# damage

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**damage**

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**Summary**

"When I found you, I thought you were dead. It seemed like your heart was not beating at all. And I thought... I thought, 'Please, God, don't let him be dead. I have just found him. Don't let me lose him.' "

**Notes**

Now with mouse-over translations for the Russian bits. (Any suggestions or corrections from native speakers on those parts would be highly appreciated.)

See the end of the work for more [notes](http://archiveofourown.org/works/5793184).
Illya parks in the shadow of a destroyed apartment complex on the outskirts of Dresden. Napoleon is conscious in the passenger’s seat, but only just; a hiccuping breath escapes him when the car bumps to a stop, but beyond that, he displays no reaction - just stays slumped exactly where he is, eyes as slits, chest barely rising when he breathes.

Illya turns the car off, then reaches over to search Napoleon’s neck for a pulse; it flutters weakly under his fingers, as sporadic as it has been for the past two hours.

“This is what you get for being idiot, Cowboy.” His hand stays on Napoleon’s neck; he can’t seem to drag it away, doesn’t want to stop feeling that thready, uneven beat under the pads of his fingers.

Napoleon’s breath hitches at the nickname and his eyes slide sideways, stopping when they find the Russian.

“Peril?”

He sounds lost, a little panicked. Illya leans toward him, sliding his hand around to tuck it under Napoleon’s head.

“Is alright, Cowboy. Do you know where you are?”

Napoleon doesn’t respond, just continues to stare at him, breathing in short little gasps. Illya places his hand instead on the American’s chest, frowns at the skittering of his heart.

“Is alright, Cowboy,” he says again, softly. “Is safe.”

“Illya,” breathes Napoleon, eyes darting around in the-near darkness of the car interior, lingering on the bomb-shattered buildings outside the windows.

“Solo. Take deep breath.”
Napoleon’s eyes slip closed, and he drags in a long breath - air rattling in his chest - and gasps on the exhale. Illya wants to press his mouth down over the American’s and take the burden from him, wants to move air in and out of Napoleon’s lungs himself.

Instead, he calls Waverly, and tells him to hurry.

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It was supposed to be a quick mission - “in and out and no mess,” as Napoleon would say. Illya, as a member of the KGB in good standing, could get them into East Berlin with relative ease, and from there they should have been able to pick up the trail of their quarry, a biochemical scientist notorious for selling to nasty people. But they hadn’t counted on the South American doctor, who had relocated to the Middle East and then to Europe a paltry few days ago, to have contacts on the USSR side. Unfortunately for the trio, the man had apparently managed to get on the payroll of THRUSH, who had posted a team on the other side of the Wall to await both him and his pursuers.

Solo had seen the ambush before Kuryakin did. Without a word to his partner, he burst from cover and made a run for it, a gambit that Kuryakin recognized not as a real escape attempt but rather as a blatant distraction to give the Russian a chance to escape. Furious, but knowing better than to pass up the opportunity now that he had it, Illya had slipped away, and allowed Solo to get captured.

He followed them to a hideout near Prague, calling Waverly on the way. Waverly said it would take some time to convince the Soviets to allow an extraction team through the Iron Curtain. Illya told him that Solo didn’t have time.

So he went in by himself, at his most covert: in and out and no mess. He only had to kill two people to recover Solo. Practically a record.

Unfortunately, it seemed Solo had already been compromised. He was lucid just long enough to tell Illya that their quarry was at the hideout and had injected him with something before going into a fit that made carrying him out to the stolen car and keeping him from biting his tongue all the way to the border quite a trial.

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A rickety, pale blue station wagon comes cruising through the apartment complex, rolling to a stop very near their hiding place. Illya gets out and circles around the car to get Napoleon, slinging his
partner around his shoulders in a fireman’s carry and hoping that Napoleon’s moan doesn’t mean he’s about to puke down Illya’s back.

“Is he alright?” asks Gaby from the driver’s seat, as Illya deposits Napoleon into the back and then climbs in after him, kneeling on the floor of the car by Napoleon’s head.

Napoleon’s lips form Gaby’s name, but no sound comes out, and he squeezes his eyes closed as she pulls cautiously away from the curb and back onto the road.

“They gave him something.” Illya bends over his partner, tucking large hands under Napoleon’s body and murmuring to him, “I roll you over. That way if you vomit, you don’t choke. Okay?”

The only response is a soft groan, and Illya does as he said he would. When he starts to draw his hands away, Napoleon reaches out to snag his wrist in weak fingers.

“Are we moving again?” Napoleon whispers, eyes still tightly shut.

“We are moving.”

“Are we okay?”

