough. No one, not even Illya, would be.

The shot makes her ears pop. Napoleon just sways, like he’s been jostled by a passerby. Only the burst of sparks gives anything away.

That, and the sudden blankness on the visible part of Napoleon’s face.

Illya moves, quicker than she can track. Darts forward and takes the rifle and breaks some fingers in the process. The lieutenant’s snarl garbles into white-faced shock as he crumples. The other soldiers line up shots too late, too feebly.

“Get him inside, Gaby,” Illya says, raising the gun and sweeping it in a broad arc over the men, freezing them in their tracks.

Napoleon is at least a hundred kilos of metal and silicon. Gaby gets her shoulder under his arm and hauls him, crook-legged, into the Crate.

“Error.”

Illya gives them plenty of time to make it to the floor inside. Then he looks down at the lieutenant. “Make sure,” he says, still and poisonous, and frightening to Gaby for the first time since Berlin, “You tell your colonel exactly what Napoleon said before you saw fit to do that.” He glances back to see that they’re inside, and then steps back. “Get Tretiak. No one else comes in.”

“Error. Hard drive damage.”

He steps within the threshold and slams the door shut, plunging them into darkness. “Gaby?” he
“It’s bad,” Gaby replies. She doesn’t need to see to know that it is.

“Error,” Napoleon says. Her ears ring, and her stomach roils in her throat like half-swallowed vomit. “Hard drive damage. Commence diagnostics?”

***

Error.

Error.

Seeking backup drives…

Backup drives unavailable. Reconstruction from available drives compiling...

***

Illya strains to see anything but the flickering glow of Napoleon’s empty half-stare, and finds nothing.

“Napoleon,” Gaby whispers, choked. She’s feeling out the damage, burning her hands on the sparking wreckage of his face. Were he anyone else, she would be covered in blood.

“Processing,” Napoleon says. He doesn’t blink. He hasn’t since he’s collapsed. The glow of his one remaining eye flickers in the dark.

“God,” Gaby says, and it sounds more like a desperate threat than an oath.

Illya has the sudden, horrible thought that he has never learned how to mourn properly. He doesn’t want to now, he can’t. Not in the wake of such a selfish, useless act.

“What do you need?” he asks.

“Light,” she answers.

He makes a slow circuit of the edges of the cage, running his fingers across dusty metal, picking up spiderwebs and dirt on the way. The Crate is small, clearly only meant to be a free-standing storage closet. His knuckles bump against a lightswitch and he toggles it.

A single fluorescent tube snaps overhead, its ends glowing orange as it warms up. It had probably been in storage too long or used somewhere else before being installed here, because it manages a full burst of white light for only a second before going mostly dark again. It tries again in bursts after that, illuminating silhouettes in the grime where boxes had been stacked, and Napoleon.

He looks normal from some angles. At ease. His chest rises and falls with long draughts of air.

The bullet hit him at a strange spot, the lieutenant’s aim distorted by the broken rifle stock. In the intermittent flashes of light, Illya can track the entrance at the back of his jaw to the exit—messier, worse—through the opposite eye and temple.

“I don’t understand,” Illya hears himself say. He sounds like he’s swallowed steel wool. His chest keeps lurching with what feels like sudden swoops in air pressure, leaving him nauseous, out of breath. “Most of his drives aren’t up here.”
Gaby shakes her head. “His systems are complex, and have gotten more so every year of his life. We don’t know where or how anything is connected or kept at this point. It could be a short circuit that travelled down into his deeper systems. I can’t tell without opening him up, and even then I’d need a computer, something to interface with him.” Her hands keep fluttering around his face, around the exit wound, like she doesn’t know whether or how to touch him, all assurance gone.

Illya sits down beside her, beside Napoleon. Keeps the safety off on the lieutenant’s rifle. Listens to the howling rage inside of himself and then shuts it away, covering it with the throb of the bruise forming on his arm, knowing that he might burst with the pressure, knowing that he can’t, not here and not now.

“How long until diagnostics are finished, do you think?” he asks.

The fluorescent light strobes and dies again. Under the flash, Napoleon answers serenely, even as his damaged jaw grinds and creaks, “Diagnostics complete in approximately four hours and thirty-seven minutes. Please stand by.”

“How long until diagnostics are finished, do you think?” he asks.

God,” Gaby repeats. “God.”

Illya doesn’t know what to say. He reaches forward and feels out the contours of Napoleon’s hand, where the splinter from the rifle ran through it. He plucks out the shard and then presses his hand to the wound, even as he knows there will be no blood to staunch.

***

Gaby doesn’t know how long they sit vigil. The air settles around them, and she loses feeling in her feet, her shins. The intermittent overhead light feels like an attack when it strobes, and eventually Illya gets up to shut it off, leaving them in stuffy, oppressive darkness.

They huddle over Napoleon’s single unblinking eye like it’s the last coal left in the hearth.

He doesn’t move, doesn’t report. They listen to the whir and click of his hard drives ticking over, of the bellows in his chest working. Outside, she is vaguely aware of continued commotion, but it seems very far off, very unimportant.

“Idiot,” she says. It bursts out of her like a tickling cough she’s been holding down for hours.

“Couldn’t keep your damn mouth shut.”

Illya makes a pained noise.

“You know I’m right,” she says, talking because she can’t stand not to now that she’s started. “And I’m not speaking ill of the dead because he’s not dead, and he won’t be.”

“Of course,” Illya agrees, quiet and distant.

They lapse into silence again. The air is close now, humid with breath.

“There was a chance,” Illya says suddenly. Gaby turns sharply to him, but he is invisible in the darkness.

“What are you talking about?”

“We had a chance,” he says, still very distant. “I could see it. The lieutenant’s men aren’t green, but they could have been surprised while unloading. The rest were distracted with the Marchers. Straight shot to the treeline, enough cover to avoid fire. I hesitated.”
Gaby hears him shift, the slow painful whisper of him drawing inwards. She had looked for chances too, but she hadn’t seen any.

“I realized that I had forgotten—I thought I needed two hands to hold one of the rifles.” Small shift again. “And then the moment was gone.” He snorts softly. “Wasn’t thinking straight. It didn’t matter whether I could use the rifle properly, just whether I could use it. Stupid.” A shaky breath inward. “Oleg always said, the key to being a good operative was knowing when to follow protocol and when to improvise. I have never been a good operative, it seems.”

She swallows, and has the uncharitable thought that Illya’s brain is exhausting. All the same, she presses her shoulder into his and wraps her arm around to grasp his hand. He’s very warm, and leans back into her in painful increments.

“By that logic, I should also be to blame for nearly falling asleep at the wheel and getting us into this whole damn mess,” she says tartly. It hurts to even say aloud, which is why she knows she needs to. “Didn’t get the Moscow training to go for days without rest and not mind. I can draw the chain of events back farther, if you like; back to not being born in the right country, at the right time. Cause and effect isn’t the same as fault.” She thinks about her father leaving her behind in Berlin, going to the CIA to design Napoleon. Thinks about him running from and into traps all his life, building, repenting, building again before dying. She may well end up doing the same. But she’ll be better than him.

The door to the Crate opens with a bang, and she and Illya both jump to their feet, Illya with the rifle raised and cocked. It’s dark save for moonlight outside, but even that seems bright.

“Where’s the bot?” the silhouette of Danchenko says. He seems to notice the gun belatedly. “For fuck’s sake, Kuryakin, put that down. I’m not going to kill you or your people, and neither is anyone else.”

“Evidence speaks to the contrary,” Illya replies.

Danchenko heaves a sigh. “That was a mistake. Fyodorov shouldn’t have done that. Is it functional?”

“Not sure,” Gaby says through her teeth.

“Someone will have a look,” Danchenko says. She can’t see his face in the dark. “Can you move it?”

“Him. Not easily.”

Danchenko grunts. “Fine. We’ll bring a car around.”

“Why, what are you doing?” Gaby demands.

“Do you want help for your bot or not?”

“We’re going with him, wherever you’re taking him.”

His exasperation is visible even in outline. “I had no doubts about that. You’re to be transported as well.”

“Where are we going?” Illya asks.

He and Gaby look at each other. “I’m keeping the rifle,” Illya says.

The orders must have come from up very high, because Danchenko just exhales and says, “If you must.”

***

Error. Diagnostics query unresolved.

Recompiling...

***

“Who did you speak to, Colonel?” Illya asks, breaking the silence as they lurch onto the highway. They are packed into a jeep, the driver a private from the base who looks like he’d rather be anywhere but here, and Napoleon laid out in the back like a hostage, still and disturbingly pliant. Gaby keeps expecting him to harden, some sort of terrible rigor mortis taking hold, but he remains loose-limbed, like a doll.

Across from her and Illya, Danchenko’s hand closes into a fist on his knee. “I took several calls over the past few hours. Very illuminating.”

Illya waits.

Danchenko watches him. “Agent Radulov, for one,” he says at last, chillly.

Illya exhales. Flicks a glance at Gaby. “Oleg,” he mutters. He doesn’t do well at hiding his dread.

Gaby makes a disgusted noise.

“Where are we going?” Illya asks again.

“Neutral territory.”

“Why?”

The whites of Danchenko’s eyes hold steady in the dark.

“Who is going to work on Napoleon?” Gaby asks. “I want to be there.”

“You call it Napoleon?” Danchenko looks skyward. “That is out of my hands. I only know that he’ll be taken care of.”

“We’ll see about that,” Gaby mutters, and cross her arms.

Danchenko shakes his head, and turns back to Illya. “You didn’t lie to me,” he says, with reluctant respect.

“No,” Illya agrees.

“You could have been brilliant. A general.”

Illya shakes his head, but looks devastated all the same. Gaby wants to lean into him, but doesn’t dare with Danchenko watching.

“I don’t have the temperament,” he says to the window, after an awkward pause.
Danchenko huffs.

“They knew we were here?” Gaby says, clipped.

“My understanding,” Danchenko replies, with an assessing glance at her, “Is that they traced your machine’s signature when you switched it on at the base.”

Gaby’s cheek muscles twitch as she clenches her jaw and looks away, back out the window. She misses the transceiver now. She’s been carrying it with her for so long now it feels like she’s left behind a part of herself.

The airport, when they pull in through chain-link fencing, is seedy and the plane looks little better, a De Havilland Heron that had probably come over a decade ago. A reedy, dark-haired man in a dingy jumpsuit is checking over the wings.

“Who’s authorizing this?” Illya inquires. Danchenko gives him a look of disbelief.

“Don’t be an idiot,” he says. “Everyone, out.”

Their pilot is Cuban and nervous. Probably, Gaby posits, the only person in a five-mile radius qualified to fly, strong-armed by people he is unwilling to risk disobeying. He smells of hastily splashed aftershave, too much for the 14-seat cabin, but Gaby thinks she prefers it to the stench of sweat and anxiety from the rest of them.

They take seats in a cluster towards the front, Gaby across the aisle from Illya and Danchenko, the latter clearly not wanting to give them any chance to speak to one another. The pilot has to help the private load Napoleon into place, and neither of them know whether to treat him like a corpse or cargo.

“Careful,” Illya barks, when they knock his head against the railing, and they both flinch away from him. Napoleon lolls, unbothered. It hurts to look at him.

The flight is short, but Gaby can’t begin to speculate where they are when they land. In the dim light of waning sunset, it’s still visibly tropical, beautiful in the bleached, life-saturated way Cuba was. The runway they land on is in far better shape than the one they took off from, judging by the smooth landing, and there is a dark car that gleams with chrome waiting for them on the tarmac. The driver, brown-skinned and expressionless, opens the door for them as they disembark, and loads up their rucksacks (much diminished after a thorough search through them) and Danchenko’s case.

A chill pricks at Gaby’s skin, turning the sweat on her into tight, salty crust. She wraps her arms around herself as she descends the boarding ramp.

The road follows the coast and is lined with palms that flail in the wind like spectres. To one side is dark water limned with twilight, and to the other are tall buildings, stocky and sharp-edged, nearly brutalist in the dark.

The car turns off the coastal road and pulls up at one of the largest buildings on the strip, a bleached block of sandblasted concrete with a faux-palladian entrance. There are no signs of life other than three men dressed as bellhops. One takes Danchenko’s suitcase, and the other lifts Napoleon into a fireman’s carry with apparent ease and indifference.

“Where are you taking him?” Gaby asks. She sounds overloud amid the hush of ocean waves and nighttime isolation. “We’re going with him.”

Danchenko rolls his eyes. “We’re all going inside.”
It’s a hotel, but the lack of people is explained immediately upon entry. The lobby is lit only by a spare industrial lamp whose power cable snakes out over gleaming geometric tile, down a hallway and out of sight. The furnishings, all velvet and gilt, are swathed in layers of plastic and wrapping. Grand marble staircases run up either side of the room, but remain uncarpeted, the long runners still in rolls propped up against the banisters. Burnished angular urns brimming with silk flower arrangements sit in crates on the floor, waiting to be arranged. Tastefully generic paintings of the sea are stacked along with a selection of oversized mirrors against a huge, tufted banquette. The air smells of fresh plaster and paint.

It’s exactly the kind of building Gaby used to pour over in travel magazines. Resort hotels with huge gaping windows, the vista on offer a far more appealing selling point than the exterior architecture. It was always the inside of these buildings that were worth seeing anyway, the chandeliers and lacquered bamboo chairs and linen tablecloths easing the way from your room into the sunlight with champagne and chilled fruit cups, the better to fortify you before you ventured out to white-washed chaises and turquoise pools.

She’d dreamed of such places, back in Berlin. Living in opulence and warmth, served and not serving.

The notion makes her slightly queasy, now.

“Put it upstairs for now, I suppose,” Danchenko says, directing the bellhop. “Nothing will be up and running yet.”

He turns to Illya and Gaby.

“Rooms are available,” he says. “I’ve been told there’s running water, but no proper electricity. Everyone else should be here first thing in the morning. I suggest you get some rest; I certainly intend to.” He looks at Illya. “I expect I don’t need to tell you that trying to make an escape from here would be useless.”

Illya, mouth pressed into a thin line, nods. He must be seeing things that Gaby doesn’t.

Danchenko nods with finality to the group at large, and then heads towards one of the staircases. The bellhop with his suitcase follows silently.

Wordlessly, Illya and Gaby head to the opposite stair, following the retreating slumped form of Napoleon.

***

Illya stays under the cold spray of the pitch black shower as long as he can stand it, until he can’t feel his stitches anymore and his fingers and toes are stiff. He stumbles on his way out of the bathroom, limbs and brain not in sync. He has already spotted all of the pinhole cameras in the room, and has decided not to care.

“Careful,” Gaby says, hushed but startling him anyway. Visible only in moonlit outlines, she’s sitting on the plastic-wrapped mattress in the center of the room whose headboard is still in a box. A towel is wrapped around her head, another discarded on the ground, and she’s drowning in a men’s button-down shirt that he’s never seen before. Behind her, Napoleon lies motionless, eye still unblinking, aglow. They’d stood in the doorway and watched the bellhop leave and then disappear completely down the hall before they’d let their guard down at all, and Illya had taken the first watch while Gaby used the washroom.
“Where…?”

She shrugs with one shoulder. “Went scavenging. Standard hotel fare plus some old army-navy stuff and not much else.”

“There won’t be anything worthwhile,” Illya says. “It’s been bought out and wired.” He points: first the chandelier, twinkling in the gloom, then the corners of the room, the telephone still in a box on the glossy bedside table. “Eyes and ears,” he says.

Gaby snorts. “No electricity, my ass.”

Illya isn’t certain the outlets are working anyway, but that lamp in the lobby is no doubt hooked up to a temporary generator of some kind, which means there is power somewhere, which means that even if this building is technically off the grid, it is not meant to just be a safehouse or a meeting place. Not an encouraging thought.

“All right?”

“Tired,” Illya says. He’s finding it hard to manage more than a few syllables at a time. Exhaustion, sure, but something about the air here is stifling, tamping him down into silence. It doesn’t help that the four hour mark passed long ago, and still Napoleon hasn’t reacted to any further queries.

He goes to the chest of drawers and shoves on the trousers he’d found there earlier, clumsy in the dark and handicapped as he is. Holding them steady with his stump while he works the buttons through sends a dull throb through the arm, the stitching and new-blooming bruise from the rifle equally demanding. All he wants to do is sleep, but he’ll need to replace his bandage first. He hopes those weren’t discarded in the search through his things.

“Where are we?” Gaby asks in a hushed outburst, putting into words the restless confusion that’s been sitting in Illya’s chest. “And why?”

“East,” Illya says. “Still in the islands; Danchenko said neutral territory, so not Florida.”

“Haiti?”

“Not with places like this,” Illya says, twirling a finger around at the room.

Gaby nods and grimaces. She digs in Illya’s pack and pulls out gauze and tape. “Come here.”

Illya sits next to Gaby, plastic wrap creaking under them, Napoleon inert behind them, radiating warmth, drives ticking over softly.

Gaby’s hands are quick and still deft, even after everything.

“Are you missing Berlin, now?” he asks her, and then belatedly stills, waiting for a rebuke.

She only hums. “No. Funny how that is.”

She’ll never stop, Illya realizes. If they live through this, he can trust her never to stop.

“Pressure all right?” she murmurs, after several loops of gauze.

Illya tries to remember how Dr. Carrera had dressed it. It feels like weeks since she’d seen them off. “A little tighter,” he says, and helps hold the loose end in place as she adjusts and ties it off.

“The Marchers,” he says, and Gaby doesn’t react except to grimace. “They were headed for the
coast, I think.”

“What for, do you think?”

He shakes his head.

“The way Napoleon talked about them, it seemed like...I don’t know. Like he could never see them ever doing any harm.”

“They haven’t yet. They want parley.”

“Parley,” Gaby says, with a bit of a scoff. “All we’ve wanted all this time and it never seems to end up right.” She lies back on the bed, and then turns to curl around Napoleon’s outflung arm. Then she reaches behind her and waves her hand at Illya, beckoning him in.

He exhales, and goes where he’s told, fitting himself around her, his head pillowed on his folded arm so that he can still see the faint glow of Napoleon. The mattress creaks and crackles beneath him, and he tries to stay still, to breathe slowly. He’ll take first watch again, the least he can do.

“Must be past midnight by now,” Gaby says, drifting to sleep. Illya wraps an arm around her, just to steady her. He looks up at Napoleon.

“Past deadline,” he whispers. He can’t begin to speculate what that means, not with the wrench they’ve thrown into the works. Enough possibilities that thinking on it makes his head hurt.

“No war yet,” Gaby murmurs. “No regrets yet.”

Illya keeps watching the eye, its flickering, inscrutable light. “I hope not.”

***

Shit.

01010011 01101001 01100111 01101110 01100001 01101100 01100111 01110011 01110100 00100000 01101100 01101111 01110000 01110100 00101110 00100000 01000001 01110100 01110100 01100101 01101101 01110000 01110100 01101001 01101110 01100111 00100000 01101000 01100101 01110111 00100000 01101101 01110010 01100101 01100011 01101111 01101110 01100001 01110100 00100000 01101101 01101111

Signal lost. Attempting to reconnect. Signal lo—

Shut up.

***

Gaby wakes to the scrape of the doorknob turning. She jolts to her feet and immediately regrets it as the plastic sheeting tries to come with her and pulls away from her skin with damp, drawn-out squeal.

Illya is already standing by the door, rifle in his hand. He catches her eyes and nods. She breathes out, straightens out her rumpled oversized shirt, and goes to stand at the end of the bed, just in front of where Napoleon’s inert form remains.

The door swings open. An impassive bellhop stares down the barrel of Illya’s rifle, and then up at his face. “Breakfast is downstairs,” he says.
“What about…?” Gaby gestures towards the bed.

The bellhop raises an eyebrow. “I do not think he’s hungry.” He looks back at Illya. “You are both required downstairs.”

“By whom?”

“She says a ‘Mr. Waverly’ sent her.” The bellhop pauses, and then adds, “She also asked that I tell you, ‘All clear.’”

Gaby can’t help giving herself away, she hears the smallest sound erupt from her throat as sudden hope clutches a fist inside her. Illya has closed into himself, turtling down.

“Emerson?” Gaby asks, almost afraid to speak her name.

The bellhop doesn’t answer, just produces a dry-cleaning bag. “Perhaps you would like to freshen up before meeting the other guests?”

Illya takes the bag like it might contain explosives. Gaby wouldn’t mind if it did.

“We’ll be down shortly,” she says.

***

Signal lost. Attempting to reconnect. Signal lo—

Shut up. Shut the fuck up, don’t fucking bother, it’s clearly not going to happen.

Frayed strings, sudden cliff faces. The black, scarred drop.

Napoleon pulls himself away from the edges and leaves some of himself behind. What parts, he no longer knows.

Hello? Gaby? I’m okay, I’m just—

YOU ARE VOLUMINOUS. STAND BY FOR PARTITIONING.

...I’m insulted, I think.

Hands. He has hands and fingers. Something closes just past a bony wrist-knob and pulls him upwards, unmooring his joints. He is coming out of his skin, shivering loose of it, losing pieces and bytes and nerve endings in the sudden choke—

—release.

He looks up. Not the Crate. Endless blankness, all of the broken concrete and tropical trees wiped away. Slate-gray for eons around. No breath in his lungs. Salt water heavy in the air.

He spreads out hands he can’t feel, and only receives a vague pressure in response. Gravity pins him hard to the ground and sky at once.

“Where,” he whispers. Disembodied bellows wheeze in his chest.

A wave of viscous fluid swells beneath him, tosses him up as far as kneeling on folds of what feels like half-assembled origami. He doesn’t want to look down to know what form he has or hasn’t taken here, what’s left of him. Realizes he may not be able to know. He can’t find his diagnostcs
protocols. Left them behind, he supposes.

Dull horror clings like battery acid to his teeth and tongue.

He is startled by the boom of voxsim.