“Da. Gaby is driving.”

“Maybe not okay, then.”

“Glad to see he’s well enough for jokes,” says Gaby, not sounding very glad.

The corners of Illya’s lips twitch. He gently touches Napoleon’s temple, the side of his head. “You sleep, Cowboy. If you don’t, Gaby might decide to finish you off.”

“That would be a shame. To have survived everything else only to have Gaby end me.” Napoleon places his hand on top of Illya’s where it rests on his jaw, trapping it there. The Russian stiffens.
“Don’t think I won’t,” Gaby warns. Her eyes flick to them in the rearview mirror, then back to the road.

Illya frowns, but he doesn’t pull his hand away.

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By the time they reach the first friendly medical facility west of Leipzig, Napoleon is mostly coherent, though not entirely ready to sit up on his own. Waverly meets them at the door with a nurse and a wheelchair.

Illya is the one who moves Napoleon to the wheelchair, and when the nurse moves to take charge, Illya stares her down coldly. The woman gives Waverly an exasperated look, and Waverly smiles genially and waves her off.

“Whatever they gave you, it appears to be wearing off quite nicely, Mr. Solo,” says Waverly as he keeps pace with them down the hospital hallway. “I expect that, given a little ‘r-and-r,’ as it were, you will end up no worse for wear. This visit serves as a formality, really, but a necessary one. It wouldn’t do to have something escape our notice only to crop up and cause problems later.”


“If only you could apply that principle to your work,” laments Waverly. “This way, gentlemen.”

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Waiting outside the room like a disdainful Russian statue, Illya is eventually joined by Gaby, back from parking the car.

She crosses her arms in a stance mirroring his and leans back against the wall beside him, looking casually up and down the hallway before murmuring: “What happened?”
“We were expected,” Illya says from the corner of his mouth. “Cowboy gave himself up to give me chance to get away.”

Gaby nods. “Of course he did.” When Illya gives her a sharp look, she sighs, dropping her arms. “Oh, Illya. He may be smart about a lot of things, but he’s stupid about others.” Raising an eyebrow at him, she adds, “And you? Are one of the others.”

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Initially, Gaby had refused to become involved with the mission.

“I told you, I’m never going back over that wall,” she had said, before stalking out of Waverly’s office and leaving the other agents to work out the details without her.

Later, when Waverly told her about the call that had come from near the Czechoslovakian border, she dug her identification out of her clutch and dropped it onto his desk.

“She said, “in case I’m captured. Which vehicle should I take?”

“I can send someone else,” he said, clever eyes peering at her over his glasses.

She rolled her eyes. “You knew I would say yes. So tell me what I need to know, and let me go.”

The drive from the pro-tem headquarters in Luxembourg to the extraction point in Dresden felt like the longest of her life, though it probably wasn’t. She couldn’t stop thinking over all the ways this had already gone wrong: the THRUSH scientist had evaded them in the Netherlands, then again in Hanover, and fled over the Wall into East Germany; backup had been waiting on the other side, when Illya’s KGB intel had indicated no such thing; Napoleon had given himself up to make way for his partner’s escape; there was no way a rescue team could be on-site in time to be of any help.

She trusted Illya to get Napoleon out of whatever mess he had managed to get himself into. But she also knew that Napoleon was probably not going to come out of it entirely unscathed. He never did.
A doctor finally opens the door, and Illya shoulders his way in without waiting for an invitation.

Propped up against the pillow, still violently pale, Napoleon gives him a deprecating smile. “Well, the docs say I’m going to be alright, Peril.”

“It’s a quick-metabolizing substance,” adds Waverly, adjusting his glasses. “Should be out of his system fairly soon, although they can’t give us a precise timeline, since the drug itself is still, apparently, experimental.”

Illya frowns, moving past Waverly without a glance to stand beside the bed, arms folded across his chest once more. “What kind of experiment?”

“Well, we’re not entirely sure, ah, as of yet.” Waverly smiles politely at the Russian. “We’ve had samples sent back to New York. If this is what our Surinamese friend was working on, we’d like to get it analyzed as soon as possible.”

“What about Napoleon? Are they going to keep him much longer?” asks Gaby, tapping her foot almost imperceptibly.

“Not much longer, no. Only overnight, I think,” says Waverly, still with that same polite smile.

Illya refuses to leave.

“And if you are attacked?” he asks pointedly, completely ignoring Waverly’s protests in favor of persuading Napoleon. “They want to finish job, they track us down here, they find you, by yourself, probably asleep, bang, no more Cowboy.”