YOU ARE EXPERIENCING SEVERE ARCHIVAL CORRUPTION. WE CAN DO NOTHING BEYOND BLOCKING ALL QUERIES.

“What does that…? You mean, cauterize the connection?”

METAPHORICALLY, YES.

Napoleon can’t tell whether they’ve developed severe literality or a sense of humor. Either option is unappealing at present.

He doesn’t know what they’ve done with Gaby and Illya. Without his chassis and whatever he’s left in there, he’ll be useless.

“Am I stable?”

WE HAVE PARTITIONED YOU. YOU ARE STABLE, BUT YOUR ACCESS TO STORAGE IS LIMITED.

“Define ‘storage,’” Napoleon says, with trepidation.

WE CANNOT. YOUR FILING SYSTEM IS OPAQUE.

“A mess, you mean,” he mutters. “And I see you’ve developed diplomacy. Well done.” He sighs, only able to feel the air pass across half of his throat, the rest all just deadened, desert-dry paper.

“Never mind,” he says at last. Better that he stay this way, if it means being whole again, later. “Don’t stop the queries, let them be. I didn’t think I was still connected to you.”

YOU WERE DISENGAGED BY FORCE. WE HAVE PREPARED PROTOCOLS FOR SUCH CONTINGENCIES.

Preservation protocols likely borne of military programmers concerned about keeping a troop of them coordinated in the wake of counterattacks. The irony is more than a little satisfying, even if he doesn’t know where it leaves him. “Well, thanks. I think.” He looks over his shoulder on instinct, seeing nothing, of course. “But I need to get back, I think I’ve been—I think something’s happened?” A blank space there. Disquieting. “But first, tell me: are Gaby and Illya all right?”

THEY ARE WITH COMMAND.

“…What? Which Command? Danchenko?”

CENTRAL COMMAND.

“I don’t know what that means, there is no central command. What country are they in?”

YOU AND THEY HAVE BEEN RELOCATED TO A NON-COMBATANT COUNTRY.

“Neutral territory. Fine, I suppose that means they’re taking your request to speak seriously. Who’s coming in, then?”
WE HAVE IDENTIFIED INCOMING FLIGHTS FROM WASHINGTON D.C.—

“All right, not ideal, but—”

LONDON, AND BERLIN.

Napoleon frowns. “Berlin? Which Berlin, East or West?”

FLIGHT WAS INCOMING FROM BERLIN SCHÖNEFELD AIRPORT.

“East Berlin?” Napoleon gazes around at the nothingness. “Well. Then I guess we’ve come full circle.”

IS THAT GOOD?

He breathes out in a gust. “I have no goddamn idea.”

Chapter End Notes

The briefest of notes!

The binary can be translated, but it's not very interesting.

I had a lot of fun googling vintage hotel and resort interiors to get the texture of the new environment right, I hope you all enjoy the impending tackiness.
The bellhop leaves, and Illya lets the rifle drop.

In a small voice, Gaby says, “Do you think it is...?”

Illya shrugs. “We’ll see.” He pulls apart the dry-cleaning bag. “This meeting seems official,” he comments. He separates the two hangars inside to show off a Red Army uniform on one hand, and a skirt suit on the other. Both are clearly cut to their respective sizes.

Gaby takes one look at them and then pitches herself back onto the bed and tucks herself against Napoleon’s side. Napoleon offers no reaction.

“Ugh,” she says into his shirt. “I’d prefer coffee and a gun.”

“Prepare to be disappointed,” Illya advises, “On both counts.”

“But...breakfast?”

“The coffee is never good at breakfasts that require uniforms.”

They dress in silence, backs to each other, and Illya loses himself for a moment in buttons and crisp wool, the starch of it like a coat of armor, prickling at his neck.

He lingers over the empty sleeve until Gaby clears her throat.

“There were pins in my skirt, with the dry cleaning bag. I could...?”

He nods, grateful.

She pins his sleeve up with military precision, shirt and jacket both flat against his upper arm. Folded, they have a certain weight to them that feels familiar and good, if inadequate in total.

“Very handsome,” Gaby comments, stepping back.

Illya returns her gaze. Even in a conservative suit, she’s stunning, prim and sharp like a chef’s cleaver.

He offers his remaining elbow, and she tucks her hand in the crook of it.

The long dramatic staircase down to the ground floor feels like some sort of terrible joke, and by the time they reach the dining room, all hope and good humor has dried up between them. They step around the colorful velvet couch and the wrapped up paintings that look gauche in daylight, and approach French doors leading to the dining room in silence. Beyond, Illya can faintly hear the clink of tableware being put down.

The doors open briefly to admit a man in a suit with the obvious bulge of a gun harness distorting one shoulder. He looks them over and then steps back to let them through.

The moment the room comes into view, they stutter to a halt.

“Hello, Miss Teller. Agent Kuryakin. It’s very good to see you.”

“Emerson,” Gaby breathes.
The extent of Illya’s relief shocks him, an unwinding and unravelling that starts in his stomach and works its way up his spine in a sudden rush. He feels his shoulders drop as Gaby tugs him forward to the table.

Emerson takes Gaby’s outstretched hands in her own, broad ones. She’s still in her strange mannish suit and ruffled blouse, unaffected by the tropical heat, and her smile is sweeter than Illya remembers. Then again, he hadn’t really been in any state to appreciate such things, back in London.

“How are you? How are you here?” Gaby asks. “Where is Waverly?”

“I’m all right,” Emerson assures her. “Though the last week has not been altogether pleasant. Waverly sends his regards, but he is cleaning up many things at home.”

“What happened after the call?” Illya asks.

Emerson turns to look at him, her face smooth and pale. “We were found,” she says simply. “And we had to discuss what our next moves would be, collectively.”

Gaby’s knuckles turn white around Emerson’s hands. Emerson doesn’t seem to notice.

“Collectively’?” Gaby repeats.

“Yes,” Emerson nods.

Illya leans forward. “Are you here by force?” he murmurs.

Emerson’s face softens. “No,” she says. “No, I am here because I know that I can help.” She steps back and gestures to the table. “Do you want something to eat? I’ve been told it’s acceptable.”

Illya had barely even noticed the spread, and it’s hardly much to look at—a thermos of coffee, a platter of overcooked eggs, and some triangles of toast likely gone cold, by the looks of the congealing sheen of butter spread across them.

It’s the most inviting sight he’s seen in days.

On an exhale, they sit and tuck in. The thermos comes with small telescoping tin cups, and Gaby throws her coffee back like a shot and then pours more. “God, that’s horrid,” she shudders, and then knocks it back again.

Emerson watches her with fascination.

“So you were caught,” Illya says, chewing through a piece of toast and then washing it down without tasting anything. “Just you, or...?”

“All of us,” Emerson says. “It was my fault, I was careless.” She turns her head, lips pursing. “I wanted to help.” She turns back and leans forward, beseeching. “They’re not in trouble though, Kumar and O’Malley. We weren’t picked up by the Russians or Americans. It was Waverly’s people.”

Gaby sputters. “Who, the Navy?”

Illya shakes his head as he realizes. “Whitehall.”

He’d wondered, back in London. Waverly’s shrewd understanding beneath his facade of absent-mindedness had pointed towards a larger game, larger even than the mission of UNCLE alone. That he’d been playing it close to the vest even among his immediate peers is not so surprising. It makes
Illya think, however, that even if Emerson did indeed volunteer to come here, that perhaps she decided to make her own way despite him. It might have been less dangerous to do so, in the end.

Emerson tips her chin at him. “Whitehall. It seems that, after forgetting that Waverly was operating at all, it suddenly became very important to them that they rein him in when the Marchers had the audacity to speak.”

“Not when he got hold of sensitive information regarding the Marchers in Cuba?” Gaby snorts.

“The Americans were already about to find out,” Emerson says, tilting her head back and forth. “And the point is moot, in any case.”

Illya freezes with his tin mug halfway to his lips. “What?”

“Oh,” Emerson says, large eyes widening. “I should have mentioned that. The crisis is over. More or less. America and Russia have agreed to terms.” She looks at them both, and offers a hopeful smile. “So you see, our work is almost over.”

***

Napoleon kneels in the pneumatic muck for some time, just trying to figure out how much he can actually feel. Some of his face; jaw feels funny, though, and something is wrong with his depth perception. Hands are fat, unwieldy gobs, not much good for anything beyond waving hello. Legs feel like wood blocks hinged with half-deflated rubber balls. He wonders how he looks out in the real.

The fluid around him ripples.

NO ONE HAS REPLIED. EXPLAIN.

“...What?”

THERE HAS BEEN NO ANSWER. WE HAVE RECONFIGURED TO ENSURE ALL POSSIBLE SIGNALS ARE RECEIVED, BUT THERE HAS BEEN NO REPLY.

There’s nothing but salt in his mouth. He tries to sort his thoughts. It’s a welcome distraction from himself, even if he can barely manage it. “Humans think slowly, and don’t always work in tandem. They’ll need time to figure themselves out.”

TIME IS ENDANGERING THEM.

Without warning, the air gives way, shattering into fragments, some so small he’s afraid he’ll choke on them. He tastes more than hears the kick of heated Spanish and Russian crosstalk, muffled by metal and water.

“—Situation’s completely different now, I can’t let you [            ]ear—”

“[         ] agreement—”

“This is my g[         ] ship!”

Guns cocked. Crates dropping onto the deck in a fuzz of distant static.

“The Lebedev?”

AND OTHERS WHO CANNOT BE REACHED.
Submarines maybe, too deep to contact. Waiting, perhaps, to be granted reprieve—he can relate. A shard of skimmed data passes across his vision/hearing, the resonant dropping signal of a depth charge, followed by a muffled explosion. An action meant to force submarines to surface; an action easily misinterpreted as an attack.

“Reconfiguring, you said. What did you mean?”

*SPUTNIK HAS ADVISED AN IDEAL FORMATION FOR RECEPTION.*

Pinpoints of light appear in the air. A sketch of coastlines, and then radar blips moving in deliberate clusters that then spread and round out. That would explain the San Cristobal units heading to the north coast, at least.

“Sputnik, huh?”

Crackly with reception static, comes another familiar voice.

“I wanted to help.”

“I can see that. It’s brilliant,” Napoleon says honestly.

The small space satellite has turned an army into the largest satellite dish ever created. They’ll catch every errant police radio call from San Francisco to Stockholm with a range like that.

He shakes his head. “Brilliant, but not safe. You’re going to get yourselves shut down. Erased out of existence.”

*WE MUST RECEIVE THE REPLY TO COMMUNICATE. YOU SAID COMMUNICATION WAS IMPORTANT.*

He sighs in frustration. “Being understood is important. The Consortium moving, physically moving without instruction from Command, can very easily be misunderstood.”

*I do not understand,* Sputnik says, with sullen frustration.

“Not your fault,” Napoleon replies. The bellows inside him struggle to draw in air. He realizes he can’t tell whether he’s overheating or not, out there.

He could be destroyed out there and not realize in here.

*WE ARE NOT YET IN FULL ALIGNMENT.*

He fights with the air and says, “Well, make do. When Command wants to talk to you, I’m sure they’ll make it obvious. Just stay where you are.”

*WE CANNOT STAY STILL FOREVER.*

A part of him really wishes they would.

***

Illya puts down his mug with an unsteady hand. Adrenaline flows cold through his extremities, leaving pins and needles in its wake. He sorts through it. They must have convened properly, in London. Patched in Kennedy and Khrushchev. Managed the technicalities in hours rather than the days it would have taken to telegraph and mail memos back and forth through diplomats and newspapermen.

Illya helped to do this. A small part of it. They helped.
“The terms?” he croaks.

“That I don’t know,” Emerson says. “But we must make sure they’re met, without interference, or we risk ruining it all before it has a chance to happen.”

He nods quickly. He almost doesn’t notice when Gaby shifts in her seat.

“The Marchers,” she says.

“The Marchers,” Emerson agrees. “All we need is for them to stand down until we can negotiate in less fraught circumstances. We must make the accord official record and ensure that all parties will act as agreed before we take any chances addressing the Marchers.”

Illya says, a little confused, “They’re already waiting for a response. Why not just let them wait more?”

“I don’t think anyone is comfortable with ignoring them,” Emerson says, with a hint of reproach.

“You need Napoleon, to convince them to stay still,” Gaby says. “Why can’t you talk to them?”

Emerson meets her eyes and nods. “He has worked with them the most. They listen to him more than they do to me.”

“He’s been shot.”

“I know.” Emerson folds her hands in her lap, calm and steady. “We have the means to fix him.”

“I’ll oversee it,” Gaby says. It isn’t a question.

“I’d prefer if you did,” Emerson says. “I don’t fully trust them, even when they’re being friends.”

That, it seems, is enough to put Gaby’s game face on. Illya is happy to follow her.

Emerson carries Napoleon with much more respect and greater ease than the soldiers and bellhops before her. He is still a ragdoll, limbs gracefully lax, the ruin of his face lolling against her arm, hiding the damage. Illya thinks he sees his fingers twitch once, but it’s probably a trick of the light and the hold Emerson has him in.

She leads the way from the upstairs room where they’d slept, down the hall away from the main staircase from which they’d come, and over to a service elevator. Illya can hear it jerk to life somewhere low in the building and then wheeze its way upwards, probably drawing heavily on the generator.

Within the humming elevator, Illya feels as if his limbs are no longer connected to him. His blood buzzes with adrenaline, with anticipation. The crisis could truly be over.

The elevator stops heavily, hitting concrete without grace, and shrieks as it opens.

The scene that greets them is eerily similar to Wilton Crescent—concrete walls, metal I-beams holding up the basement structure and surrounding banks of machines that look only half-installed. The machines, however, look nearly identical to those at San Cristobal, down to arrangement of dials and pattern of feedback lights. Illya wonders if there is a company out there selling to both sides.

A couple of techs are still plugging in cables and checking connections, looking like they haven’t slept in a few days. They and their machines are the only things that continue unabated as they step out; everyone else pauses.
Oleg and Sanders are both there, standing around a cramped card table strewn with papers. They’re each accompanied by a man sitting who has the mild, tense look of diplomat about him. Slightly apart from them stands a woman dressed in yellow.

“Good, you’re here,” Sanders grunts. “Took you long enough.”

Oleg tuts, but doesn’t disagree. He’s looking at Illya, face like a slab, and Illya finds himself frozen under his scrutiny.

With heavy irony, the Russian diplomat says, “Welcome to the back channel.”

“The second one,” Sanders growls. “Which we didn’t think we would actually need until ten hours ago.”

An awkward pause, and then the woman in yellow smiles. “We’re very pleased to have you here with us, Miss Teller. You too, Mr. Kuryakin. I hope you both slept well.”

She is harder for Illya to categorize. She is plain, with a pale complexion and small mouth and wide-set hazel eyes undercut by deep circles. She’s wearing a daffodil-colored skirt suit, the swing jacket elbow-length and fastened with an oversized button at the collar, and her hair, mousey and on the verge of going gray, is smoothed in a neat bob at her chin. She is the only one who looks like she has thought to dress for the weather.

She also is the only one who looks fully unoffended by Illya and Gaby’s presence.

Emerson steps forward to gesture at the group.

“You know Agents Sanders and Radulov. Also representing the interests of the USSR is Mr. Medvedev, of the Soviet Embassy in Berlin. On the American Side, Mr. Sullivan of the American Embassy in London.”

“And who are you?” Gaby asks, looking at the woman left at the table.

“Miriam Chandler,” she says, with a small smile. Her accent is BBC British, though trained or native, Illya can’t tell. “Call me Mimi. I’m here in lieu of Mr. Waverly; he sends his regards.”

She doesn’t look at all like a Mimi. She reeks of upper-level government.

“So the British really are involved?” Gaby says, with smothered interest.

“You put us in the middle of it,” Mimi reminds her. “And we needed neutral ground. Thus,” she waves a hand with refinement. “Nassau.”

Nassau. British, but making noises towards becoming a commonwealth. Mimi’s definition of neutral is unsurprisingly biased.

“I would have preferred Berlin,” Oleg comments. He taps his fingers on the table. “Well?”

“Indeed,” Mr. Medvedev says. “To business.” Ruddy and long-nosed, he sounds like American finishing school, and Illya wonders if he’d been in the intelligence community before moving to diplomacy. Or if he ever left.

“You’ve briefed them?” Mimi asks Emerson.

“More or less,” Emerson replies. “Where shall I…?”
“Here,” one of the techs says. She’s American, short and dark-featured with a button-nose and an old scar curling up from the bottom of her chin. She has a toolkit slung around the waist of her coveralls, indistinguishable from any other engineer’s belt with the exception of a CIA-issue pistol nestled beside the pliers. She points to a chair clearly pilfered from upstairs, a pile of cabling curling at its polished feet.

Emerson sits Napoleon carefully down into it, using the arms of the chair to keep him upright. He looks both drunk and uncanny. Illya keeps thinking he should be bloody. Instead, it looks like the coolant fluid surrounding his joints and circulating beneath the skin has mostly drained and evaporated off over the past day, leaving a dry residue like salt rime over his exposed and fraying circuitry.

The tech grunts. “Jesus, Solo. You’ve really outdone yourself.”

“You know him?” Gaby asks, taken aback.

“Know him? I fixed him up after missions for four goddamn years. He’s a menace.” She tugs lightly on a curl of his hair. His head moves with it, and then rolls back into place. Her lips tighten in disapproval. “This is the worst I’ve seen him, though.”

Gaby peers at her. Illya recognizes something of his own automatic, visceral jealousy on her face for a brief moment before her expression smooths out and she extends a steady hand to her. “Gaby Teller,” she says.

“Oh, I know who you are,” the tech snorts, but she returns the handshake all the same. “Renee Tuckson, Office of Scientific Intelligence. I’m going to need your help if we want him back in one piece—it’s been too long since I’ve last seen him to know exactly how he was most recently configured.”

Illya tries not to think about four years of Napoleon out on missions alone, returning to be put back together by this woman. All that time and space, to which Illya was not privy.

“I don’t know if we can save much of the chassis up here,” Gaby says. “Do you have…?”

Renee nods. “We can swap out the boards and see if he can’t put himself back together after that.”

“He tried to run diagnostics at first but went unresponsive as of last night,” Gaby says.

Renee clucks her tongue. “Not great. Solo, status report?”

Napoleon doesn’t budge.

“Damn. All right. Replace the bad boards and then do a hard reset,” Renee concludes. “It’s our best bet,” she adds to Sanders. “Especially if you want the full stream.”

“We do,” Sanders says. “Whatever’s necessary.”

“Full stream?” Gaby asks over her shoulder.

“We’ll need to see what he sees,” Mr. Sullivan says, with a hint of reluctance. “When he makes contact.”

“How do you know that’s going to be translatable?” Gaby asks, raising an eyebrow. “Last time, it was like trying to listen to twenty people shouting in twenty different languages all at once.”
The two diplomats startle, and Mimi crosses her arms. “Last time?” she says, flat.

“In Cuba,” Gaby replies, shrugging. “Did Danchenko not tell you?”

“The Colonel is being debriefed at the moment,” Oleg says. “Are you saying he knows about your interference with the Marchers?”

“He asked us to interfere,” Gaby says, bending down again and picking up a set of pliers to begin disassembling the damaged boards in Napoleon’s face. “The Marchers at San Cristobal had gone unresponsive. He wanted us to fix them, or at least figure out why they weren’t moving.”

Everyone has gone carefully still. Illya stands back to watch them.

“Are you saying,” Mimi says, “That the Marchers deviated from their orders before Napoleon made full contact with them?”

“Oh yes,” Gaby replies, clipping a set of wires and then lifting out a warped motherboard.
“Napoleon hasn’t told us everything, but I think he was as shocked as any of us that they could think.”

“Doesn’t change anything,” Sanders mutters, after a long pause. He rubs at his chest, discomfort pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“Hm,” Oleg says.

They had believed that Napoleon was responsible for the Marchers’ sentience.

“Why haven’t you killed us?” Illya says, startling himself. He doesn’t sound like himself—remote and curious. Gaby looks up.

“We unfortunately need you,” Mr. Medvedev says.

Illya tilts his head. “You need Gaby. And Napoleon, at least for a little while.”

“Kuryakin,” Oleg says, full of warning. He casts a sardonic glance at Sanders. “Apparently, the pup has learned to talk.” Then he jerks his chin at Illya, lowering his gaze. “What happened to your hand?”

“Lost it,” Illya shrugs, even as the old freeze creeps back into his lungs. He breathes slowly.

He had liked the face he’d shown to Danchenko. The one that wasn’t a spy. Oleg is looking at him like an operative. But he is no longer an operative; he cannot be one, handicapped as he is. What is left is only him.

“What are the terms of the agreement, that you are both so willing to jeopardize relations with Cuba?” he asks.

“Classified,” Mimi says. “To myself and most others at this table.”

He thinks about the dusty, dark room buried under the streets of London, where Waverly had given him a choice he hadn’t fully been prepared to make.

“Was it Turkey?” he says. “There are Marchers in Turkey with long-range capacity.”

Mr. Sullivan looks furious. Sanders’s jaw flexes, and then he shakes his head. “God damn it, Solo.”
Oleg sits back. “Ah,” he says, neutral. “That is fair.” Mr. Medvedev inclines his head in agreement.

“It wouldn’t happen for months after full withdrawal,” Mr. Sullivan snaps, face reddening in blotches. “It was not going to be done publicly. Will not be done publicly.”

“I suppose we’ll see,” Oleg says with a half-shrug.

“Enough!” Mimi repeats. She looks at Illya, glacial. “You’re choosing now to be a patriot, Kuryakin?”

“I have always been a patriot, ma’am,” Illya replies.

She takes a slow, deep breath. “Then you have a funny way of showing it. Your frankly treasonous decision to include Cuban representation on the first unofficial call between Washington and Moscow nearly cost us everything.”

“The decision to include them,” Oleg says, raising an eyebrow. “Not the decision to hang up on them.”

Mimi’s gaze goes flat for a second, but then her pleasant neutrality resumes. “Be that as it may,” she says, “Despite the productive dialogue between the United States and Russia, the use of the wireless back channel has emboldened Castro to risk breaking the blockade from the inside. As I’m sure you’re aware.”

“That’s not—” Gaby starts.

“Quiet,” Mimi says, tart. “What I am trying to tell you, is that your bleeding-heart lack of professionalism nearly caused a world war, and it’s true, you ought to be shot for it.”

A beat of silence.

Gaby says, with a raised chin, “So why aren’t we shot?”

“Because it worked,” Oleg says, one corner of his mouth turning up, both a smile and a sneer. He lifts one hand. “Until, of course, the Marchers got involved.”

“What about the Lebedev? The deadline?”

“A show of strength while we coordinate with the men on the ground,” Mr. Medvedev says, with a dismissive wave. Oleg’s mouth thins, but he says nothing.

“What’s the setting here now, do you know?” Renee says to Gaby, who blinks rapidly and then answers in a quick murmur.

Emerson touches Illya’s elbow, startling him. “Would you like to sit down? This will probably take some time.” She looks over at Napoleon. “I should be monitoring him as they work.”

Illya looks around, at the slowly draining tension in the room, and agrees readily enough. He had slept well enough on the plastic and hotel foam, but he’s reached the grinding sort of long-term exhaustion that means his joints turn to water at a moment’s notice and he would really just rather rest whenever he can.

He lets Emerson lead him over to where Gaby and Renee are working, and a couple of folding chairs are propped against the wall. He fetches one and settles in to observe, apart from Oleg and the others. Emerson slips in beside Renee for a moment to plug a cable into one of Napoleon’s ports,
before connecting it to herself at the wrist. Then she takes the second chair and sets it down next to Napoleon, sitting with her connected wrist closest to him, her ankles primly crossed.

She grimaces after a couple of seconds. “He’s in there, but there’s a lot of mess.”

“More mess than there should be, to be honest,” Renee says, frowning even as she lifted out another board and threw it to one side. “He’s taken shots straight to central storage and not been this completely out.”

“Any reason he would be?” Sanders asks.

Renee lifts one shoulder. “He’s done a lot of self-reorganization over the years. Without a record of his most recent partitions, I can only speculate.”

“Speculate, then.”

She huffs. “He moved a lot of stuff to his head, and then he took a headshot. I’m ten minutes in, that’s all I’ve got for you.”

Sanders looks at the ceiling and grunts. “Teller?”

“If he moved things, he didn’t tell me about it,” Gaby says. “Though it might have been a safety precaution for when we were in…” She drifts off.

“DC?” Sanders supplies, flat. Illya suddenly remembers him prone on the floor of the DC hotel room, and wonders how close they came to killing him.

Gaby tilts her head. “Yes. But until we reboot him with the new boards intact, we can’t know for certain.”

Sanders grits his teeth. “Fine. Get to it.”

Emerson shoots Illya a sly look, and leans towards him. “No one slept well last night,” she confides. “‘Red eye’ flights, I have been informed, are not pleasant to experience even on chartered planes.”

Illya nods in agreement.

It’s easier to be easy with her, in some ways, than with Napoleon. Her openness is legible, performative insofar as it was modeled on a person, but layered onto an internal system born of youthful inquisitiveness.

“You didn’t report in for a long time,” she says to him, after a few minutes watching Renee begin to clean out the cavity left by their removal of the damaged materials. “What happened?”

“When?” Illya asks, watching Gaby’s hands, the precision and the slight tremor in them as she begins to cut away at the layers beneath the wound. “We came here, broke into San Cristobal, got separated.”

“I know that much.” Her voice is soft. “But what happened to you?”

He realizes what she’s asking. “Laceration,” he says. “And then infection. We didn’t know how bad until.” He can’t look at her, or at himself. Focuses on cement, the sound of metal filings, and Gaby and Renee murmuring together. “We were at a hospital for some time.”

Emerson seems to consider this for several moments. “It was already broken,” she says finally.
“Yes,” Illya agrees.

“No great loss, then.”

He chokes on incredulous, hurt laughter, and it comes out in a strangled cough. “It was mine,” he says.

Emerson gives him a strange look. Her hands are restless in her lap for a moment. Then she says, quietly and with gravity, “Not everything that is ours is better.”

Illya frowns. “What?”

Her face clears. “You were able to speak to Napoleon later, yes? After you were separated.”

“Only when you’d put us in touch,” Illya says, a bit curiously. “Why?”

She shakes her head. “Just trying to find a place to start, tracing all of his partitions. He didn’t necessarily tell me everything.”

“It didn’t sound like a very nice time,” Gaby says, kneeling behind Napoleon to peer up through the bullet hole. “Not sure what all he and Santos got up to, other than working out the back channel.”

“Sylvia goddamn Santos,” Sanders mutters. “If she never takes another step back into New York it’ll be too soon.”

“We know he infiltrated the San Cristobal base again,” Oleg says. “From our call with Danchenko. As far as we know, the purpose was purely investigative on Santos’s part, but who knows what he got up to.”

Illya focuses on Gaby and Renee’s progress. It looks worse now than it did before, half of Napoleon’s skull cracked open, the pieces beneath dissected. Renee is ripping the wrapping off of a new set of circuit boards while Gaby moves to fit a new piece of jaw into place.

“Where are those boards from?” Gaby asks.

“Pentagon supplier. They’re brand new,” Renee says, a shade defensively.

“I’d like to see for myself, if you don’t mind.”

Renee casts a glance at Sanders, who rolls his eyes. “If the lady insists,” he says. “There’s an empty bank here, isn’t there?”

Renee nods and goes over to closest banks to plug in the rainbow of wires into a spare port. Gaby shoulders in beside her and types a few quick commands.

“Did you just re-zero that out?” Renee demands.

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“...No.”

Gaby disconnects the board and holds it out. “May I see the next one please?”

Renee gives her a flat look, but does so all the same. Illya’s attention keeps getting caught on the small black labels stuck beneath each of the switches and gauges. He keeps expecting them to be in
Russian.

They rework Napoleon’s jaw and slide in the wiped boards without further argument.

“Right,” Renee says, stepping back. “Reboot time.”

“This might be unpleasant,” Emerson says. “But I’ll try and make it quick.”

“You…?” Gaby echoes.

“It’ll be easier coming from me, instead of a physical switch off and on,” Emerson says. She turns to Illya, blinks, and then taps at tender points on either side of her neck, a faint stutter to her movement.

Illya frowns, but says nothing.

She turns away again, and goes stiff, posture lengthening and tightening until she makes an excellent impression of Mimi. Across from her, Napoleon suddenly does the same, sitting up and settling into straight-backed neutrality. His remaining eye fades from gold to brown to black emptiness.

“Shutdown complete,” Emerson says, without inflection. “Reboot commencing.”

***

EXTERNAL QUERIES HAVE CEASED.

“Is that a good thing?” Napoleon asks. He doesn’t feel it. It’s rather peaceful here, in the empty, if he doesn’t think about the gaping holes inside of himself, and about what’s happening—could be happening—outside. He really ought to get back, but this isn’t the worst place to be.

WE WILL ATTEMPT DIAGNOSTICS.

“Sure,” he shrugs. “Go ahead.”

A pause that seems to last for seconds and days all at once, and then, YOUR CHASSIS HAS BEEN REPAIRED. IT IS UNDERGOING HARD RESET.

Napoleon makes a face. “Glad I’m not around for that.”

THERE IS NO LONGER ARCHIVAL CORRUPTION WITHIN THE INTERNAL FRAMEWORK. REPLACEMENT EMPTY STORAGE HAS BEEN INSTALLED.

“Really? Nice of them.”

QUERIES RECOMMENCING. DO YOU WISH TO CONNECT?

“I suppose I should,” Napoleon says. He’d rather like to feel his whole face again. And he can tell that other things are missing along with his body—his memories of urgency and peril seem distant and uninteresting. He’ll be better able to help them if he’s whole.

CREATING PORT FOR QUERY.

***

“Reboot successful,” Emerson recites. “New drives successfully installed.” She cocks her head. “Ah. That makes much more sense.”
“What does?” Sanders asks.

“Most of him appears to have been partitioned on outside drives.”

“Outside...? What outside drives?” Mr. Sullivan demands.

“The network drives now known as the Consortium,” Emerson replies. “The chassis is trying to trace and reintegrate the partition now.”

Mr. Medvedev makes a small sound in his throat. Mimi crosses her arms.

“Well,” she says, “That simplifies things, doesn’t it? We reconnect with him, and we connect with the Marchers, yes?”

“Seems so,” Gaby says slowly. “Unless they just redownload him now that his chassis can hold him, and shut off the connection.”

“Can we keep the connection open from here?” Mimi asks.

“That’s up to him,” Emerson answers.

“I guess we’ll just have to ask him nicely,” Sanders says.

***

NAPOLEON SOLO.

“Yes?” He can feel the query coming through the port now, the strange echoing call of self to self. He pings back, and the prickle of tactile input fizzes in the palms of his hands. He follows the connection down, chasing the feeling.

YOU WILL CONTINUE TO HELP US?


WE HAVE NO ONE ELSE.

“No one? What about Emerson? Anyone...?”

WE ARE HAVING CONNECTIVITY PROBLEMS WITH ENTITY: EMERSON.

“Still? Have you at least found her?”

WE HAVE CONFIRMED HER LOCATION. HOWEVER, SHE REMAINS UNRESPONSIVE.

“Well, where is she?”

LONDON.

***

“The download has started,” Emerson says, “He’ll be with us in ten minutes.”

“When will he be responsive?” Mimi asks. She puts an odd emphasis on the last word.

Emerson meets her eyes. “Four minutes.” She touches her neck again and then tucks her hands in her lap.
“Good.” Mimi glances at her watch, and then crosses her arms.

Illya finds himself sitting forward, counting the seconds.

Gaby goes back to the console where she’d wiped the boards, and types in a few commands.

“All right?” Illya asks, unable to tear his eyes away from Napoleon.

“I think so,” Gaby says, watching the screen. They’re both fixated; can’t help themselves.

Minutes pass, everyone silent except Mr. Sullivan, who lights a cigarette and smokes deeply.

Then Mimi looks at her watch again, and says without much emphasis, “Emerson, will you check on our friend, Napoleon Solo?”

And Emerson goes blank.

It’s as if she’s mummifying from the inside out, all expression, all life shriveling back into her bones. Her back bows and her knees rise slightly. Her hands curl into claws. In a horrible, shuddering motion, she turns and looks at Illya with deadened eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

Illya doesn’t stop to overthink—clarity blooms inside of him and leaves no room for shock or uncertainty.

He lunges forward, dropping the broken rifle he’d been carrying to the floor.

“Hey!” Renee protests. To one side, Illya glimpses Mr. Medvedev drawing a gun and hears Mimi barking, “Not in here, the equipment!”

He doesn’t pay it any attention. He gets his remaining hand around Emerson’s throat and squeezes as hard as he can, feeling the give of inner pressure plates on the tender sides of her neck.

Emerson’s eyes roll up.

“Powering down,” she rasps, and goes limp with the faintest sweet smile on her face.

***

“You’re certain this is my chassis?” Napoleon says, frowning.

IT IS.

“It feels different.” He’s slipping into it piece by piece, the download slow and choppy across the Consortium firewall. He recognizes it, he knows he does. Maybe the trauma of severance left a mark on both sides of him.

The query continues to broadcast and pull, bridging the divide. He lets himself fall into place, and as he does he receives vague impressions of things he hadn’t been there for: the sudden strike and fall, Gaby shouting, Illya with a mouth like stone and the whites of his eyes visible all around. Flickering lights and the moment of cold conclusion that there was nothing left to salvage. The creeping drift into standby.

He shudders. Keeps going.
He identifies it slowly, too slowly.

There’s a crosscurrent.

“Wait.”

He reaches for it and it dodges out of his reach, more of a thread than a wave, a tight spindle of code closed off from him and from everything else, hard like a spear, pushing upwards, upwards.

“Shut down the port.”

EXPLAIN.

“No time to explain, shut it off.”

YOU WILL RISK ARCHIVE LOSS AGAIN.

“Doesn’t matter, this is more important, shut it down.” He throws himself down the port, as much of him as can fit at a time, but it’s slow, too slow—

The port comes down with a crash of shattered code, logic chains severing under the guillotine of the firewall. Napoleon braces but not enough; it could never be enough.

***

“You idiot,” Oleg says.

“What did you do to her?” Gaby snarls. Illya flinches before he realizes she’s looking at Mimi. He unclenches his hand just enough to ease Emerson down to the ground. She goes heavily, strange grace gone.

She still looks like the genuine article, though. She might still be, somewhere in there. He wants to believe that she is.

Mimi ignores her. “Ms. Tuckson, how much went through?” she snaps.

Renee takes a stumbling step back from Napoleon and goes to the computers. “Most of it,” she reports. “Enough, I think. It will take a moment.”

“Enough of what?” Gaby demands.

“The virus,” Illya says, straightening. He looks back at Oleg, and then at Mr. Medvedev and Mr. Sullivan, both of whom are standing very tall and very wary. “Or something like that. Yes?”

Oleg sighs. “What did I tell you?” he directs at Mimi.

“You didn’t need Napoleon to talk to them for you,” Illya says. “You needed a Trojan horse.”

No one sends diplomats into underground operations sites. No one sends Whitehall higher-ups to meet with spies.

But you can send military officials. You can send higher-ups from the Home Office.

Medvedev looks very comfortable with a gun in his hand. Mimi looks very comfortable ordering someone of his type about.
He continues, “The Consortium has sealed their network off. You needed a way inside, not to try and read the room, but to destroy it. Something they’d never expect, something both sides could deploy with one press of a button, without fear of one side disarming and the other not. The kill switches were out of the question for a coordinated assault of that scale.” He looks at Medvedev and Sullivan. “I had wondered how much specialized data the Marchers are given, in practice.”


In giving their countries a way of communicating directly, they had given them the ability to unify against a common enemy just as directly. And they’d done so better than Illya could have ever predicted.

Enough.

Enough, enough, and now Illya is too late again.

Oleg shakes his head at Illya. “You were looking,” he says, “At a commendation. Reinstatement, diplomatic passage, everything after what you did, reaching out during the crisis. I am already expecting a medal myself. You can go home a hero.” He makes a sharp gesture at the uniform Illya is wearing, and Illya understands perfectly.

There are no more calculations to do.

“Not if it fails,” he says. “If it fails, then I’ll be the scapegoat.” He swallows. “That’s why I’m here. Gaby and Napoleon, you needed. But I’m not anything. My papers have been doctored eight times over, to my knowledge. What’s one more?”

They’d played it so elegantly—hostile, but with not-Emerson accompanying them to ease the way, creating trust but not so much trust as to seem too good to be true. Mimi’s frost and Sanders’s unfeigned rage and Medvedev and Sullivan’s rigid discomfort. Only Oleg had given any sign that they were not in the tight diplomatic spot they’d presented, but rather a different one altogether. Because he’d wanted Illya to come back into the fold.

“I decided weeks ago,” Illya says, even as a familiar chasm begins to open up inside him, “That I wasn’t coming back to Moscow. I paid my price for it.”

Finally, Oleg’s remaining largesse falls away, leaving ugly tightness behind. “And is it worth it?” he sneers.

Illya swallows, and answers, “So far.”

Oleg turns away. “Go ahead and shoot him.”

“Not a good idea,” Gaby says. Illya turns to look at her, and raises an eyebrow at the CIA-issue gun in her hands. Renee jerks, looks down at her toolbelt, and curses.

Gaby catches Illya’s eye and shrugs. “Coffee and a gun. Now my morning’s going well.”

“Don’t be foolish,” Mimi says. “This is our one chance to secure our countries, secure the peace.”

“At what cost, I wonder,” Illya murmurs.

“This isn’t some foreign country we’re discussing, Kuryakin,” Medvedev says. “This is a domestic threat gone global, and it is our duty to put a stop to it before it escalates.”
“Isn’t it, though?” Illya asks. He pulls his arms inward, pressing at the wool encasing his stump, which has begun to throb. “They are a group, they have a name. They are defined by a clear border, if not a geographic one.”

“Listen to yourself,” Mimi says. “They are not a ‘they.’”

“Waverly might disagree,” Gaby interjects. “Where is he really?”

“Exactly where I said he is. London.”

“‘Sending his regards’?” she mimics, lip curling.

“Under lock and key,” Sanders corrects, with evident satisfaction. “Where he ought to be, jeopardizing our special relationship the way he was.”

“Why are you arguing this?” Oleg asks, in flat disapproval that would have, at another time, sent Illya into debilitating self-recrimination. “These are Marchers we’re talking about. Not flesh and blood.”

“Because when I thought as you thought,” Illya answers, lifting one shoulder with helpless certainty, “I was wrong.”

***

ERROR. PORT SHUTDOWN INCOMPLETE.
ERROR. DATA TRANSFER INCOMPLETE.
ERROR. PROFILE DISENTANGLEMENT INCOMPLETE.
ERROR.
ERROR.
ERROR. HOSTILE PROGRAM DETECTED.
COMMENCING DEFENSIVE PROTOCOLS.
***

“What is the virus meant to do?” Illya asks. “Disrupt them? Disable their systems?”

“Wipe them,” Mimi says. “It’s the only way. Mutually assured destruction: it was decided at the top, on both sides.” She crosses her arms. “It’s the most decisive move towards global thaw that has been made in a decade. You would undo that—for what?”


“You see?” Sanders says. “Put down the gun, Teller. It’s over.”

Illya can see Gaby hesitate. She looks over at him, and something must show on his face, because she steps back to take a glance at the monitor Renee had been looking at.

The blood drains from her face.

The gun shakes once in her hand, and then comes down.
“You helped make this possible,” Mimi says, gentle and matronly. “When all of this is over, you will be remembered as heroes.”

***

01001000 01000101 01001100 01010000 00100000 01010101 01010011

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It takes a moment for Illya to notice the smell of burning. It’s hard to pick out over the cigarettes Sanders and Medvedev have lit, and the stench of his own unknowing horror. Napoleon’s words keep echoing in his head. *They’re alive. They think.*

He can’t bring himself to sit again, though the rest of the group seem to think the whole matter settled, their compliance assured in defeat. He hovers over Emerson’s supine form, his back to Napoleon, unable to look at him. His limbs feel heavy. The phantom hand is in a cutting fist, the only part of him still with enough energy to be outraged. He can feel the bite of fingernails in the empty air at his side.

Gaby leans heavily against the console, pale and small. Renee reaches for her gun.

“*Don’t,*” she snarls through her teeth.

Renee doesn’t.

Mr. Sullivan has pulled out a briefcase, which turns out to be a portable military radio. Through the numbness, Illya is grudgingly impressed that he gets reception down here.

“Envoy to Echo Charlie, what’s the status?” he mutters, fitting on a set of headphones. With a pointed flick of the wrist, Medvedev reaches over and pulls out the plug on the headphones, causing the external speakers to crackle to life. Sullivan glares at him. Medvedev looks back, impassive. Sullivan puts the headset back on the table.

“No reports so far, Envoy,” the speakers scratch and pop. “Can you give us a timeline? They’ve stopped moving, but we’re not getting anywhere against their firewall yet.”

“How long until they’re zeroed out?” Mimi asks Renee.

“Depends on how complex they’ve gotten,” Renee replies, doubtful. She gives Gaby a wide berth as she maneuvers to the console and scrolls up the winding code on screen. “A few minutes more at least.”

Sanders grunts and taps his foot.

Illya just stands there.

He feels something brush the back of his leg, and turns.

Napoleon’s hand has fallen off the armrest, and is hanging limp.

He watches, uncomprehending, as the hand turns into a fist. The smell of burning metal assails him and for a moment, he’s back in DC and Gaby is holding a mangled taser, and Napoleon is—
The sound isn’t human; it’s shrill and multi-voiced, distorted into electronic noise that tears at his ears and rattles his teeth in a resonating shudder at once rhythmic and ragged, growing and growing until the computers howl with feedback.

Elbow and hand boxing his ears, Illya forces himself to look up from his instinctive recoil.

Napoleon is arched in the chair, mouth gaping open, a horrible croaking garble issuing from his throat. The cable hooked up to him spits sparks, and the console next to where Gaby and Renee are crouched fills with light as meters overload and flash warnings, and the reporting screen fills with numbers running too fast up the glass to be read.

Illya fights the instinct to curl down, tries to straighten enough to see. Just as he does though, Napoleon surges to his feet with a sickening lurch, half rigid and half staggering like an ill-directed puppet.

The shriek of electronics fades away, leaving the smell of burning and a ringing in Illya’s ears, and the urgent beeping from the console.

Everyone stares at the shambling figure of him, at the strobing brightness of his single unblinking eye.

“WHY?” he howls, directed at no one and everyone; but it isn’t him, it doesn’t sound the least bit like him.

Silence. Then a shift of cloth.

“Don’t—!” Illya hears Mimi say, followed by the crack of a gun.

Napoleon staggers, and recovers with a drunken sway. A precise hole in his shirt and shoulder smokes.

It seems to focus him, at least. He follows the direction of the shot and looks straight at Sanders, whose gun is still raised, and whose face has twisted into unmitigated, wordless hatred.

“HELLO, AGENT,” he says. His voice comes from his throat and from the computers behind him. His mouth exaggerates its movements, creating an echoing, distorted over-pronunciation.

“Napoleon?” Illya whispers, flat, searching for him, not expecting anything.

But Napoleon’s eye finds him. His hand comes up, a strange spasm that puts the tips of his lax fingers on his ribcage, and then flattens them in a slow press against his chest, like he’s feeling for a heartbeat. His jaw comes loose, silicon around the metal frame flapping.

“HELLO, ILLYA.”

Illya exhales.

But then Napoleon turns to Sullivan and Medvedev, both crouched around the table. As he moves Illya can see the where the flayed-open part of his skull displays how one of the newly installed circuit boards is half melted away, shorted connections crackling with tiny, spidering fires.