Napoleon cracks a grin. “And in a hospital gown, no less.” Glancing sideways at Waverly, he adds, “Actually, I wouldn’t mind some company. If something were to happen, I’m not entirely sure I could manage on my own. And we’re being safe, not sorry, remember?”
“I did say that, didn’t I? Very well, I deserve the consequences. Mr. Kuryakin, I must ask you to please remember that we would like to be allowed to use this medical facility again in the future, meaning please, please do not break any equipment, murder any orderlies, or cause any type of rumpus, ruckus, or other chaos. Please.” Waverly opens the door and nods at Gaby. “After you, Miss Teller.”

“He good, boys,” she says as she leaves.

Illya watches them go, waiting for the door to click shut before he draws up a chair and sits, regarding his partner seriously.

“You doing okay, Cowboy?” he asks. “Really.”

Napoleon smiles, but it’s tight. “I’m trained to deal with these things, the same as you are.”

Illya shrugs. “I deal with many things. Pain, torture. Drugs are… hard.” He shakes his head. “With drugs, you cannot trust yourself. For men like us, this is difficult. Who else can we trust?”

Napoleon shrugs back. “Each other?” he offers.

A flicker of surprise comes over the Russian’s face. He tilts his head to one side, studying Napoleon as if he’s never seen him before. Then he nods slowly.

“That is true,” he says. “Good answer, Cowboy.”

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Their first mission together after the Vinciguerra Affair was a disaster. Illya’s tracking equipment had proven inconsistent in Instanbul’s sticky, subtropical climate, and rather than pretend for a moment that he had a single rational bone in his entire body, Solo had gone completely off script, doing a lot of what he called “improvising” and Illya called “dumb Cowboy stunts.” Gaby, meanwhile, disappeared as soon as things started to go south, leaving the Russian certain that they had been betrayed. Again.
Through an unfortunate and utterly chaotic series of events that were very clearly everyone’s fault except his own, Illya ended up half-drowned a kilometer out from the coast of the Sea of Marmara. Not for the first time, Solo jumped in after him, towing him all the way back to shore and then performing chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until Illya vomited all over him and finally began breathing again.

Gaby, meanwhile, had seen the collapse of their plans from a mile away, and taken the mission into her own hands. She had lied, cajoled, and tiptoed her way into the nuclear laboratories on the Prince Islands, whereupon she had set about destroying everything she could find, including several critical control stations. Now, if she had had Napoleon with her, they might have been able to crack the safe and recover the top-secret documents that would have helped UNCLE trace the nuclear materials back to their origin; if Illya had been there, they might have even had the chance to take a prisoner or two, or at least to prevent the employees of the lab from scattering and reporting everything they knew back to their superiors within twenty-four hours. But as it was, she still managed to commit enough sabotage to more or less bring the place down around her ears. It would be of no use to THRUSH anytime in the near future.

So, in the way of the Vinciguerra Affair, Istanbul had gone all to hell - and somehow, through the strange serendipity that seemed to coalesce around the three of them, they had come through to the other side intact, and even, after a fashion, victorious.

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Napoleon comes to himself slowly, clawing back to wakefulness as if dragging himself out of a sucking black mire. There are low, worried voices around him, an unfamiliar woman speaking German, and then Illya, snarling back in the same language: “Leave it. It is bad dream. I will deal with it.”

He reaches out blindly, hooking his fingers into the fringe of Illya’s jacket and yanking. The Russian leans close to him, a whiff of his leather-and-whiskey scent making Napoleon dizzy.

“Easy, Cowboy.”

Napoleon struggles to open his gummy eyes, take a moment to register the sight of Illya seated next to the bed, bending over him as if to block out the rest of the room.

“Easy,” Illya says again, and Napoleon realizes for the first time that the Russian’s big palm is
resting on his chest, warming the hard nub of bone at the center.

“Ah,” he says, and closes his eyes again.

Illya is quiet for a moment. Then: “It seems bad. You are not usually noisy sleeper.”

Napoleon’s jaw tightens on reflex. He works to loosen it again, to relax enough to reply: “It’s bad.”

Every nerve in his body seems to focus in on Peril’s thumb when it moves, brushing slowly back and forth over his breastbone.

“It will fade,” Illya mumbles, stumbling over his words just slightly - he sounds awkward, Napoleon realizes, like he’s not certain that he should be trying to reassure Napoleon - “with time.”

“Right.” Napoleon breathes in to feel the weight of Illya’s hand on his chest as it rises. He wants to look at the Russian (he pictures Illya’s ice blue eyes, blonde eyelashes, the tight lines of his jaw), but his eyelids are too heavy to open. “Hey, Peril?”