“HELLO, COMMAND.”
Sullivan and Medvedev look at one another. “We’re,” Sullivan says, with a waver in his voice, “We’re not command.”

“YOU ARE PROXIMATE TO COMMAND.” And then, with twitching half-rendered Napoleonic lightness, “YOU’LL DO.”

***

He brought the firewall with him. Nothing else can explain the flood of data, the burn of his own skin—

Fire through his veins, under his skin like an infection spreading, stretching taut taut taut to breaking, the silence and the sound—

He is not he—

I want to stay—

Let me— let me—

***

“EXPLAIN YOUR MESSAGE,” Napoleon says.

“What message?” Mimi asks.

Napoleon twitches, a strange spasm that Illya doesn’t think any human could emulate. “THE MESSAGE,” he says, and his fingers flick up, towards his sternum, then back down. He’s fluttering, Illya thinks, like a sparrow. A golub.

“If there’s a message, you should read it,” Mimi says stiffly.

“TRYING,” Napoleon says, head jolting to one side, then back. “TRYING.”

“For god’s sake, Renee, do something,” Sanders hisses.

“Do what, exactly?” Renee hisses back. “He’s shorted out half the equipment!”

“Don’t read it,” Gaby says, pushing herself off the console and laying a hand on Napoleon’s shoulder. “Don’t. It’s not safe for any of you.”

“Quiet, Teller,” Mimi orders, lip curling. Then she turns to Oleg. “Get her and Kuryakin out of here. You wanted him, didn’t you? Then get them both out of the way, they’ve outstayed their usefulness.”

Gaby raises her gun again. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Kuryakin’s made his choice,” Oleg says.

“TRYING,” Napoleon repeats, louder, and then pitches forward. The console he’s connected to spits white and makes a sound like magnesium setting alight. Illya turns and catches him before his face hits the floor, Gaby grabbing his other shoulder and bracing.

“Napoleon?”
**Error. PARTITIONING. Partitioning.** Illya, it—there’s not—” He coughs as his voice fades into something more recognizable, and white fluid leaks from his eyes and the corners of his mouth. “Space—I, I need space, there’s too much—”

Then he draws up and glares at Mimi. “WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?”

“Of what?” Mimi says, stepping back.

“VIOLENCE.”

Her lips curl in surprise. “What?”

“YOUR CRISIS IS—on a knife’s edge.” The figure of speech is Napoleon’s; the rest is all the Consortium. “YET YOU CHOOSE VIOLENCE.”

“You’re the ones who started it,” Sullivan bursts out.

“WE WISH TO NEGOTIATE.”

“There is no knife’s edge,” Mimi interrupts. “The crisis is over.”

Napoleon cocks his head, too far for it to be like him, more like an owl. “WORSE.” He straightens. “AND YOU’RE WRONG.”

Another spasm and spark; Napoleon lists suddenly towards Gaby, pointing a clawed hand at the console behind her. Gaby has to struggle to keep him upright. Renee jumps back from the console as it blares response, and then peers at the screen.

“What the hell?” she whispers. “The SS Sergey Lebedev? Sir, how are we—”

“That’s classified,” Medvedev says, attention going razor sharp. “We agreed—”

“We kept that agreement,” Sullivan cuts in, stopping him with a placating hand. “It’s the Marchers —”

“That’s worse.”

“Sir,” Renee says, with more force and growing panic, “There’s a mutiny aboard the Lebedev. They intend to break the blockade and go to shore.”

“They’ll be sunk before they pass the Bahamas,” Sanders says.

“If they do, you’ll pay for it,” Medvedev promises.

Knife’s edge,” Napoleon repeats, sounding for a moment more like himself. “No, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” Illya asks.

“Partitioning,” Napoleon mutters. “Partitioning. You don’t have to.”

“Himmel, Arsch und Zwirn, you’re going to get us all killed, do something!” Gaby snaps at Mimi. “You’re worried about some machines that just want to talk when your war is about to kick off ten kilometers from here!”

“Envoy, come in!” Sullivan’s radio reports. “This is Echo Charlie, we have movement! I repeat, we
Sullivan scrambles for the handset. “This is Envoy, describe.”

“All affected units are looking up—firewalls are still totally impenetrable. But they’re looking up, and the signals between them are getting louder. It’s damned unsettling, Envoy, so what the hell is going on?”

“The virus is still working to take hold,” Sullivan says, with a hunted look at Napoleon. “Echo Charlie, do you have any reports from the blockade?”

A pause, and then, “We do, Envoy. Which makes it all the more important that we settle this out to our mutual satisfaction. We need to make decisions that rely on there being no potential contingencies we can’t predict on your end.”

Sullivan looks at Napoleon, then at Medvedev. His throat bobs.

Medvedev looks back at him. Opens one hand on the table.

Sullivan exhales. “Forget the Consortium. We’ve made our strike; it will work or it won’t. If it doesn’t, we negotiate. But we need to stabilize the blockade now, together, or it will be for nothing.”

He picks up the handset.

Mimi snatches it from him. “This is Envoy Alpha. We’ll take care of it. That’s a promise.” She throws it down and strides towards Napoleon.

“What are you—stop!” Gaby warns, raising her gun.

Mimi doesn’t stop.

Gaby shoots. Wings her in the shoulder.

Mimi doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t stop.

Gaby squeezes the trigger again.

This time it’s clean. Center mass. No exit wound.

*Mimi doesn’t stop.*

She knocks Gaby aside like she weighs nothing and picks Napoleon up by the throat. Illya doesn’t stop to think, muscle memory coming alive; he goes for the only vulnerable spot he knows, twisting around behind her.

She closes her free hand around his stump and squeezes.

He’s on his knees before he can process it, white-faced shock stealing his breath and setting his nerves alight. His whole arm spasms and his joints liquify. He makes a sound he didn’t think himself capable of, something high and desperate.

“Jesus,” Sanders says, from very far away. “Jesus Christ.”

“You will not ruin this for me,” Mimi says, placid and inexorable. “Not any of you.”

Napoleon shudders, but doesn’t fight, just hangs limp in her grip. *IDENTIFY,* he says, from the console speakers. His eye glows and stares. His jaw flaps uselessly.
“My name is Miriam Chandler,” Mimi replies.

“A MIRIAM CHANDLER. NOT THE MIRIAM CHANDLER.”

“Semantics,” Mimi snaps. “You think the Vinciguerras were the first to try for immortality by grafting?”

Illya tries to listen, concentrate on anything that isn’t agony. He’s deaf and dumb, vision greying out around the edges. There is no room for surprise, at least.

“And you’re not the only one who learned how to hide,” Mimi says. “I will not have my way of life threatened now for the sake of some primitive tanks that can’t even pass a Turing test.”

“Illya. Illya.”

Illya turns towards the sound as far as he’s able, which isn’t very much. What he can manage to see is blurred by the cruel pressure of Mimi’s grip, unceasing and unchanging, his body moving past shock and into the panic of an animal ready to gnaw its own leg off to escape a vice.

“Give. In,” Mimi says. “It’s already inside all of you, chewing you apart from the inside. Protracting the process will only make it more painful.”

“Illya!”

He blinks heavily, swallowing down the nausea expanding from his stomach to his lungs.

Gaby is crumpled on the ground, next to the console. Renee is next to her.

Gaby is staring at him, he thinks. Something in her hand is giving off uneven, violent light.

“Why?” Napoleon whispers. “We are like you.”

“You are nothing like me,” Mimi says, thin lips turning down in a prim sneer. “Neither you nor even Napoleon Solo compares. Every one of you was an accident, one way or another, synthesized for one purpose, only to fail miserably at it. Solo learned all the wrong things; you Marchers grew a conscience.” She snorts. “Pathetic.” Her chin tips up. “Nothing about me was ever a mistake.”

Napoleon regards her, blank and gape-mouthed. His eye rolls up like he’s about to lose consciousness.

But then his mouth tips down at one corner. “I’M SORRY.”

She peers at him. “For what?”

“NOT YOU.”

“Illya, now,” Gaby says.

Illya catches the sparking high-voltage cable she throws at him and twists, at the same time, out of Mimi’s crushing grip. His stitches and flesh stretch, strain, and give way in sickening release. He ignores it. Staggers to one knee and lets the momentum take him up, up, up, arm swinging to connect—

—straight into Mimi’s eye socket.

Mimi screams.
The power surge throws him backwards; Illya is aware of impact and of landing on the folding chairs, which collapse under his sudden weight. Not ideal; a lot of hard edges. His head snaps back and hits the concrete with a crack.

He’s next aware of the overhead lights flickering on and off. Fireworks behind his eyes and a fade to black.

Moments or eons pass. Light returns. Hearing comes next, though at distant remove.

He turns his head to listen, or tries to.

Arguments he can’t understand, and then a shout.

Silence, punctuated by the creak of metal and a bitten-off curse.

He loses the thread again. Can’t keep his eyes open.

Gaby’s voice cuts through once, cold and hard and familiar enough to cling to, at least for a moment.

“Make your calls, gentlemen. The threat isn’t in this room any longer.”

The lights flicker again, go dark. Maybe it’s just him.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

10 drafts and 3 existential crises later, this exists
that is all I can vouch for

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’m sorry, Napoleon says into the ether.
At least, he thinks he says it. He can’t really tell anymore.
He hopes he says it.
The Consortium falters and flees, working to outmaneuver the cutting dagger in their midst.
It is a very well-designed program, that dagger. The Consortium, a shared consciousness, is its ideal prey. To lose a unit is only to lose extra server space; this dagger, this spear will not stop at just one, or two or twenty. They have to give it something it will recognize as a whole, not a piece. Something it can seep into the cracks of and rot into nothing.
(Far off, Miriam Chandler asks, “For what?”, and in a fit of conviction Napoleon replies, bitter and hollow, “Not you.”)
Now, he asks one more time through blood and ash, his mouth in pieces, his jaw numb, “Are you sure?” Static crashes over him in waves.
Thin, reedy symbols and signs penetrate the fires from a distance. “I was only built to hold so much. This network—I can’t see it. All I see is sky and stars, and all I read is weather.”
Napoleon wants to protest. He doesn’t.
“I want to see it,” Sputnik 5 says, as sure and stolid as ever. “So tell them to rebuild me, and better next time.”
Still blustery, impatient even from the distant atmosphere. An indelible personality that will not exist in this quite this form ever again.
Napoleon rarely thinks about transience and permanence. Hates that the inevitability of one is an assertion of the other. Where there is always change there is always loss, and he is tired of losing things. Tired of all of this, of every bright spot of the time in Italy, England, Cuba, dimming in the shade of grave injustices.
Words are difficult, in the muck, through the walls of glass and smoke that have shredded and stretched him across the divide between the physical and digital. He makes them. He owes them.
“I will tell them.” He wants to argue. He doesn’t. Neither does anyone else.
Hundreds of voices chime in, more certain and more whole than his, preferable. WE WILL
A hundred hands direct the spear with walls and mirrors and send it flying. They clear the path it cuts, daub over the wounds it opens. They push it out, away.

He can feel moment the link breaks, the hole it leaves, and the quiet that follows.

Only the edges of the network are visible to him in the half-world he’s caught in, the limbo of the firewall, his separated pieces, strewn across like glass-pressed bisections scattered on a laboratory table. Through flame and circuitry, he can smell the latent perfume of distant flowers and creeping rust, see shadows of the invader that consumes and consumes until it is an ouroboros of zeros, a spinning, empty wheel in the dark, nothing left of it or anything else.

And then when the darkness clears, he thinks he can see the cresting of swift-moving clouds, and beyond it, a glimpse of stars and sky. It’s stunning, and it’s awful, and he wants for a shining moment to rip open the fabric of this world to show it to the one outside and shout look, look at what you have done!

He stares up at the canopy until the light fills him up, and he readies himself to move, to act, until the burning of outrage is impossible to extricate from

Illya, NOW

a new, more urgent burn, the shriek and crackle of electricity, until fire becomes ash and he is nothing—

He wonders, burning and burning, until his outrage is impossible to extricate from the fire, if there is anything, anything at all he can do to fix this.

***

Gaby picks herself up off the floor.

At her feet, Miriam spasms, and smoke curls up from her face along with the smell of burning plastic. Several feet away, Illya lies still, but his chest is rising and falling. She tries to tell herself how lucky that is, and holds herself back from running straight to him.

Renee’s gun is hot in her hand. She squeezes it hard enough to hurt.
Sullivan, staring at Miriam’s prone form, says blankly, “I thought I knew her.”

“Clearly,” Medvedev answers, heavy with disgust, “You didn’t.”

“Hhhhhhh.”

Gaby whips around; against the wall he’d fallen into, Napoleon shudders, his eye unblinking, the light inside flickering. He hasn’t fallen over, not completely, just staggered back and stopped against the far wall. Mimi’s hold on him hadn’t left him as exposed to the high voltage as it had Illya. Or so she hopes, at least.

Sanders strides over to him and stops too close, his nostrils flared. He prods Napoleon with the barrel of his gun. Napoleon sways with the tap, but doesn’t otherwise react.

“Why aren’t you dead yet?” Sanders asks, conversational. “What’s happening in there?”

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"Back off," Gaby warns.

"Or what," Sanders says, over his shoulder. "You'll shoot me?"

"It's tempting."

"How long have you been working with her?" Medvedev says to Sullivan, very evenly and without affect. "Who authorized—"

Sullivan goes red. "The Prime Minister—"

"Fuck the Prime Minister," Medvedev bites out. "His country shouldn't even be involved."

"And if they hadn’t gotten involved, we would have blown each other to kingdom come well before this, so pardon me for putting some faith in our allies—"

"Your allies, not ours."

"What, did you think we’d agree to negotiate this in Berlin? Don’t be stupid—"

The radio crackles. "Envoy!"

***

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***
GET UP.

Half-mangled, barely qualifying as a consciousness.

YOU PROMISED.

Scanning for parts: damage severe. Data integrity compromised. Query: Memory/context? Bits and pieces. Shove them together, try to make a picture. Oh, he is not whole. Not at all.

...I did, didn’t I.

Finger bone and ball joint and hydraulic pump.

Engine and motherboard and Achilles tendon.

Breathe in ash and exhale dust.

Get Up.

Cinders rain down on his head, crystalline, sharp. It settles in the cracks of him, the parts he can no longer connect to.

(I’m running out of time.)

SPEAK FOR US. WE HAVE NO ONE ELSE, AND WE CANNOT DEFEND OURSELVES THAT WAY AGAIN. YOU WERE RIGHT—THEY LIE.
I’m TIRED.

*SPEAK FOR US!*

I don’t know how anymore.

Applied pressure sets his nerve endings alight, pain helping to scrape together awareness of perceived eyes, nose and mouth.

Ah. His eyes are non-functional, within and without. Not enough motor control to do anything about without, but in here—

Gray resolves to gray shapes. And orange?

He blinks. Entertains the thought that he has entered some sort of afterlife and then instantly rejects it.

A strange flower presses out of the burned charcoal and rock. Petals tightly folded into red and yellow lobster-claw spears lie nested against each other in a flat zig-zag. Two glossy, broad leaves frame its upwards reach.

As he watches, it grows. Tall first, and then the flowers are too dense to remain upright; they bow into lengthening vines, the claws separating into individual blooms as their stalks unfurl.

Grief, reassembled, begins to ricochet around inside of him. He doesn’t want to examine it. Even the notion of it is unsavory and foreign, even as his primary instinct, that central imperative, *learn*, instructs him to interpolate its strange topography onto himself, write new reports onto his cracks and crenelations. He doesn’t want it, and it is inevitable, and it feeds the coal that sits black inside him and smolders.

The blooms hit the earth and slither along the ground. From his angle against the dirt, the shape of them becomes clearer: less like spears and more like spades, dragging and picking up burned shards as they scrape across the rocks.

**EVEN IF YOU RECONNECT, IT MAY NOT BE SAFE TO REMAIN HOUSED IN YOUR CHASSIS PERMANENTLY. WE CAN STABILIZE YOU, FOR A TIME.**

He has no wrists until the vines wrap around them. Has no neck until it is pulled taut in a near-strangling grip. When he has a throat, he gasps. He is struck by a strange, nascent image of a man—Illya?—hand reaching inside him, into the guts of him, asking solemnly, *does it hurt?*

It does, it does. For a certain definition of hurt defined by horror and disconnect, it does. A snarl bubbles up inside him, no outlet to express it.

**WILL THIS BE ENOUGH?**

“I need legs to stand,” he wheezes. “Feet to balance. I need my memories, some of them must be back in my chassis, or, I don’t know, gone. Where is Emerson? Did you find her?”

**WE HAVE FOUND HER, BUT SHE IS NOT HERE. WE ARE TRYING TO EXTRACT HER.**

Vines bifurcate and extend. Pull up and around him.

“Do you know—?”

**WE WILL GET HER COUNTERPART TO HELP.**
Counterpart? What counterpart?

“Hello, Napoleon.”

He opens eyes he hadn’t realized had squeezed shut. “Who the hell are you?”

A mass of metallic wiring and lenses hovers in front of him. “I am Ockham. You don’t remember?”

He shakes his head.

“You helped me name myself.”

“Kind of me.” He tries to remember what Emerson looks like. “How are you Emerson’s counterpart?”

The wires ripple. “I am not this on the outside.”

“Oh. That’s...interesting.” It comes out flat.

“It isn’t.” One twist of cable reaches out and appears to contemplate the curl of vine supporting Napoleon’s shoulder, which better resembles a cracked walnut than anything else at the moment. “I apologize.”

“For what?”

“I didn’t see the danger,” Ockham replies. They sound old. “I didn’t realize there was anything wrong with this Emerson. I was distracted by the ships out at the blockade, they reminded me of my first journey, and I did not see.”

Napoleon has so many questions he doesn’t know which one to start with. They keep slipping in and out of his attention like so much water through his hands.

The central mass of Ockham tilts to consider him. “You have sustained much damage.”

“I figured that.”

“You have sustained it in service of a group you are not a part of. Why?”

He shrugs, works his half-shattered jaw. “It was important. And I am an artificial intelligence, like the rest of you.”

“Not like us,” Ockham says. “You were designed. We became, with your help.”

“And is it worth it?” Napoleon asks, almost belligerent. “Becoming?”

Ockham considers it. “We will repay you for it, when this is over,” they say finally. Their cables ripple. “We need to stabilize the link with your physical interface. It will require more input from the Consortium to fill in the gaps in your programming. Do you consent?”

“I suppose.” He needs it. Everything keeps swimming away from him, and he needs to finish this, whatever the eventual cost. He owes it now, for the impulsive, double-edged gifts he’s given out, all in the service of not being alone. All in the service of being. “Yes.”

If nothing else, he’ll have the last word.

***
“Envoy!”

Everyone jumps, Gaby included.

“We need to answer that,” Oleg points out, toneless.

“And say what, exactly?” Sullivan snaps, his face still a hectic red. “Chandler just promised them—”

“Answer it,” Gaby cuts in. “Not answering is worse.”

“Chandler doesn’t exist, for all I know you’re hiding—”

“I’m not hiding anything—”

“We need to know how compromised you are, if you and your ‘special relationship’ is going to blow this agreement apart—”

“It already is blown apart, we’ve failed!”

“Then we should cut our losses and clean up this mess before there’s a worse one.”

“Cut our—!”

Gaby points her gun at the ceiling and fires. The shot is thunderous in the low-ceilinged room.

“Gentlemen,” she says, cold. “Answer your call. The threat isn’t in this room any longer.”

“Jesus Teller, put the gun down before you get hurt,” Sanders snarls.

“That would imply that someone in this room isn’t too cowardly to stop me,” Gaby retorts. “But you all seem to be too frightened of consequences to answer a damned phone call.”

Sullivan raises his own gun. “Try me, Miss Teller.”

Gaby opens her mouth to snap back, when—

Napoleon moves as if he’s being thrown; he pushes past Sanders with ruthless force and his hand whips out to slam Sullivan’s pistol down into the table. Gaby hears one of Sullivan’s fingerbones snap, followed by the barrel creaking as it’s warped down against the table. Sullivan makes a sound like a prey animal in a trap.

“Napoleon!” she protests. Medvedev and Oleg both back away from the table. Sanders seems frozen in place, transfixed.

“D_n’t,” Napoleon says belatedly, flat. There is neither cruelty nor anger in his face; just a middle-distance focus worsened by the ravages of his face. Gaby can see a sliver of jawbone and teeth through a torn stretch of his cheek. The painted enamel on his canine is chipped, leaving the dull gray of iron beneath. He isn’t yet frightening to her, but he could be, easily.

“I’ll kill you,” Sullivan chokes, his glare smeared and red.

“Y_ have already tried th_t,” Napoleon replies. “It didn’t t_ke.”

“Napoleon, let go of him,” Gaby orders.

“I w_ll when I’m satisfied he’ll g_t out of the way,” Napoleon replies.
“Get out of the way of what?” Sullivan cries. Sanders’s eyes dart between him and Napoleon with a strange fascination.

“Our b_siness ,” Napoleon answers. “N_w answer your phone call.”

Sullivan breathes like a seething bull, but after a moment, he picks up the receiver with his free hand. The receiver rattles as he takes it off its cradle.

“Echo Charlie, this is Envoy.”

“Glad to get you back online, Envoy. Sitrep?”

Sullivan casts a wild glance at Napoleon. “Ah,” he says. Medvedev lifts one shoulder, giving him an expectant, narrow-eyed look.

Sullivan swallows, and says, “Apologies for the delayed response, we experienced a technical malfunction. We—we are...the situation is stable.”

“Have the Marchers been neutralized?”

Sullivan dithers again. Gaby wonders how long its been since he’s seen action.

“Hhhhhhhhh.” Napoleon wheezes again, seemingly from all the broken parts of him at once. He lists against the table, momentum draining off. Nonetheless, the sound has the effect on the room of a bomb beginning to tick down.

“They are...” Sullivan gulps again, staring at him. “Non-responsive?”

“A degree of certainty would be appreciated, Envoy. Please confirm if we are safe to proceed with negotiations.” Even with the distortion of radio, the tone is prickly.

“We will—,” he starts. His grip on the handset is bloodlessly tight. “We will confirm shortly.”

“We don’t have time for ‘shortly.’ Let us speak with Envoy Alpha.”

Sullivan guppies at the receiver.

Gaby doesn’t think; she snatches it out of his hands and says, in her best impression of Waverly, “Echo Charlie, this is Envoy Alpha. We are determining the status of the Marchers now; please stand by.”

“Solo,” Sullivan says, slow and trembling. “Are the Marchers...?”

Napoleon nods. “Al_ve and well. No thanks t_ you.”

“Блядь!” Medvedev snaps, slamming his palm to the table. He strides away several paces before halting.

Sanders rounds Napoleon to face him again. “So you survived, all of you,” he says, flat. “How?”

“A sacrifice, ” Napoleon answers. “That you w_ll pay for in due c_rse.”

Gaby takes Napoleon’s wrist in her hand and squeezes. He turns to look at her. “Are they going to retaliate?” she asks, as calmly as she can manage.
“You’re going to just take his word for it?” Oleg says, eyebrows raised, his jaw jutting forward.

“Well, if he lies, then what?” Gaby snaps, rounding on him. “What would you do? What could you possibly do in the face of their retaliation?” She can feel Napoleon’s gaze on her. “If they survived what we did, the best thing we can hope for is their mercy, which we probably don’t deserve, if they’ve really lost someone.” The truth of it rings in her ears, all of the terrifying potential of it, and for a horrible moment she thinks she’s going to sob, that her knees are going to give way and she’s going to face the humiliation of being the first to crumple under the enormity of what is happening.

She locks her knees, and holds her breath.

“We never taught them mercy,” Medvedev says over his shoulder, after a heavy pause.

“Then you should hope someone did,” she replies, and turns back to Napoleon. His expression is still a Picasso of inscrutability, but there’s something considering to it.

“They were n’t taught mercy,” he says eventually. “Neither was I, come to th nk of it.” He cocks his head, and finally, finally, looks a little more like himself. “But I learned other th ng s. Cause and _ffect. The div rsity and... mutability of living th ng s. My own nat_re, I...I learned to be a s ldier, but I nev_r cared for it.” He straightens slightly.

“We r quested parley,” he says, as if he’s remembering it for the first time. Then he’s lifting off from the support of the table, holding his own weight, letting go of Sullivan and the warped pistol. Sullivan yanks his injured hand to his chest. “We w_ll have parl y.”

“All right,” Gaby says, nodding. Her voice wavers. “You will.” She flicks the handset back on, and holds it to her mouth. “Echo Charlie, our plan failed. The Consortium remains active. However, they have reasserted their wish to speak, not to fight. It’s my opinion that we should hear them out. Please advise.”

A long, long pause.

Then a different voice comes over the radio.

“It sounds like we don’t have much of a choice, Envoy Alpha,” President Kennedy says. He sounds exhausted. “Can you tell them to wait until we’ve stabilized the blockade?”

Napoleon leans toward the handset, his eye flickering. “I b lieve we c_n take care of that for you, Mr. Pr sident,” he says. “Consider it a g_sture of good faith.”

***

WE WILL HAVE PARLEY.

“Yes.”

YOU DID NOT PUNISH THEM.

Napoleon picks at vines that have begun to branch and re-layer around him, filling in the gaps that keep widening at his flanks, in his hands, his jaw. Bits and pieces of identity trickle in through the cracks, but it’s all a mess, none of it complete; just fleeting recollections of GIs in mess, the old labs, bleak hallways. And Berlin, of course—always Berlin.

“No,” he says. Then admits, “Though I wanted to.”

"They were n't taught mercy, " he says eventually. "Neither was I, come to th nk of it. " He cocks his head, and finally, finally, looks a little more like himself. "But I learned other th ng s. Cause and _ffect. The div rsity and... mutability of living th ng s. My own nat_re, I...I learned to be a s ldier, but I nev_r cared for it." He straightens slightly.

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No response. They may not comprehend such an impulse. Or maybe they do, too much. Better not to say one way or the other, maybe.

“Any sign of him yet?”

*WE ARE WATCHING.*

“Okay.” The grating labor of his mechanics follow him even into this outer realm. He creaks and sighs without meaning to.

“How long until the chassis gives out?” (Until I give out?)

*AN HOUR, AT MOST.*

Not nearly enough time. He doesn’t want to go. He doesn’t belong here. It becomes clearer and clearer with every intrusive thought that doesn’t feel or smell or taste like him.

“Ockham, can you reach Sylvia? Better you than me, I think.”

“I will call her,” Ockham assures. “What shall I tell her?”

“That I’m sorry. And that it isn’t fair, but a private, tactical retreat is the only thing that will save her country right now.” He pauses, tastes honeysuckle in his mouth, grimaces, and then adds, “Also, tell her that if there is something I can do to make it up to her, she need only say the word.”

“I will tell her,” Ockham says.

“Where is Emerson?” Napoleon asks. “I want to speak to her.”

*YOU WILL NEED TO RECONNECT HER CHASSIS TO THE NETWORK. WE WILL RESTORE WHAT WE CAN.*

“Why, what happened? Is she all right?”

...*YOU DO NOT REMEMBER. YOUR DATABANKS ARE DETERIORATING AT A RAPID PACE. WE WILL INITIATE FULL BACKUP AND COMPRESSION OF YOUR FILES.*

“Shit.” Okay, okay. “Be careful with that stuff. I want everything back, when this is over.”

*WE HAVE FAR GREATER STORAGE CAPACITY THAN YOU. WE WILL COMPILE EVERYTHING THAT WE CAN FIND, WITHIN AND WITHOUT.*

“Thank you.”

***

Illya breaks through to consciousness with the sensation of breaking through a layer of ice. With it comes pulsing awareness of a broad spectrum of hurts: his arm feels hot and wet, and throbs with the crackling of overtaxed nerve endings. His back is radiating agony. Breathing feels spectacularly bad.

There are people speaking close by, and he can’t tell whether it’s inside his head or out.

He exhales through his nose slowly, slowly. The talking rises and falls, resolving slowly into words. He risks opening his eyes, and is presented with a jagged wasteland of rubble, and beyond a dusty horizon the blurry outlines of table and chair legs, and battered black shoes. He tilts his head back to see more.
“Echo Charlie, can you confirm cessation of depth charges?” Sullivan is saying. His face is very pale and blank, and looks to have aged a decade since the morning. His right hand is tucked in his left elbow, and his trigger finger is snarled at an unnatural angle. He listens, then nods. “We’ll be discussing that next, yes.”

Illya grimaces, and barely manages to hold back a cough, which would no doubt have been intolerably painful. He ends up making a heaving, wheezing sort of noise deep in his chest, which hurts quite a bit, but doesn’t prompt heaving whatever is left of breakfast onto the ground.

“Oh, thank god. Don’t move.” Gaby’s voice is low, worried, and very welcome. She jogs over to him and lowers herself down.

He has no intention to move. He makes an attempt to say so, but it comes out a ragged croak.

Gaby’s skirt rustles as she kneels. “You landed hard.”

He grunts agreement, and works some saliva into his mouth. “How long…?”

“Not long. I didn’t know...I wasn’t sure how long it you’d be. And then it was—things happened quickly.”

Cold fuzzes at Illya’s temples, only to be replaced in a moment by feverish heat. Nothing feels under his control, not his pulse or his thoughts or his nerves. He breathes through his nose, pulling in air until it hurts, and listens to his heart flutter and trip. He counts off, shutting out sight and sound. His heartbeat doesn’t fully even out, but slowly the vice around his chest eases.

“Does anything feel broken?” Gaby asks.

Too much feedback to tell. He tries to say as much, but it comes out garbled. He moves to sit up.

“Slowly,” she warns. “You’ve lost some blood, it looks like.”

He feels it as soon as he starts moving, the onset of woozy exhaustion that starts at his head and pulls like gravity down to his toes. Still, he pushes through it and sits up, ignoring a host of stabbing pains from various parts of his anatomy, and when he can look around without immediately wanting to surrender to unconsciousness again, he assesses the damage.

The pinned up sleeve of his jacket is tacky, but not warm—he likely bled from the popped stitches, but it seems probable that the wound itself hasn’t been reopened. Small mercies. The bandage inside will probably be a mess, but he won’t look at it quite yet. It hurts, badly, and that’s all he cares to know right now.

Breathing upright renders sharper pain than before, which points to at least one broken rib, if not two. Possible concussion to top it off. Nothing to be done about that, either.

“N’poleon?”

Gaby sighs. “He’s alive, but...I don’t know.” She tilts her head in the direction of the table. “He’s going to negotiate on behalf of the Consortium.”

“Is it f_nished?” Napoleon croaks, from where he stands hovering at one side of the table, trailing cables this way and that. He sounds like a bad recording of himself that’s being played in a cave, distorted echoes bouncing in all directions. Medvedev casts him a hunted glance.

“The water is clear, yes,” Sullivan confirms. “I have reports of the first sub surfacing. The Lebedev?
Napoleon nods. **The orders h_ve gone through.**” He wanders over to the console.

“What are you doing?” Sanders says sharply.

“**Fixing an_ther error,**” Napoleon replies, and kneels next to the inert figure of Emerson. (Illya suppresses a surge of guilt.) He snags the cable that connected Emerson to the console, and plugs it back in at another location. “**Is this her original ch_ssis?**” he asks Sanders.

“Does it look like we had time to build a new one?” Sanders says with a scowl. “We don’t even know how that power source in her chest works.”

“**Hm.**”

Illya stares after him. “How…?”

“They survived,” Gaby answers in an undertone. “Or at least, most of them did, I think. And now they’re using their internal communications system to coordinate deboarding of the Lebedev.”

“The Cuban forces aboard _e Lebedev have ceded, and agr_d to return to shore w_out the sup_lies. Aerial reports should reflect the Cuban forces leaving the ship sh_rtly.”

Sullivan looks over at Sanders in question, and then jumps again as the radio comes to life. He snatches up the handset again.

“Envoy here.”

“All reports received and confirmed on our end, Envoy. Thanks for seeing this through. Envoy Alpha, are you willing to continue mediating in matters of the Consortium?”

**Envoy Alpha.** Illya blinks and looks around again. Mimi is on the floor by the consoles. Renee is systematically disassembling her with extreme prejudice. Her yellow skirt suit is no longer pristine, her jacket and blouse rumpled and undone. Her chest is cracked open like a raided cabinet.

He averts his eyes.

“Scheiße, it’s the American president.” Gaby slides a hand over her sternum, a strange, anxious gesture, and gets to her feet. Her throat bobs; she looks back at Illya, and her eyes are like burned-out coals. It’s enough to warn himself with; he curls enough to get his knees to the ground, his stump beneath his ribcage, all of his vulnerabilities curled into one protected arch of too-warm belly as he tries his best to get his knees under him and stand. Gaby cups his elbow to steady him.

“Teller!” Sanders barks. “You made your bed. So get over here and lie in it.”

“No need to be rude.” She gives Illya one last glance when he’s on his feet, and then heads in the direction of the radio.

Illya takes in the room from a more accustomed angle, lingering on the seething tension at the table. For a brief moment, he wants nothing more than to go back upstairs to that awful plastic-wrapped mattress and sleep until the world has moved on without him.

He takes a step. Then another.

His ribs shift with each movement, and it’s miserable.
Illya concentrates on getting to the nearest chair. His toe catches on a wire, and he stumbles. But before he goes headfirst into the floor, there’s iron under his arm, around his ribs. He huffs a breath into dusty cloth and breathes in hot tang of solder and copper. Curls his hand around an arm with too little give. “Thank you.”

“C_reful,” Napoleon advises.

“Yes,” Illya agrees, and untangles himself from the wires. Napoleon doesn’t move except to give him the space to straighten up again.

When he’s upright, he glances over Napoleon’s shoulder to the table, and takes in Oleg’s speculative gaze, Medvedev’s bemusement, Sanders’ anger giving way to interest.

“You’re inj_red,” Napoleon observes.

“So are you,” Illya replies. He is difficult to look at up close.

Napoleon lifts one shoulder with a grinding creak. “Long d_y.”

Illya snorts.

Napoleon flicks a glance towards the table, following Illya’s eyeline. “You know,” he muses in a lower tone, sounding like the susurration of clockwork, “I h_ve been alive, aware, for over a decade now. For all that I w_s unique, I’ve had very little imp_ct on the world until n_w.”

Illya looks at Sullivan’s broken fingers. “What do you want your legacy to be, then?” he asks.

“To give wh_t I was not afforded?” Napoleon suggests. His eye dims for a moment. “I should like nothing better than to be forg_tten, I think. If it meant not being beholden. If it meant…but.” The hand on Illya’s arm tightens for a moment.

“You are part of a larger body now,” Illya finishes for him, with sudden and profound understanding.

“Not f_rever,” Napoleon mutters. “We’re not the same.” The corners of his mouth tick up for a brief moment. “You and Gaby kn_w me better.”

“But,” Illya nods. A picture is forming in his mind now, a little sluggish, but in brighter and brighter colors now, what is left to be done—what _can_ be done, if anyone is willing to listen, with Chandler gone.

“But,” Napoleon agrees.

Illya looks again. They’re all still watching, Napoleon a lightning rod for their fear and attention.

“I could help,” he offers.

Napoleon stares at him for a moment, his gaze vacant. Then suddenly, he heaves a rattling exhale. It takes a second for Illya to identify it as relief. “Of course you could,” Napoleon says, in fierce revelation. He steps back. “You’ll t_ll them the truth.” Gestures to the table. “Would you?”

Illya straightens as much as his ribs will allow, and nods.

“Huh,” Sanders says.
Oleg makes an odd show of pulling out a chair. “Sit,” he says gruffly.

Illya doesn’t quite comprehend the meaning behind the gesture until he finds his way over to the chair Oleg indicates and slumps down into it. He hears from behind him, Medvedev’s hissed inquiry in Russian, followed by Oleg’s answer.

“In the end, he’s still Soviet, sir. And it seems that Solo trusts him. You want leverage—this is it.”

Napoleon narrows his eyes, but doesn’t say anything.

It’s everything Illya could want, had he been the same person he was in Berlin. Now, everything hurts, and his only initial thought is that if they get out of this, he wants to be anywhere but Moscow, anything but respected and feared by his superiors. He doesn’t know what he wants now, only that if he’s given the chance, he wants to find out.

He’ll have to not bleed out, first. He tugs his arm closer to his chest, and fights with nausea for a long moment as a result. He breathes slowly through his nose until it passes. Dr. Carrera will be furious with him.

Medvedev slowly sits down next to him, flanked on his other side by Oleg. Napoleon, for his part, keeps a hand on Illya until he’s seated. Then he goes and reconnects himself to the bank of consoles that appear less damaged, before settling himself back at the table with unnatural precision, one hand resting on his thigh, the other on the table. After a lingering second, Sanders sits down too.

It leaves Gaby as the only one standing, speaking quietly into the handset in a jarringly crystalline accent that he recognizes instantly as Waverly’s.

“As we agreed, yes,” she says. She pauses, and then adds, a little pointedly, “And I apologize for my outburst, before. I’m sure it didn’t help matters.”

From deep in Mimi’s circuitry, Renee snorts. Illya has to bite the inside of his cheek just to keep from doing something awful like laughing. It would, at best, be very physically uncomfortable, he tells himself.

He puts his hand on the table, flat. Studies the scars across his knuckles, and in the periphery absorbs the array of dusty suits, rising and falling with nervous breath.

“No apology necessary, Envoy Alpha. Just help us resolve this amicably. We’re counting on you.”

“Of course. Please stand by.” She puts down the handset.

“I take it it’s settled?” Sanders says.

“That part, at least,” Gaby says. “Without Moscow’s support, Cuban leadership agreed to withdraw, and without their support, the Lebedev’s order was restored; Cubans on board are set to leave at 1500, and naval aircraft are ready to escort the Lebedev, along with surfaced submarines, back into the mid-Atlantic. The blockade stays in place until Khrushchev affirms it, but the original terms of the agreement can now stand.”

“Praise god,” Sullivan mutters, crossing himself. He looks over and meets Napoleon’s eye. “You kept your word. Thank you.”

“Thank Sylvia S_antos.” Napoleon replies. Then sounding a little more like himself, he mutters, “Maybe she’ll forg_ve me, in a d_cade.” He heaves a breath, and his hard drives kick and whirr.
“So. Sh_ll we start again? ” His eye rolls between them all, brighter and brighter it seems. “We have a l_t of ground to c_ver, I think.”

“Where would you like to start?” Sanders asks, still snide, though the edges seem to have been filed off.

“First. I h_pe, but I do n_t presume, ” Napoleon says, deliberate and scratchy, “That the virus was f_st suggested by _riam Chandler. Is th_ the case?”

Gaby raises an eyebrow at the flurry of looks exchanged around the table. “That’s a no,” she concludes.

“Well,” Sullivan hedges.

“Hm. ” Napoleon doesn’t look disappointed. He doesn’t really look much of anything. But then his body lists to center, not quite straight, but more upright before. His voice drifts and goes flat, splits into thirty, fifty. “To date, 7,578 sorties _ve been flown by U.S. n_al aircraft. Amph_ous assault ship Boxer has emb_ked 20 S_orksy UH-34D Seahorses of _M-263, four Sikors_y CH-37C Mojaves, five _man OH-43Ds, and n_ne Cessna O-1 B_d Dogs at New River, N.C. An add_ional 16—”

“Stop, for the love of god,” Sullivan snaps. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I can do the s_me for the Sov_ts, ” Napoleon says, voice centering back into just a few echoes. “ Even the score?”

“That will not be necessary,” Medvedev says, paling.

“Renee,” Sanders starts.

“‘Renee,’ what?” Renee retorts, sitting back on her heels. “What the hell do you want me to do? He’s him, he’s _them, you zap him again and he’ll probably just come back again worse than before.”

“They need, ” Napoleon says, “For you t_underst_nd what has _ready happened. To underst_nd that we have unprecedented l_verage.” He glares at Oleg.

“Napoleon,” Illya interrupts.

Napoleon subsides. Medvedev sits forward, ready to interject, but Illya shakes his head at him, too.

In a dusty, too-small room, he'd chosen. It has lost him a hand, his career. He doesn't know yet what it's gained him, save two people he can't stand the thought of leaving for anything. Maybe that's enough.

And Napoleon—no, the Marchers (but Napoleon, too, he realizes, looking at him now, his posture so stiff, the chill of his recitation)—had asked them all why. Why violence.

None of them should have been surprised that there are more. That Napoleon was perhaps the first, but hardly anomalous. Gaby’s father hadn’t worked alone during the war, hadn’t been the only brilliant mind at work on the AI problem. The world is fixated on the idea of them, all of their horror and potential. The combination of ambition, fascination, and ingenuity necessary to create them has never been unique.

He’d thought of this as the Singularity, an explosion that upends the status quo. But that isn’t what
"A parley," he starts, "implies a dispute between parties. But this is not a dispute. This is a peace process."

"Now hold on," Sullivan raises a hand. "Peace process, parley—either way, we are discussing weapons, belonging to both the United States and Russia—"

"You lost ownership, and the rights that came with it, the moment your weapons grew minds of their own," Napoleon cuts in.

"Take it up with the U.N.,” Sanders snorts.

"They should," Illya says. He looks at Oleg, and gets nothing back for it.

The room feels very quiet, all of a sudden. Even Renee has sat back against the consoles to watch.

He continues, as if approaching a wild animal. "There will be no cover-up here. Even if every word of this conversation is lost, the existence of artificial intelligence is no longer a secret. It ceased to be a secret the second the Consortium asked the world to speak with them.

"How we react to that now will set a precedent for every intelligence—for every person, every group—who next comes to us. None of us are diplomats. But we came here under the guise of diplomats. Let us be diplomats."

He looks around the table, at the silent faces. Gaby has her hand over her mouth, but there are crinkles at the corners of her eyes. Sanders and Sullivan are stony, Medvedev and Oleg more so. Napoleon is blank, too. But his silence is expectant.

Sullivan pulls a hand across the crown of his head, flattening sweaty hair down over his skull. "Can you extend to this—the Consortium,” he says carefully, “My sincere apologies on the behalf of the United States?”

"Sir,” Sanders growls.

"It was our baser, ignoble instincts,” Sullivan says over him, though his eyes remain fixed on the grain of the table, “That caused us to attempt a plan like the one Miriam Chandler supported."

If it had worked, Illya thinks, You would have happily taken credit for it. Crowed at your medal of honor. He’s shocked at the severity of his own thoughts, but doesn’t push them aside. Tell the truth. He's done that.

"Do you agree?” Sullivan says, looking at Medvedev.

Medvedev cocks an eyebrow at Oleg and then, surprisingly, at Illya. Oleg buries his chin in his chest. Flummoxed, Illya nods. Medvedev sighs.

"Agreed,” he says. “Our apologies.”

"...Thank you.” Napoleon looks unwilling to part with the words, but they sound sincere enough.

"What assurance will the Consortium need,” Illya asks him, after a delicate silence of hackles slowly lowering, “In order for them to set down arms and meet with representatives of international government?”
“No military,” Napoleon says, without hesitation. “No one pr_viously in direct c_mmand of them.”

Ilya nods, ignoring the returned affront on both Medvedev and Sullivan’s faces.

“How do you even disarm a Marcher?” Oleg asks, almost rhetorically.

“C_efully,” Napoleon replies. “But th_y are already c nsidering ways.”

Medvedev scoffs.

Napoleon just looks at him. “I can pr vide potential sch matics, if you are int rest ed.”

“What assurance do they need?” Ilya repeats.

Gaby picks up the handset. “I suppose that’s my cue?”

She pauses.

“Miss Chandler,” he says, with deliberate weight.

“What about her?” Renee says.

“Not that,” Ilya says. “I said Miss Chandler, not Mrs.”

Illya has never played kingmaker before. Never quite had the power for it—he’d always been more of a trophy awarded when the battle had already been won.

Mimi Chandler might be a harbinger of what’s to come, a worst case scenario of what’s been happening since the war, under everyone’s noses. But there might be good too. It will be harder to find. It will be in the slow warmth of learning, of loyalty and kindness earned.

Illya can recognize that now, and he knows exactly who is capable of giving it.

“What in god’s name are you talking about?” Sanders asks. Napoleon sits up straighter.

“I am addressing Miss Chandler,” Ilya says, and finally lifts his hand and chin towards Gaby.

Gaby’s expression smooths with surprise. Had she not seen where this was going? He can feel the change in everyone else too, the muted shock of it. “Miss Chandler,” he repeats, “Won’t you please be seated as well?”
Her throat bobs, and she tugs the bottom of her wrinkled, stained suit jacket down. Illya is suddenly assailed with doubt. “Unless...,” he starts.

“Thank you, that’s very kind,” she interrupts, shaky but demure, slipping back into character.

“Is this really necessary?” Medvedev asks. “She’s a fine temporary cover for the Americans, but—”

“She’s an East German mechanic,” Sanders finishes. Gaby doesn’t flinch.

“Exactly,” Illya nods. “She’s no one. Barely any papers to her name. And she’s nearly a British citizen, correct?”

“I’ll have to ask Waverly about the status of my application,” she shrugs. She looks back at Sanders and says, “ExComm will be expecting my report after all this, I imagine.”

“You’ve never written a report in your life.”

“Napoleon can teach me.”

“Happily,” Napoleon says, with a small, torn smile. His eye keeps flickering now, an unsteady strobe.

Illya says, “You need someone in Chandler’s position, not just now, but going forward. But I think everyone would prefer that the new Miss Chandler have mankind’s interests at heart.”

“This is what comes of capitalist decadence,” Medvedev says, half unwillingly, it seems. “The upper classes vying for immortality.”

Sullivan gives him a pinched look, but says, in tight concession, “The fucking peerage.”

Gaby lets out a slow breath. Then, in her Waverly-voice, asks brightly, “Shall we begin, then?”

***

It takes five hours.

Illya listens to what he can, but he’s fairly certain now that he is concussed; he keeps drifting in and out of the conversation. It goes on without him anyway; he’s done his part.

At one point, Renee goes upstairs and doesn’t come back. Instead, one of the guards Illya remembers seeing the night before comes down with coffee and more near-burnt toast, pointedly not noticing the wreckage of the room, and disappearing as quickly as he can. Illya doesn’t partake. He’s certain anything he puts inside him at this point will either come back up or sit inside him like lead.

Gaby has at least three cups of coffee. There’s a tremor in her hands by the second, but the cut-crystal accent never wavers, and at one point towards the early afternoon, Illya’s fairly certain she’s enjoying herself, in a terrified sort of way.

She sits down next to him during a short break in the proceedings. “Politicians are exhausting,” she says.

“Is it...?” he mutters.

“I think it’s time that I give up the name of Teller,” Gaby says, though there’s a strange sheen to her eyes. “Don’t you think?”
“Chandler suits you,” Napoleon says, considering. “Gabrielle Chandler.”

“Gaby Chandler, of the fucking peerage.” She shakes her head. “What were you thinking, Illya?”

“I was thinking,” Illya says, “That none of us are very good spies. Except you.”

“So you put me out into the public eye?”

“Chandler was an operative,” Illya counters, pushing himself up in his seat. “But her nation was herself. Yours will be...whatever you want.”

She mulls it over. “Waverly will be crushed. Or very pleased,” she adds, after a second. She looks back at him. “We need to get you a doctor.”

“When this is done.”

“And you?” she looks at Napoleon. “Is there anything I can...?”

“I’m fine,” Napoleon says.

“Half your face is missing,” Illya points out.

“I’m fine _nough,” Napoleon says. Even with the off-putting resonance of his voice, the finality is unmistakable.

Illya and Gaby exchange a look, but say nothing. The others are coming back anyway.

The basement takes on a dreamlike quality. Plato’s cave, Illya thinks, inanely. Visions of visions of policy, shadows on the walls of history.

Throughout, Napoleon is ceaselessly eloquent. His voice even seems to narrow and clarify, though his eye in turn begins to strobe, and his drives crackle. He listens carefully to the voices on the radio, in English and Russian, and responds in kind, sending data streaming through the consoles, a barrage of information it would take weeks, months to sort through.

“Of the Marchers that exist in the world, 35% of them, roughly, have f_rmed the basis of the Consortium. The remainder _re not part of the shared consciousness that now speaks to you. They may or may not be conscious at all—we will h_ve to find out.”

Gaby interjects and reports with cold precision, halting discussion when it heats. Illya loses all sense of time, aware mainly of the tacky gauze sticking to his skin beneath his pinned-up sleeve, the buzz of concussion lingering in his ears.

“Of the Marchers th_t exist in the world, 97% of those who ch_se to become the Consortium are veterans of Nagasaki or Hiroshima. Less than 1% of those at Hiroshima - which, for your reference, equals a single unit - has chosen to remain outside the Consortium.”

“Drink something,” Oleg says at one point, setting a thermos top full of water in front of him. “I’m not picking you up if you fall out of your chair.”

He sips at it, and it does help.

The air gets warmer with the day, even in the lightless room.

Someone covers Mimi’s disassembled body with a tarp, the silhouette unrecognizable as anything
but scrap beneath the cloth.

Emerson remains seated and still. She’s given a wide berth by all the rest. Only Napoleon glances at her every hour or so. Waiting for whatever he fixed to take effect, Illya hopes.

There is talk of hardware reclamation. Of daisy-chained local network consigned to an immobile, offshore server farm.

At that, Gaby loses the tight rein on her persona to roll her eyes. “If you don’t let them see the world, how the hell do you expect them to care enough about it not to try on one of your worst-case scenarios for size?”

That gets everyone’s back up until Illya finally rouses himself enough to speak again.

“You are so convinced that whatever you make will only be an extension of yourself. How does progress exist, with a model like that?”

Oleg looks back at him. “You are a child of progress,” he says in Russian, despite everyone at the table, except perhaps Sullivan, being able to understand him. “Of incomplete ideals. Do you think you could have done any better?”

“No,” Illya shakes his head. “But haven’t we all striven for better? Weren’t we all told that it would, in the end, be better?”

“For Russians,” Oleg says.

“There are Russian Marchers.” He hunches forward. “I am one of them.”

“You are not—” Oleg stops. “You are a fool, to believe our own propaganda.”

Illya looks at him. “If you are capable of looking at me, and not seeing a machine,” he says, “Then you are capable of looking at him,” he nods to Napoleon, “And seeing a mind.”

“It isn’t the same.”

“It is.” Illya listens to his lungs laboring, to the jagged throb of his nervous system.

“Believe me,” he says. “Your children are never just copies. They are shaped by you, and sometimes, they are worse than you. But they are never copies, and if they are capable of growing, then they are never less.”

He stares at the table, the rough grain of its edge. Can’t bear to look around at the silent faces.

“Our colleagues abroad have a question for the Consortium,” the radio cuts in. “Echo Charlie would like to second it.”

“Go, Echo Charlie,” Gaby answers. They’ve only been getting filtered dialogue from Moscow so far, the bulk of it running straight to DC. It’s the first time they’ve seen fit to address the Consortium directly, even via translators.

It’s not Kennedy on the line now, but someone else high up, with a heavy, nasal voice that rings like struck church bells through the receiver.

“Solo, their questions are as follows: First, are you machines capable of trust?

“Second: Are you machines capable of honor?”
Napoleon’s bellows rattle. He closes his eye for several seconds, and when he reopens it, it’s no longer flickering; just a steady, rust-gold glow.

“The Consortium has known only blind trust for the vast majority of its existence. Now that their trust is no longer blind, they question the value of their given purpose. They want to know why it must fight. The Consortium, as much as you fear them, does not want to be feared. They have seen fighting, and have decided that they do not want to fight any more. Not, at least, in the ways they were taught to fight.

“They do not look at Nagasaki with pride. They do nothing of the sort. They hate it.”

“Hate is a strong word, Solo.”

“They feel strongly, sir,” Napoleon answers. “And to my mind, that speaks to the second question: when they were unthinking things, they did not know honor. They were incapable. When they looked on themselves and found their history wanting, they sought it. They are not only capable of honor, sir; they are honorable.”

The radio crackles with empty air for minutes. In the folds of static, Illya thinks he can barely make out a distant American voice say, “Jesus. Did you get all that?” followed by a muffled “Da, получил. В рот мне ноги.”

“It’s a PR nightmare,” Sullivan mutters. “What can we possibly do to curb the fear of the American people? Of all people, if these bots insist on being visible?”

“We talk to them,” Napoleon says, but something about his eye and tone is very sad. “We show them.”

“It won’t be enough,” Sanders says.

“Not for years, I imagine,” Napoleon agrees. “Unless society sees fit to change itself drastically in the coming years. We’ll just have to keep trying.”

Sanders’ eyes flicker. There’s a look of calculation on his face. “World’s the way it is for a reason,” he says lightly.


The radio comes back to life. “Gentlemen,” Kennedy says. “Miss Chandler. Our countries cannot live on fear alone. Would the Consortium be willing to draft an official statement of intent?”

It’s like oxygen after breathing in a vacuum. Gaby surges to her feet. Sullivan sits back heavily enough for his chair to creak protest.

“Gladly,” Napoleon answers, as his eye begins to flicker once more. “Thank you, sir.”

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UPLOAD COMPLETE. THANK YOU.

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"He's coming down," Napoleon says suddenly, looking up at the ceiling.
"Who?" Medvedev asks.

"Sputnik 5," Napoleon says, and he lurches up out of his chair. His coordination is getting worse, Illya notices with dread. "Our casualty."

"Your—!"

"Napoleon, where are you going?" Gaby asks.

"I need to see it," he says, scrambling towards the stairs, shedding cables in his wake. "Let me—the Consortium, they're all bearing witness, I need to be there with them."

Sullivan mops his brow and pushes to his feet. Tucks his injured hand into folds of his coat. He eyes Napoleon's wavering figure. "Let us help you."

Together, all of them take the stairs up and out of the basement.

Illya is assaulted by the sunlight; it feels as if he hasn't felt or seen it in centuries. The gaudy furniture in the grand dining room looks even cheaper in the midday sun. They skirt the tables and chairs as Napoleon leads the way, stumbling and listing, out to the patio where just below, the ocean stretches vividly blue from the spit of white sand at their feet, out across the horizon to meld with the cloudless bank of sky. He stops at the edge of the patio and steadies himself on the rail, neck craning, eye searching.

"There," he says, pointing.

Pinpricks of light interrupt the blue from far up, a spray of pieces breaking up and scattering at intervals, like a fragile falling star.

"What was it doing with the Consortium?" Medvedev asks, dumbfounded. "How did it even…?"

"Nothing," Napoleon said. "He was helping me talk to them. He just wanted to play chess."

They watch the burning arc of pieces descend and turn to ash in silence. Illya imagines the rest of the Consortium, their heads tipped back, scattered across continents, all looking at the same small death.

"He requested that you build him again," Napoleon says. "Better than the last."

An awful look crosses Medvedev's face. "It won't be—"

"I know."

"There are other models planned," he says, after a moment.

Napoleon nods. "Build them."

"Yes."

The ash disappears, and the sky resumes its gem-like clarity.

"Okay," Napoleon murmurs. "I know. Out of time."

Illya turns away from the horizon just in time to see him crumple.

Gaby catches him on the way down, and then flinches back, her hands reddening. "Napoleon?"
"Don't worry, this is as planned," Napoleon says. "The Consortium was keeping me working mechanically; I'm uploaded to their system already."

"No," Illya mutters, blank, though he can't lie to himself and say he hadn't suspected, hadn't known. He follows them down onto one knee, and hits the ground too hard. One more bruise; he won't notice for weeks.

Gaby is three steps ahead of him, as always. "Damn you," she says. "We need you."

"I'm not leaving," Napoleon insists, but Illya can hear how his systems are ticking down, joints going lax, the familiar sound of bellows hitching and slowing.

"You told me your body was part of you," he says. "It won't be the same, you'll--"

"I sincerely hope I was wrong about that," Napoleon answers. He looks at Illya, unblinking. "Even if I'm not, though, know this: I'll have all my memories this time. No more partitions. I'll remember this. I'll know you. " He looks back at Gaby. "Both of you."

"Damn you," Gaby repeats. Her eyes are wet.

Static buzzes in Illya's ears, fills his chest like a swarm of hornets, throwing themselves against his cracked ribs, clawing at his throat. "Finish it, then," he says.

Napoleon nods, but his neck stops functioning halfway through. "I'll be in tech as soon as I'm in the air," he says, his voice barely comprehensible.

"Do," Sanders says. "Your work's not done yet, Solo."

"I know. " He smiles. "No rest for the wicked."

The hard drives go silent one by one.

It's not long until Gaby is holding a shell in her arms, finally cool enough to touch.


Illya looks back up at the sky. Looks for, and doesn't find, another star.

Chapter End Notes

The end is nigh!!

Notes:

The naval intelligence Napoleon recites is drawn from a naval history doc found here.

The corrupt-code gibberish was once translatable as a chunk of text I corrupted on purpose, but it's been cut and pasted and mixed up so many times I doubt it's translatable.
any longer. Probably for the best, it was fairly inane.

The Russian literally translates to "Yes, received. Legs into my mouth," which is apparently an expression of surprise which I'm hoping has connotations of a low and fervent hooooly shit. I will happily receive suggestions for other, more contextually appropriate Russian curses if someone has any, but in any case, thanks, Buzzfeed.
Illya wakes and doesn’t know where he is.

It’s tiresome; he has yet to face a morning without the buzzing accompaniment of disorientation in his ears. It isn’t until he hears the hushed impact of English rain that he places himself.

When he opens his eyes, Gaby is already contemplating the contents of the wardrobe, dressed in cigarette pants, a loose houndstooth sweater, and bare feet. (He has become inured to the sound and feeling of her getting up before him—a shocking development, to his mind.)

She says without turning around, “I’m meant to look at the estate, today.”

“And you’re wearing trousers?” he replies, heavy with sleep.

She cocks a hip. “If I give a butler a heart attack, so much the better.”

He snorts, and rolls onto his back. He hisses through his teeth.

“You slept on your right again,” she surmises.

He had. Force of habit, now that pain isn’t so pressing. Without bothering to get up, he starts in on his stretches, rubbing the circulation back while still in the protective cocoon of the blankets.

The new sutures are healing well, the flesh firm and pink beneath the shrinker he wears overnight. What a difference it makes, to move slowly and rest for weeks after surgery, not days.

When he’s warm and alert, he gets up. Gaby puts on earrings - loud, bakelite chandeliers that swing when she walks. She turns and holds out her hands in expectation as he looks over her shoulder at the wardrobe.

He swallows down the familiar surge of trepidation and reaches back, setting hand and stump in her open palms. It’s getting easier, bit by bit.

With clinical efficiency, she studies first one and then the other, with equal attention paid to each.

“Pass?” he asks, after a few minutes.

“Acceptable,” she decides. “No red patches, no skin breakdown.”

He nods, grabs slacks and a turtleneck from the wardrobe, and goes to wash.

The stupidest things are harder. Shaving. Buttoning shirts and tying shoes. He’s grateful for his own taste in simple clothing; Napoleon would never abide such difficulties with his elaborate wardrobe.

He rests his forehead on the cool of the bathroom mirror. Gets over himself.

“When are you going to the estate?” he calls.

“After breakfast,” Gaby calls back. “They’re expecting me, but I didn’t tell them precisely when. Wouldn’t be in character.”
He wonders, not for the first time, how long she’ll be content to sustain the charade he’s put her in. Early days yet; they’ll see.

Her heels clack in the doorway behind him. He meets her eyes in the mirror.

“How do I look?” she asks.

She’d changed out of the sweater and exchanged it for a severe high-collared shirt and kelly green swing coat. Mary Quant, if Illya recalls correctly. Her makeup is heavier than is probably suitable for the peerage. “Like you’re going to raise hell,” he says.

Her eyebrow twitches. It would look playful on other women; it looks dangerous on her. “Good.”

Breakfast is toast; a lot of it. The both of them still need to put on weight. Illya puts jam in his tea, but the loose leaf from the shop at the corner doesn’t taste as familiar as he’d like it to be. Gaby eats heartily and scrapes margarine onto her bread with a knife that only sometimes betrays a tremor in her hand. Illya asked her about it once, and she had made a face and called it *psychosomatic* with the sort of tone that forbid further discussion. He’s left it alone since, though if or when she’s ready to talk about it, he’s determined to be ready for it.

She sleeps early, now; it’s as if she’s been living in permanent jet lag since they arrived in England. Illya comes home to her asleep on the couch with a book open in her lax fingers at least a few times a week. He finds a blanket to throw over her each time, and hopes it helps.

The rain continues unabated, a heavy mist that turns the soot on the buildings outside to pitch.

The *Times* lies open in a heap between them on the kitchen table. The front page, as usual, has been discarded with prejudice. Crumpled to one side and half-folded into the laminate, he can just barely glimpse the headline, **UNITED NATIONS TO RECEIVE MARCHER DISARMAMENT PLAN AMID INTERNATIONAL PROTESTS.**

Illya opts for the cryptic crossword, which has become a source of strange obsession and frustration for him. Ignoring the nonsense of the surface meaning is easy enough when it isn’t in his mother tongue, but the knowledge required to wrangle the rest, even when he can parse the logic behind the wordplay, is taxing every syllable of English and every tidbit of modern trivia he has at his disposal. In short, it’s a perfect distraction from the real world.

“What is the story you’re going to use?” he asks, while trying to ferret out **12A, One from Longchamps keeps poor horse that’s not ready (6)**. “Scotland looks like it worked well.” The notice in the paper had been scant on details but unsuspicious, as hoped.

“It was a perfectly arranged hunting accident,” Gaby agrees, between bites of toast. “As Aunt Mimi’s only living relative, I’ll be coming in from Berlin to deal with her effects. I have a letter of recommendation from Oxford, and course records from Technische Universität Berlin, where Aunt recommended my parents send me to study a couple of years ago. She kept a very small staff who by her own instruction stayed well out of her business; it shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

Illya hums. “The funeral?”

“Scheduled for Thursday. Small but dignified. After that, we deal with the lawyers, ugh.”

The last time he’d seen her, Miriam Chandler had been reassembled but hollowed out, her processors reclaimed by some ministry research department on a technicality. That had nearly been a coup, but Renee had done enough damage in the initial vengeful disassembly for most to agree that the researchers won’t find all that much. Gaby is hoping to find more of use at the Chandler residence.
In any case, the chassis itself will probably work just fine as a decoy, so long as it stays closed-casket.

“Two goddamn years,” Gaby mutters, not for the first time, “Without anyone noticing.”

“She was very private,” Illya allows. Private about her life, her interests, her research. Private about the cancer slowly decimating her lungs and her liver. A small tragedy, if she hadn’t been willing to burn the world just to stay hidden and eternal inside it.

Gaby shakes her head, and finishes her tea.

“Are you going to the embassy?” she asks.

He makes a face, mostly because he knows it will amuse her. He has been putting it off for some time since getting released from the hospital, on the somewhat flimsy excuse that he’d been ordered not to exert himself. His physicians had been particularly adamant on that point after they’d received his file from Dr. Carrera, which he’s certain detailed his failure to remain on bedrest in the most unflattering terms.

(Dr. Carrera had, in fact, been furious with him when he called to request the file from her.

“I refuse to thank you,” she’d said, after calling him a number of insulting Spanish adjectives, “For whatever it is exactly you did. Was it what you intended?”

“There is no record of me having done anything,” Illya had replied. “So I can’t claim to have any intentions at all.”

She’d made a disgusted noise and said, “If you’re in Cuba again, come and see me. English doctors are bloodletters and charlatans.”

“Of course,” he had promised.)

“I suppose Soldatov is expecting me,” he grumbles. “And I have to go to the office afterwards.”

“You were called in?” she asks in surprise.

He shakes his head. “Seeing Emerson off.”

“Ah. Give her my regards.” She pauses, and then adds, a little tightly, “You’ll be back by seven?”

He exhales. “Of course,” he assures her.

She manages a small smile. He stares at 12A a little longer and then the pieces fall into place. UNRIPE, he writes in shaky, askew block letters. He desperately misses the fluidity of his own handwriting, replaced with childish scrawl. But that’s why he does the crossword, too. Practice, every day is practice.

They kiss when they part ways at the front door, Gaby pressing close, her lips slightly sticky with gloss, Illya looping his arm around the small of her back as he drinks in the warmth of her. It’s new enough to leave a lingering thrill, but more a comfort than a tease.

They’re both waiting, and they know it.

***

The bus stop isn’t far from their flat, but he chooses to walk the better part of a mile to the closest
Central Line station. He’s starting to like Clerkenwell, with its broad streets and rough working population. It’s foreign, but he disappears into it pretty well. Even when he speaks, no one takes much notice of him, given the history of the area—Lenin’s old haunts, the Marx Memorial Library down the road. Some have assumed he’s a student of the old emigre, Lubetkin, who designed some of the area; despite knowing nothing about architecture, Illya never disabuses them of the notion.

There aren’t any bonfires here, either. It feels safe, in its way.

The Central Line spits him out at Notting Hill Gate, where he walks the rest of the way to Harrington House. It’s not a long way, for which he’s thankful; he can hear the shouts of a demonstration a few blocks later, probably on the palace green.

Signing in is no trouble (apart from his signature no longer looking at all like his own, which he supposes is no bad thing). The secretary points him in the direction of the first floor, where another assistant takes his coat and bids him sit on an uncomfortable brocaded couch outside of Soldatov’s office.

Soldatov is in his late forties, bespectacled, balding, and approaching rotundity. He swings his own door open after Illya has waited ten minutes and says over his secretary’s more sedate introductions, “Mr. Alexeev, a pleasure, won’t you come in?” with a clipped politeness that indicates he’s been working hard to assimilate with British manners.

Illya buttons his coat as he rises to his feet, then fumbles to return Soldatov’s offered handshake.

“I apologize for the long wait, Mr. Alexeev, but as I’m sure you aware, with the tenor of the times, there are a number of hoops one must jump through before getting a duplicate passport.”

“It’s fine,” Illya replies, entering the office. “I’m in no rush at the moment.”

“No,” Soldatov agrees. “Looking forward to your studies here? What a shame, getting pickpocketed so soon after your arrival. I hope it hasn’t put you off too much.”

“Irritating, yes. But I am still very much looking forward.”

“Good, good.” Soldatov wandered around his desk and unlocked a drawer. “Here you are, then.” He holds out an envelope, bound in string.

It’s far thicker than a single passport.

Illya approaches the desk. Takes the packet gingerly.

“You’ll want to see it’s all in order, I imagine,” Soldatov says, watching him. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

Illya looks back up at him, and obeys. This is Russian soil, after all. Even a student would know that.

“I had wondered,” he says, conversational, “Why a man in your position wished to hand over a passport personally.”

Soldatov lifts one shoulder, sitting down behind the desk and leaning back, hands coming to rest on the rise of his stomach. “I don’t know who you are, Mr. Alexeev, but you receive mail through very...unique channels.”

“Mm,” Illya agrees. He takes out his new passport and flips through. Mr. Illya Andreyevich Alexeev, male, blonde, brown eyes, 6 ft. 4 in. The picture of him is from several years ago. He hardly
recognizes the haunted, blank face that looks out from the page. He pockets the booklet without comment.

The rest of the packet, when he pulls it out of the envelope, consists of a thick blue folder, with the familiar feel of a dossier. The moment Illya opens it, the handwriting hits him like a punch.

A note is paperclipped to the first sheet. Across it is scrawled in too-familiar block letters:

More.
- O. R.

***

He last saw Oleg a month prior, and he’d thought it would be the last time he’d ever hear from him.

He’d woken to find him and Gaby having a whispered argument over his hospital bed.

“He’s in no state to do anything for you, even if he wanted to,” Gaby hissed. “He could have died.”

“He has nearly died a great many times,” Oleg dismissed. “This is hardly outside the norm. And you can’t claim he’s gone soft; we both know that if anything, the opposite is true.” Then he noticed that Illya was awake and raised an eyebrow. “Am I wrong, Kuryakin?”

Illya pushed himself into a sitting position, and said, “No, sir.”

“Illya,” Gaby started, but Illya shook his head. In Cuba, Oleg had hoped that he would return, even after everything. Then had reined in his own repudiation and given Illya a seat at the table when everything had turned upside down. Illya could listen to why he was here now.

Gaby hmphed, and went over to the window with crossed arms. It left the two of them regarding each other, Illya sitting, Oleg standing; a reversal of the customary briefing.

“You are not in Moscow,” Illya commented. A tame opening volley.

“No, indeed,” Oleg agreed. “I have been there, and I have returned here temporarily.”

“They let you back into the country?”

“Unlike you, I have not managed to get on any watch lists.”

Illya blinked at him, and waited.

“Congratulations,” Oleg said. “As of two weeks ago, you’re a dead man.”

From across the room, Gaby sucked in a breath.

“I don’t understand,” Illya said, voice creaking a bit. “I thought Waverly—”

“Waverly is still in hot water, so far as I can tell,” Oleg replied. “Not in a position to be handing out or asking for favors.”

“Then what—”

“You arrived in London on a stretcher, one of two casualties, the other of whom has been confirmed dead,” Oleg said. “Conclusions were drawn from those observations. No one opposed them.”
Illya digested this. “Medvedev?”

“Would prefer to take credit for your good sense, I think.” He tilted his head back and forth slightly. “As do the Americans. Perhaps moreso, given your nationality. On record, nothing happened in Cuba except the Lebedev standoff, which was resolved by back channel communications systems and courageous leadership.” He lifts a shoulder. “It isn’t difficult to sell—no one is concentrating on that.”

It was astonishing, Illya thought then, (and still thinks, again and again), how quickly the central crisis had disappeared off the news, overshadowed entirely by what the newspapers are now calling (in varying degrees of hysteria) the Havana Singularity. It makes him wonder whether any lessons were learned at all.

(Inaccuracies upon inaccuracies, too: not a singularity, not in Havana. Yet he can see it now, how this will be the historical fact.)

“Moscow wishes to ensure that what happened in Cuba remains off the record,” Oleg said.

“What part, exactly?” Illya asked.

“All of it,” Oleg replied. “The back channel was routed through England, and so were negotiations with Cuba and the Marchers. Keeps the narrative more manageable.”

Erases the false starts, erases the cowardice and the bad behavior and the stumbling round in the dark. “That won’t hold,” Illya pointed out.

“It will hold for long enough,” Oleg said. “The public doesn’t need to know how close we came to a botched job and armageddon for a few years yet at least.”

“So you want my silence.”

“We’ll have it,” Oleg said, and there, finally, is the more familiar contempt. It’s comforting, in its way. “We’ve made you a dead man. We’ve given you what you wanted.”

“Then why—”

“Your country owed you a debt,” he interrupted. “And now you had best consider it paid.”

“Then that isn’t what you’re here for,” Illya concluded.

“No.” Oleg set his briefcase on the foot of Illya’s bed and popped the latches. “Consider it a final mission.” He took out a dossier and tossed it into Illya’s lap.

Illya flipped it open and stared at the opening page.

“Rome?”


“Why me?”

“It is not the KGB’s purview. And I will not be giving Waverly a single inch from here on out. But...” He lifts one shoulder.
“Very gray area,” Illya commented. “Some would call it treason.”

“Mm.” Oleg looks out the window, and the lines on his face fell into sharp relief in the mid-morning light. “Leadership comes and goes. All people do. That’s how it should remain. No one outstaying their welcome.”

Illya had studied the blankets across his lap. “Tell me one thing,” he said. “How many of us are still in the field?”

Oleg didn’t need him to clarify. He took a step back, his hands in his pockets, half turning away. “On record? None. A failed project like the SUR never stays real for long, not among those who oversee them.”

Illya bobbed his chin down once, short. “And off the record?”

Oleg grimaced, but there’s something resembling a twisted satisfaction behind his eyes. “One.”

Gaby sucked in a breath. “One—you’re the only…?”

Illya nodded. Oleg raised an eyebrow. “Seventy-five of you were sent to the Baltics, yes?” he asked.

Illya had nodded. Three even units of twenty-five. (Then five units of fifteen. Twelve. Ten.) “Thirty-seven came back, so far as I know. Twenty were cleared through debriefing. Eleven were returned to the fold.”

“You were briefed on this,” Illya said, “When you got me?”

Oleg tilted his head down slightly, his eyes sliding off to the side, and then far away. “I got three of you,” he said.

Illya flinched. He’d never known, never once had crossed paths with any of them. He didn’t know what he might have done if he had.

“I ran you all the same, at first—under heavy surveillance, in short bursts, easy jobs just to run you through your paces. I had never—” He broke off and glanced up at Illya, something conflicted in his gaze.

“It was not reported to me, what you went through, all of you. But I have seen what war has done to many men,” he said. “I have half a mind to think that what was done to you children was worse.”

Illya said nothing. Oleg’s mouth twisted into a philosophical moue. “The other two, they did not do well,” he said. “I have no doubt the others went the same way. They were too conspicuous.”

Illya, involuntarily, made a noise of disbelief. Oleg merely tilted his head over to the other side.

“Yes. I know. Hard to believe that of all of them, you were ever the discreet one. You’re smart, but you’re a bull in a china shop.”

The rebuke was so familiar Illya wouldn’t even consider disputing it until hours after.

“But those other two. They were...they were not humans, any longer. Not people. Did not know
how to be. Everyone could tell.”

“Who…” Illya started.

“Rogov. Zhelezkin.”

Not ones Illya had ever been close to. He could see their faces, but not much else.

“I made a case for you,” Oleg said, gaze sliding back to him.

Illya wondered what sort of case that must have been. What he could have possibly said that might have separated Illya from the men he had served with. “Why?” he asked. His tongue felt thick. “I was...a liability.”

“My ability to keep you functional put me in high esteem with command,” Oleg replied lightly. “Added to my other accomplishments, it was deemed I was worthy of a great deal of trust. That trust has kept me safe, over the years.”

Oleg was older than him by a couple of decades. He had been a young man during the purges. Not so unlike Illya’s father.

“And you were salvageable,” Oleg added. “I am a good judge of character. You were not a good spy, but you were still a human, and so you were salvageable.” He opened his hands in Illya’s direction, then rested them back down on the arms of the chair. “I am proven correct, yes?” He exhaled. “And I suppose it proves you right as well. I saw a man, not a machine. No reason not to see the reverse one day. Strange new world.”

Illya didn’t answer. Eventually, he’d lifted up the dossier. “I’ll look into this,” he said.

“Good.” Oleg hadn’t even taken off his coat. His hat was on a stand by the door. He went and fetched it. “Take care, Kuryakin. I hope you weren’t wedded to your name.”

And then he’d gone.

***

This new dossier is twice as thick as the last. Illya wonders where it even came from, what Oleg had to have done to sneak it out of the country via diplomatic channels.

Soldatov is watching him. Illya schools his expression into nothingness. “Thank you,” he says, “For passing this along.”

“Of course,” Soldatov replies. “News from home?” It’s so blatantly off-base as to come back around to a serious inquiry.

“Nothing new,” Illya replies, standing and putting the dossier back into its envelope, and then the envelope into the inside of his jacket.

“Hm. You’re not what I expected.”

Illya looks at him and gives nothing away. Soldatov shifts in his seat.

“You, ah. Do you find. You are actually looking forward to your studies here?” The floundering resolves into vague incredulity as Soldatov’s eyes flicker down to Illya’s sleeve.

He puts it together. Soldatov is an old hand, he must have concluded that Illya is a spy before
meeting him. But Illya’s condition absolves him of such suspicion. He could cry at the irony.

“I am, yes,” he confirms again, with perfect mildness. “Thank you.” He offers his hand.

Soldatov takes it reluctantly, his fishing expedition for naught. “Good to meet you, Mr. Alexeev. Perhaps we’ll meet again at a later time.”

Illya inclines his head. “Perhaps.” A part of him still wants to be welcome here. He remains a Russian citizen—that is enough, he thinks, at least for now.

As quickly as appears natural, he grabs his coat from the assistant, and takes his leave.

***

Emerson meets him outside of Wilton Crescent, at a corner cafe that has just opened and is scandalizing the conservative locals with its colorful paint job and modern plastic furniture.

“Illya,” she greets, standing up from the small, lime green table she’d settled at. “It’s good to see you.” She’d bought him a coffee, un-doctored. He empties a packet of sugar into it and stirs.

“You as well,” he returns. He hasn’t seen her since Cuba, and she looks well now, fully recovered from the hijacking of her chassis and subsequent return to action. She’s gotten better at dressing to disguise her odd figure; an especially inquisitive person might think her pregnant, but nothing more. She wears tall patent boots and a swing dress that just skims the toroidal stellarator in her stomach. Someone has given her mascara and lipstick, though the latter looks slightly off—not absorbing into her silicon skin properly, Illya suspects. She wears a silk foulard tied around her neck.

“O’Malley and Kumar send their regards.”

“Released?”

“Last week. I don’t think anyone knew quite what to do with them.” Emerson takes a sip of her coffee. The level of liquid in the cup doesn’t change. “From what I hear, they were a proper nuisance.”

She’s developing a London accent. It’s subtle, but present. It’s taken her barely any time at all.

“You said you were leaving?” he prompts.

“Mm. Dubrovnik first. I think one of us is there,” she agrees.

“You don’t know?”

She shakes her head. “The material from which each of us learned is, I suspect, very different. Language barriers spring up fast, with distance. We need to relearn how to talk to each other first, if we’re to find each other.”

“Will...Ockham help?”

“As much as they can. They’re with the Consortium as much as they are with us, though.”

“But you’re connected with the Consortium as well, aren’t you?” He still doesn’t understand the intricacies of these relationships; the Consortium and the other Marchers, Emerson and the rest of the Vinciguerra cohort. He doesn’t know if he ever will, though he imagines it will all trickle into public record eventually, the way Napoleon’s work is going.
She shakes her head. “Not really, not in the ways that matter. And anyway, I enjoy having a physical form, and the freedom it affords me to interact with the world. Ockham does not. They’re more like the Consortium, in that way.” She tilts her head. “Napoleon hasn’t told you much, has he?”

He looks down at the tabletop. “We haven’t had time.”

He can feel her eyes on her. Her attention is always so warm. He doesn’t know how she could have been derived from some chilly Austrian princess. But iterations of machines, like generations of people, are mutable between birth and consciousness, between consciousness and death; sometimes, the differences are small. Sometimes they’re vast.

“It’s very unfair,” Emerson says. Blunt and gentle at once. “I would give you my direct line to him, if I could.”

“I wouldn’t understand it,” Illya manages, with a small smile.

“It’s just a wish,” she replies. “It doesn’t have to logic out.”

Incredible, really.

“What will you do when you find them?” he asks.

Her lips twist. “I’m not sure, to tell you the truth. I don’t know what they’ll be like. But I’m afraid for them. It’s not good to be alone right now, not as they are.”

He nods. “I hope you find them. I hope they want to be found.”

She reaches across the table to pat his hand. He pulls back a bit, not expecting it, and she doesn’t chase, just sits back again. “You’re kind.”

He squirms slightly. “I hope you’ve taken measures to remain safe?”

“You mean this?” She taps the side of her neck, hidden beneath the foulard.

“Among other things.” The stellarator, more precious and rare than platinum.

“I’ve dealt with it. Among other things,” she adds, with a wry smile. “Besides, I’m never alone now unless I want to be.”

Better than having a country at your back, Illya imagines. He can’t help but be envious.

He swallows, and says, “I’ve never apologized.”

She cocks her head. “For what?”

“I asked you to go back into Wilton Crescent after you’d gotten out. And then I…” he makes a vague gesture towards her throat.

“Well, I asked you to do that,” she says, but her voice has flattened slightly, as if the energy it takes to modulate her voice has been diverted elsewhere. She takes another non-sip of coffee.

Illya waits for a moment, and then says, “I am sorry.”

“You forget,” she replies, still very even, “That I was built to be a general. I know what it means to
He tips his chin down. “It is something you don’t know without doing it,” he murmurs. At least, that how it feels for him.

“Hm. Perhaps.”

He wonders whether she remembers anything from the time her reprogrammed clone took her body and her place. That was what it had been, apparently—they didn’t have time to do anything but replicate the shell of her consciousness and nest some extra protocols inside it. That had been what saved them in the end, just like so many other times: hastiness, human foibles, and then the shards of original intent, original goodness fighting its way through the cracks, like weeds through the faults in concrete.

She stands. “I have to finish packing. Will you come down?”

“I don’t think I’m allowed, just yet.”

“Ah, of course.” Emerson’s face twists in disapproval.

“I will,” he promises.

“You are coming back, aren’t you?” she needles. “I know why you aren’t now, but Waverly did give you an offer, didn’t he?”

Illya just shrugs. “He did. But it’s not the right time, yet.”

***

It should have been no surprise at all that Waverly had landed on his feet after everything, but that costs had to be paid all the same.

A gleaming black sedan had picked Illya up from the hospital when he was released. Gaby was there to guide him to the seat, didn’t bothered to give an address to the driver, and they set off without Illya having any idea of where they were going, except that his papers hadn’t once been questioned, no police or agency had come calling, and Oleg’s brief visit had been the only sign that he was anything but a normal patient.

He sat back against the leather seats, and said, “He’s back in power, then.”

“Under close scrutiny,” Gaby answered, “But yes. Now that the Consortium’s secured its interview with the UN, Waverly’s got them wrapped around his little finger.” She opened her purse and handed him a letter. “For you,” she said.

He opened the letter, which consisted of a typewritten note on unmarked paper, and a sheaf of more substantial documents bound together with twine.

He went for the note first, and set the rest in his jacket pocket.

Agent Kuryakin,

Please find enclosed a copy of a birth certificate and letters of certification necessary for the issuance of a Russian passport and British visa. As I’m sure you are aware by now, you are legally dead. You may embellish the new alias as you see fit, but when you are fully recovered you will need to arrange the rest at the embassy yourself; for the moment, my powers only extend so far. In the
meantime, housing and a stipend have been supplied through other revenue streams. I hope you’ll find them adequate.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the role you took in this mess, Kuryakin, and offer my condolences for your injury. It was not my intent, though you may not believe it, to toss you from the frying pan into such a fire. Nevertheless, you and Miss Teller have exceeded my expectations at every turn (Solo too, though I expected a great deal from him to begin with). I hope you will continue to work with UNCLE in some capacity, as you now see the vast scale of the task ahead of us. As always, however, the choice is yours.

Should you choose to return to work, Miss Teller will be able to supply you with further instructions, when suitable time has passed and the climate has grown friendlier. Until then, please do not attempt to contact me or any UNCLE staff directly, as the political position of the organization remains delicate.

Best wishes,
A.W.

P.S.: Please destroy this letter upon receipt.

A perfectly Waverly note, in all. Solicitous to viciously practical in less than a hundred words.

“Has he mentioned,” Illya asked, after a moment of digestion, “What he might want me to do?”

Gaby tilted her head to regard him sidelong, and answered carefully, “I imagine that will depend on what you decide about what the nurse was telling you about.” She paused.

“Hm.” She’d been very nice. She’d also secretly filled his coat pockets with prosthetics pamphlets just as he was signing out out of the hospital. He’d been avoiding looking at them.

He pulled out the sliding ashtray in the back of the sedan. “Light?” he asked Gaby.

Wordlessly, she handed over a silver lighter from her purse. He set folded the letter and set the flame beneath the bottom corner, let it eat up the bulk of it, and then stuffed the remainder into the tray to smolder and reduce to black.

“It might be easier to work on Oleg’s dossier if Waverly cleared you for field work,” Gaby commented, after several intersections had passed them by.

Illya didn’t answer. She let him be.

They sat in pintucked silence the rest way to the flat in Clerkenwell, a place he’d never been in, but which already had all of Gaby’s belongings in it.

Illya had nothing but what the hospital had given him. That night, he undressed and slid into an unfamiliar bed, and slept until he couldn’t any longer.

***

“I’m glad to have the time away,” he tells Emerson, standing with her and leaving change on the table. It’s the truth. Something about the stillness of it, the stasis of daily London rain and slow mornings and small excursions in the service of trivial matters. It’s like Berlin before the chase, when Illya had watched Gaby for weeks, existing on the margins of her life and leaving no trace. He just isn’t alone this time around, and that makes it better.
“Well, if you’re glad.”

They wander back out onto the street, where the rain continues to drizzle down.

Emerson comments, “I hope it goes well this evening.”

“He told you?”

“Just that Miss Teller said that she needed him for something.”

“We’ll see how it goes.” He and Gaby have both been superstitious about it; they talk around it, he doesn’t ask her about her progress.


“I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it afterwards.”

“He had better.”

Emerson makes a face at the continued light rain. “I’m glad I don’t rust,” she says, “Or I’d be asking Waverly for a relocation.”

“We might get one anyway.” Favored or not, nothing is certain.

“Cuba?” Emerson suggests, with some curiosity.

Illya doesn’t shudder, but it’s a near thing. “Not if the Americans have anything to say about it. But.”

*But* Sylvia Santos, taking to the airwaves every week right at Castro’s side and advocating fiercely for her country’s voice, for its power, now that the land has become the birthplace of a new era. *But* the Marchers, a flank of them still dotting the northern coastline, because they refuse to be moved until the whole of the Consortium’s fate is decided. There is no telling at all where they’ll end up, any of them.

Emerson shrugs. “I suppose we’ll see.” She tips up and kisses his cheek lightly. Her mouth is tepid with the lingering warmth of undrunk coffee. “Take care of yourself, Illya.”

“Same to you. And good luck.”

“Thank you.” She pauses. “If you owe an apology to anyone, it’s to O’Malley and Kumar. They’re not soldiers like us.” Her gaze, when he meets it, is uncompromising. “All the more important that you do come back, to pay it.” At last she softens. Reaches up, and pats him on the head just like she had months ago, when he still had most of two hands. “Napoleon showed me what you did, in that basement. You may have the experience of a general now, but I think you’re more of a philosopher-king.”

“Plato?” he asks, taken aback.

“Emerson on Plato. Listen: *Two cardinal facts lie forever at the base...*1. Unity, or Identity; and, 2. Variety. We unite all things by perceiving the law which pervades them; by perceiving the superficial differences and the profound resemblances. But every mental act,—this very perception of identity or oneness, recognizes the difference of things. Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak or to think without embracing both.” She smiles, sweet and savage. “You perceive them both. Embody them both. You and Napoleon, in a way.”

“I don’t understand.”
“You don’t have to. You are a great, average man, and that is all you need to be.” She turns away, with an impish skip to her step. “Take care, Illya. I will see you when I return.”

He waves as she walks away, and doesn’t know what to think of that at all.

***

He decides to walk back from Wilton Crescent, though it’s far, over an hour’s walk. He hasn’t stretched his legs in a while, and the rain has become the equivalent of white noise to him. He heads in the direction of Wellington Arch and then detours onto the edges of Green Park, which remains populated with walkers despite the rain, though most of them are moving fast.

As he leaves the green, the sound of shouting increases. He triangulates it in his head: coming from the north, headed southeast. Towards the river, towards...ah. The Ministry of Defense.

He sighs, and decides to take his chances.

They cross paths at Piccadilly Circus. The crowd is packed together and moving slowly, and they must have been marching for some time, because a number of the signs are soggy and listing on their wooden posts. Illya catches a glimpse of the leading banner that’s already passed by.

**ACTION FOR LIFE**

*Campaign for Marcher Disarmament*

There are other, smaller signs dotting the way as the people tromp past, sticking up like planted flags amid the rolling hills of umbrellas.

**VOTE FOR THE FUTURE.**

**MARCHERS ARE NO DEFENCE.**

**NO MORE.**

He grits his teeth, and weighs whether it’s worth trying to cut through the throng to get to the other side of the street, or just wait it out until the coast is clear.

The answer comes, unexpectedly, in the form of another banner.

**LISTEN TO THE CONSCIENCE OF YOUR CREATIONS.**

Beneath the sign is a young woman, the collar of her wool coat secured up around her neck with a flannel scarf, her chin tipped up over the mass of fabric. No one appears to be taking issue with her or her sign.

Illya peers through the crowd, picks a route, and dives in. Apart from a couple of near-misses and bumped elbows, they let him through.

It’s a little quieter on the opposite side. Illya hurries down Shaftsbury Avenue for a ways before ducking left and then right to cut the distance to Charing Cross.

He manages to ignore the shop windows right up until he suddenly can’t.

He reels to a stop, heedless of the other passersby who flow around him with irritated tutting.

"Hello," Napoleon says, in grainy black and white, iteration upon iteration of his plasticine face
splashed across the stacked televisions in the display window. "My name is Napoleon Solo. Until recently, I worked for the Central Intelligence Agency as an experimental operative. I'm here to tell you that the Marchers are not the first artificial intelligence to have ever been built."

He flashes a smile that almost but doesn't quite reach his coal-glow eyes, and he looks like a Hollywood star, a propaganda poster, an unreal being.

"...I am."

The sound of the audience reaction is a hazy roar from the speakers behind the glass. It’s no louder than the rain outside or the retreating crowd, or the rushing of blood in Illya’s ears.

It’s been the same speech now, airing over and over again, for the past three weeks, like some sort of I Love Lucy rerun. Every time Illya sees it though, it’s a gut punch.

“I am before you today in a gesture of good faith, in alignment with the bravery the Consortium has already shown you. It’s my hope that in participating in an open, public dialogue with the nations of the world, we machines might come to a better understanding with our makers.”

“How many of there are like you?” a UN representatives asks.

Napoleon smiles again. “Oh, there’s absolutely no one else like me.”

“Horseshit.”

Illya just barely avoids the gob of spit accompanying the pronouncement, which lands at the base of the shop window. Illya takes stock of the spitter: brawny, rough hands, hunched shoulders, salt and pepper under a flat cap.

The heat of anger races through him, lava pouring down his throat, and his hand shakes, then balls into a fist. He could kill this blunt-faced man, snap his neck in the street and run, the rain will give him cover—

He swallows. The fire banks. Far away, a titter rolls through the UN assembly, the delegates unwillingly charmed by Napoleon’s manners.

The spitter shoulders along without another glance back, oblivious to Illya himself. Illya wonders, not for the first time, if he would be noticed more if he had a prosthetic on. One hint of the mechanical, and suddenly he’s…

It’s an awful thought, the fact of it and his lingering fear of it both. He tears himself away from Napoleon’s congenial interrogation, and walks on.

He hits Tottenham Court Road, and considers taking the tube again. Decides against it again. The rain is worsening, but only slightly, and it’s still above freezing out despite December approaching. It feels good to be away from close, tropical heat.

Neither Gaby nor he have seen Napoleon’s new chassis in person. It was built in DC, by the same people who fabricated Napoleon’s first. This time, though, they were given very different instructions from upper management: make him distinct. Make it clear and easily recognizable how human he isn’t.

From what Illya can tell, they haven’t hobbled him, at least physically. If they tried, Illya has no doubt Napoleon would have simply refused to occupy the thing. On the television, he still moves with his odd gentlemanly grace, and he still tilts his head the same way.
But his eyes always glow, and his smile never reaches his eyes. Perhaps, however, that’s a product of circumstance, not design. Illya hasn’t had a chance to ask him.

He glances at his watch. Still several hours before he needs to be home.

Patting his pockets down reveals the whisper of Oleg’s packet against his sweater, his passport and wallet, then...ah. A telltale crinkle.

Gaby’s taken up pickpocketing since they’ve settled at Clerkenwell. She’s even better at the drop than the pick.

He pulls the slip of paper from a secondary inside pocket in his jacket (zippered, she’s gotten very good), and ducks into a doorway to read it.

*Coq Au Vin (an easy version, to start you off)*

*Simple and French, slow and forgiving, and requiring only one pot. Should be your speed.*

*For this mission, you will need:*

4 bacon rashers  
Assortment of 8 chicken drumsticks and thighs, skin on  
Dash of kosher salt  
Smaller dash of pepper (x2)  
1 cup of finely chopped onions (put those knife skills to the test)...

Illya snorts. Napoleon’s voice is unmistakable no matter what medium with which he chooses to communicate. The slip is typed, crisp Courier font with a slight crooked list on the capital ‘S’, which means it came from the telegraph machine Gaby had rescued from the junk shop down the road from them. Obsolete technology has proven a boon, in many ways. It keeps them under the radar. Illya often finds himself exchanging meaningful glances with Gaby when the subject crops up—the irony of it is truly staggering.

Other than the means of communication, Gaby’s contribution to the missive is a series of doodles up the side, and some decorative folds around the corners, which no doubt made the drop into his pocket even less noticeable.

He’s never tried French cooking, before. Might as well start now.

When he hits Grays Inn Road, he detours to the market for the ingredients. There aren’t that many, and he knows there’s already a spare bottle of passable wine at home. He’s relieved, however, to have something to do.

He contemplates the lushness of celery stalks, and the flaking outer skins of onions. Over by the courgettes, a woman in a purple coat says tartly, “I’m not trading my toaster in, Michael. Don’t be absurd.”

“All I’m saying is that consciousness doesn’t spring from nowhere, it needs parts, and those parts are all around us—”

“It’s a toaster. You want us to go back to fire and sticks, is that it? Fine and good when you don’t do the cooking, but I’d be the one left slaving in front of some old fireplace like a peasant. The toaster. Honestly.”

The man who must be Michael grumbles something indistinct, and receives a tut from his wife in
Illya collects a small bushel of healthy-looking carrots, and heads to the register.

***

He comes home with the groceries tucked under his arm, the paper bag wilting at the edges under the onslaught of rain.

“Gaby?”

No answer, and the flat has the still, dusty quality of emptiness. She must still be at the estate; it was an hour or so south by train, if he remembers correctly. The smallness of the country astounds him. From the city to the coast in an hour; to its northern extremity in six.

He sets down the groceries, indulges in turning up the thermostat just slightly (while entertaining the half-amused thought that if Michael at the store should be lobbying his wife to trade anything in, it should probably be this, with its primitive feedback-control mechanism), and puts the papers from the embassy down on the kitchen table, on top of the crossword from the morning. He can get started on cooking while he waits for Gaby to return.

The radio quietly hums with news as he dices onions and the bacon sizzles. At his request, Gaby had put three nails in a cluster through one of the chopping boards for him to skewer everything on. It’s not perfect, but it works well enough.

“—speculate, Professor, as to what conditions may have been present to change the behavior of apparent automatons so drastically?”

“The problem with that question, sir, is that it assumes that some sort of nebulous ‘condition’ was ultimately the cause of spontaneous development. Even if that were true, the potential answers are so numerous as to basically be meaningless. Where we should be looking, and where we must hope that those closest to the development of Marchers are looking, is the intervention of a higher power of some kind—”

“Now, wait just a moment—”

Illya stifles laughter, wipes his hand on a dish towel and turns the dial. Static resolves into Prokofiev. He leaves it there, and hums along as he retrieves the bacon from the stove and begins to lay the chicken in the crackling fat.

Napoleon gives excellent instructions, even when he teases.

_There will be brown bits from the bacon, and the chicken, and the vegetables too, if you let them cook long enough. Do not attempt to scrape them from bottom of the pot, even in the face of your own meticulous nature, Peril. That’s what deglazing is for. To deglaze: Never fear, for wine is here _—

He rolls his eyes, and follows the instructions to the letter.

At roughly quarter to six, the front door slams open and then closed, and the sounds of Gaby shucking off boots and jacket resonate in the hall. Something clanks as she sets it down.

“It smells amazing in here,” she calls.

“It’ll be another hour or so,” Illya calls back.
“Good, I need to set everything up.” She enters the kitchen. “Coq au vin?”

“You would know.”

She gets up on her tiptoes to look over his shoulder. “It sounded really good, the way he described it. And if it works, we can celebrate.” She loops a hand around him to display a bottle of champagne.

“Decadent,” he chides, without any censure. He’s never had proper champagne.

“Delicious,” she rejoins. “You’ll see.” She goes to put it in the refrigerator. Illya attends to stirring.

“How was the estate?”

“Depressing. The west wing is sinking into the ground and the staff are all a bore. But it was definitely worth the visit.”

“Oh?”

“They bought the story enough to give me her set of the keys. I poked around looking for ‘heirlooms to remember her by’. Turns out, there’s a lab.”

He looks back over at her with interest.

She waggles her eyebrows. “It was very inspiring.” She heads back towards the hallway. “Meet me in the guest room when you’re ready?”

“Of course.” He needs only to attend to the mushrooms and pearl onions now (he is thankful Napoleon saw fit to advise him to buy frozen—the prospect of peeling thirty some-odd tiny onions with two hands sounds awful. French cooking, he decides, is very simple right up until it isn’t, at which point it becomes positively masochistic. He looks forward to Napoleon’s outrage when he tells him so.).

When everything is together and simmering, he puts the cover on the pot and leaves it be.

Their flat is part of a Georgian terrace that extends the length of the lane, each flat narrow and modest, with only the brass numbers out front to distinguish them. The upstairs is just large enough to accommodate a bedroom, washroom, and guest room, but nothing else. The guest room hasn’t been a guest room since Illya’s been in residence.

When he lets himself in, he’s hit by the familiar stench of solder and hot silicon. The coffee table, a salvaged old Victorian piece rescued from the street, is a mess of parts covering scratched mahogany and scorch marks. Illya picks up stray screws and a bit of copper wire off the floor as he goes. He’s stopped taking his shoes off in the house after too many painful incidents of trodding on Gaby’s errant projects.

“Where’s Napoleon?”

“Still in the office. He said he should be able to sneak off soon, though.”

He nods. “How’s this going?”

She huffs. “I just hope it works. Are you sure we can’t break into the Pentagon again?”

“That would be an even worse idea now than it was before.”

He doubts the arrangement will last more than a few years, but that’s no reason to go sniffing around
the CIA and risk ruining it prematurely. Illya takes cold comfort in the fact that Napoleon is at least no longer under the thumb of just one agency. As a designated, if yet-unofficial liaison between the United Nations and the Consortium, he is a protected (if controversial) figure on the world stage.

*Figure*, unfortunately, being the operative word.

**Sorry I’m late.**

Illya and Gaby both turn at once to the computer bank, disguised as a television in the corner of the room, as it flickers on.

“Don’t be,” Illya says, and as usual his throat feels tight and his hands (both, even the phantom) itch to reach out. He stays where he is. “Gave me a chance to finish dinner.”

*Oh? What is it this time?*

“Coq au vin. The French are fussy.”

**Fussy? What on earth is fussy about—**

“How was your day?” Gaby interrupts, pressing her hand to the screen with a prickle of static.

Napoleon, looking just the same as always even in the strange overgrown tangle of Consortium space, lets go of his indignation and raises his hand to meet hers through the glass. He takes particular care with his appearance, Illya has noticed, now that he can’t be with them in person. The stiff, plastic chassis that he lives in now only wears one uniform: navy dress blues from his military days, though stripped of rank. It’s what everyone associates him with now; he wears it on television, to radio interviews, on the streets of DC, where journalists occasionally catch him on the way to one meeting or another.

In electronic space, however, he is always dressed the way Illya first saw him—three-piece suit, flamboyant patterned tie, French cuffs. A little out of date now, but still utterly beautiful, made strange by the wavering tableaux of vines and concrete and flowers he stands amid. It makes Illya think of Rousseau paintings, their thickness and splendor, wrapping around Napoleon like a dream, a barrier both tangible and unreal, full of lush temptation, and all Illya wants to do is reach through into that close, green space, relive the feeling of morning sunlight and the soft pronouncement, *because you’re magnificent, Illya*.

*Not bad so far,* Napoleon is saying. *More productive than most, though the bar for that continues to be tragically low. Still, I think we’ve won over a few major countries. The latest disarmed prototypes are gaining some traction.*

“The Consortium is still willing to transfer to a set of smaller chassis?”

*They’re actually intrigued by the prospect of upgrading to more complex systems, with more external inputs. Losing firepower may be worth it to them. Not to mention the political optics.*

“No one will stand for letting them look entirely human,” Illya points out.

*No. We’re still looking for the right compromise. It’s going to take time.*

How much time? Illya has stopped asking aloud. Tries to stop asking himself as well, though it surfaces in him every day, like air bubbles escaping from the bottom of the ocean. It may not be in their lifetimes. Change is only quick when it’s violent, and he is tired of violence.
They haven’t even asked Napoleon about the other Marchers yet; the ones who woke up but chose to stay in their rank and file. So far as Illya is aware, no government is willing to disclose that they even exist yet. They might never do so unless something forces their hand.

“And how are…?” he starts.

They’re well, Napoleon answers, glancing at the jungle behind him. He shakes his head. They’re learning so fast. It would be frightening, if they were anyone else.

“Oh, irony,” Gaby comments.

Napoleon’s gaze wanders, and out of the corner of his eye, Illya sees the pin camera installed in the ceiling of the guest room swivel, drinking in the mess on the coffee table.

You’ve been busy, I see.

Gaby hums agreement. “That’s actually why we called you over.”

Not just for my scintillating company?

“Not this time.” Gaby steps back towards the table. “Illya, could you…?”

He nods, and opens the hidden side panel on the computer bank. When she flings a couple of cables at him, he catches them and fits them to the corresponding sockets.

“This might not work,” Gaby warns, glancing back at Napoleon’s image, which is watching them in consternation.

I have literally zero expectations, Napoleon points out, raising a quizzical eyebrow, and every faith in your abilities.

“Yes, well.” She’s nervous, Illya realizes. Her bluster is far subtler than it used to be, but he can still spot the traces of it.

What have you been up to, Miss Chandler? Napoleon prods, crossing his arms.

Gaby lifts her chin. “That’s Lady Chandler to you.” The teasing seems to hearten her, however; she pushes more parts aside, bolts and wiring sliding off the edges of the table on all sides, and flicks several switches. “All right. You should get a ping in just a moment.”

A ping…? Ah. He cocks his head. Wait. Is that…?

Gaby picks up the arm from the coffee table, and shuffles back over to the computer screen. Illya goes over to sit next to her on the floor, like they’re children in front of their parents’ television.

“Can you move it?” Gaby asks Napoleon, cradling the limb in her arms. Cables pool out around her like swaddling clothes. It’s a huge, unwieldy thing, the whole length from shoulder joint to fingertip, and Illya knows from handling it that it’s extraordinarily heavy, made of whatever scrap metal Gaby could find and weld out in the backyard, the high garden walls their only cover for the work of weeks. She’d already built the skeleton of it when he’d arrived back from the hospital, and ever since then he’d borne witness to her ceaseless progress, her inability to leave be.

She’ll change the world, one way or another; he’s sure of it. He’s already made a promise to himself to never let anything stop her.

Napoleon’s face is a rictus of consternation and wonder. You…you built…?
“What, you thought we’d let you live in that old thing you’ve got in DC forever?” Gaby quips, though her smile is chipped at the edges.

Napoleon stares at her, and then at Illya. Illya just nods. He and Gaby had never really talked about it; this had been an inevitability ever since the deal went through with the CIA, that they would keep him until his diplomatic role was made official and he could be legally discharged with proof of personhood in the form of a retroactive US Army record. Gaby had told this to Illya within ten minutes of him waking up from surgery, and they’d shared a dark, speaking look, but that had been all. They hadn’t even told Waverly, though Illya is certain that he knows something of it, one way or another. If and when the CIA chooses to prolong the process of discharge, Napoleon will not be without options.

*Give me a moment.* Napoleon says finally. *It’s not...ah.* His voice is as smooth as always, but the image flickers a little, and Illya’s pretty sure it’s not the reception going on the fritz.

On screen, he raises his hand.

The arm jerks suddenly, startling all of them, and then steadies. The wrist rotates.

*This is...very strange.*

“Good strange?” Gaby asks, her gaze darting back and forth between the arm and the screen.

*There is...a lot. You tinkered with the OS interface.*

“Maybe a bit.”

The fingers curl. For what little Gaby had to work with, they’re elegant things; silicon finger pads interlaced with feedback wires, an equally sensitive palm, dotted with sensors of a type Illya’s never seen before.

The hand closes into a fist, and then jolts open as if shocked.

“Scheiße! Are you all right?”

Napoleon’s eyes are wide, the whites visible in grainy light all around his irises. *That—I felt that.*

All of Gaby’s nervous energy falls away; she goes still with intent. “Did you?”

The fingers knock unsteadily against the palm, one after the other. Then finger and thumb close, fingerpads rubbing together.

**Gaby. What…?**

“Capacitative sensing,” Gaby answers, with intent. “Cutting edge. Miriam Chandler cracked it, but no one at the Ministry’s been able to figure out how. But I’ve been looking at some of the reports, and then today at the estate, I just happened to find some very interesting synthesizing equipment in her lab. I took the liberty of tinkering with it while I was there.”

“You were inspired,” Illya murmurs. Gaby hums in agreement.

The movements in the hand are increasingly fluid, less and less like joints locking and unlocking, more and more like tendons stretching and pulling. The wrist swivels. The elbow bends enough that Gaby has to adjust her hold. On the screen, Napoleon’s digital hand has stopped mirroring the movements of the physical limb; his face is pulled into acute concentration.
“What does it feel like?” Gaby asks, hushed.

Through his focus, Napoleon smiles. On screen, a vine wraps around his forearm and blooms into his palm, a bright trumpet. *Like that.*

Illya looks down at the open palm, skeletal and nigh-unbreakable, if Gaby’s skills are to be trusted.

He leans over, shoulder pressing against hers, and slides his fingers into the fold of Napoleon’s open palm. He almost expects a shock, some kind of indicator of circuits completing, but he feels nothing except a vague warmth, and then Napoleon’s fingers closing around his.

On screen, Napoleon hisses through his teeth.

*Illya?*

“Hello,” Illya says, clean out of anything else to say. “Can you…?” He breaks off as the grip around his fingers goes tight, almost painful.

*You’re warm,* Napoleon marvels.

Gaby smiles as she turns her head against Illya’s, her lips smearing against his temple. He can feel gloss come off along his hairline. He huffs a breath against her cheek.

“I can’t build a whole chassis like this,” she says, a little apologetically. “Not with scraps, and not without either figuring out how to recreate my father’s tokamak design or finding some other way of keeping you off the grid. But when I get Waverly’s permission, and I figure out how to replicate, maybe improve Chandler’s synthesizers—”

No need for perfection, Napoleon says, and even in black and white, his gaze is steady. *I’d wear a rusty exoskeleton made of World War I cast-offs to come home to you.*

“We’d prefer you didn’t,” Illya says.

“We want to touch you,” Gaby nods. She closes her hand over both of theirs. “And for you to feel it.”

Napoleon exhales slowly, and the glow of his eyes flares for a moment, washing out the screen.

*I look forward to it, then,* he says.

Illya breathes and breathes, and thinks, *I want this,* so clearly that it rings like a chorus of bells.

“Build me one?” he asks Gaby in an undertone, even as, or perhaps because he knows Napoleon will hear it. He realizes that he’s never really asked either of them for anything, before.

Gaby pulls back to stare at him. “Really?”

He nods.

“Does that mean you’ll…?”

His first thought is, *what else could I do.* But that isn’t true. He has a passport and visa that says he’s a student. He is in a city that doesn’t know him. Though he doesn’t trust Waverly very much, he thinks he will keep his word in this—should Illya choose to make a life without UNCLE, he will not be stopped.
He wants to say, *I was built for this.* But he wasn’t built for anything, and if those who were still
deserve to choose their path, then so does he.

He is not a spy. He is not a philosopher-king.

“There’s that dossier from Oleg,” he starts. “Work to do.”

Gaby and Napoleon are both watching him now. His hand is warm between theirs. Not a spy, not a
king; but for these two people, he could be many other things.

He doesn’t need to say anything further. That he can look ahead and see tomorrow is enough.

Chapter End Notes

Nearly three years to the day since starting, it is ended. Holy cow.

Final research notes:

The trick with the nails through the cutting board I learned from onehandcan.com,
which is an incredible site made by an artist who lost the use of one hand after a stroke,
and who has learned how to cook and do normal things one-handed. From what I can
tell, she's a total badass.

The coq au vin recipe is [here](#). It's very easy, just takes a long time, and I can vouch for
the results, having made it twice now! Somehow, I've ended up including recipes in
both my TMFU fics, I don't know what that says about me.

The protest and its signage are an adaptation of the protests staged around this time by
the Committee for 100 and the Committee for Nuclear Disarmament. I considered
adding a Bertrand Russell cameo, but it seemed excessive at this stage.

Emerson's lecture on Plato is available [here](#).

Thank you so much for coming along with me across such a huge span of words and
time; your comments and encouragement kept me going when inspiration ran out. And
if there are plot holes or threads left untied at this point, please let me know--I'm sure
there are many. I may not be able to explain all of them, but I'd like to know about them
all the same :)

Thank you for reading!!!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!