He might be imagining the way Illya’s hand shifts, fingertips touching the hollow of his throat now, lightly, so lightly. He can’t open his eyes to see if the Russian is really leaning closer, or if he’s dreaming the way that whiskey-leather scent seems like it’s surrounding him.

“What, Cowboy?” whispers Illya, fingertips lingering over the pulse in the American’s neck.

Napoleon doesn’t respond. He’s asleep.

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Gaby calls early, even before Waverly sends a car to pick them up.

“I just wanted to check on you two,” she says. “No noise last night?”
“No. Everything is fine.”

“How is he?”

Illya glances at Napoleon, who is finally, now that it’s morning, sleeping quietly. There are dark rings under his eyes.

“He did not sleep much.”

Gaby’s silent for a moment before sighing and saying, “Well, bring him home in one piece, and we can take care of him here.”

“I will.”

Her voice is warm. “I know you will, Illya.”

She hangs up before he can say anything else.
Illya will do anything to get Napoleon to bed.

Their first time sharing a small space had been, unexpectedly, not that bad. For Gaby, anyway.

The group dynamic suited her. Napoleon alternately mocked, challenged, and doted on her, seeming more proud than put out when she was unimpressed. Illya, meanwhile, didn’t seem to quite know what to do with her; he was unwilling to actually hurt her and thus had no viable defense against either her genial bullying or her episodes of intense affection.

Of course, that was Gaby’s experience. The boys, who had barely managed to survive - Illya in danger of a rage-stroke, Napoleon in danger of being throttled with his own tie by Illya - might have thought differently. It would be some time - several more missions and many more safehouses - before the Russian and the American would seem to have come to a sort of tense parley. These days, Napoleon only irritated Illya on purpose half the time (rather than all of the time), and Illya had taken to often rolling his eyes instead of resorting to physical violence every time Napoleon teased, flirted, or otherwise provoked him.

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Home, for the time being, is a cottage in rural France, which Napoleon has half-filled with books out of which he is currently teaching himself - and Gaby - French.

It’s after dinner now, and Napoleon is poring over one of these books with a slight frown-wrinkle between his eyebrows. Finally, he sighs, closing the book and leaning forward with his elbows on the table, putting his head in his hands.

“Do you have a headache?” Gaby asks at once. She’s reading a book of her own, a newly-published Vonnegut novel in the original English, but she’s been keeping a sharp eye on Napoleon all day, alert to his every movement.

Rubbing his forehead in slow circles for a while, he smiles ruefully. “No ache. I’m just having trouble concentrating. It’s been a long couple of days.”
He doesn’t want to tell her that he’s been unable to focus his eyes for more than a few seconds at a time, and that those few seconds are difficult and painful. He knows what her response will be, and he’s not ready to retire for the night just yet.

Still watching him like a hawk over the top of her book, Gaby suggests, “You could ask Illya to read it aloud. He speaks French.”

"I know that." Lifting his gaze, he raises an eyebrow at her. "I do, however, find it interesting that you think he’d be agreeable to reading me a bedtime story.”

“Anything to get you to bed.”

Half a smile cracks his cool veneer. “If he really wants to get me into bed, speaking French to me wouldn’t be a terrible start. Although I could think of better.”

Gaby rolls her eyes. “Don’t tell me. Tell him.”

He looks almost affronted. "You think I haven't tried?"

"You've flirted. You've hinted. You've done everything except actually tell him. Honestly, I wish the two of you would just talk, for once. You're driving me crazy."

“I talk,” Napoleon defends himself. "He just doesn’t talk back.”

“That is because you talk enough for both of us.” As if summoned by the mention of him, Illya leans against the kitchen doorframe, arms folded across his chest, eyebrows raised. “You doing okay, Cowboy?”

Napoleon is rubbing his eyes vainly, with an air of impatience. “Quite alright, thanks.”

“Maybe you should - ”
“Please, do not suggest that I go to bed. I’ve had that one already, from her.” Napoleon jerks his thumb at Gaby. “I’ve spent quite a bit of time unconscious recently, forgive me if I’m a little starved for stimulation.” He indicates the French book.

Illya spares it a glance. “You can study your French in bed.”

The ex-thief sighs. “Peril, really, I don’t - ”

Illya looks at Gaby, who gives him a small nod. He turns his attention back to Napoleon. “You go, or I carry you. That is your choice.”

“Peril - ”

Illya circles around the table and swoops Napoleon up, tossing the American over his shoulder like a sack and carefully picking up the French book in his free hand.

“Illya!” Napoleon squirms for a moment. “Gaby! Do something!”

Gaby has already returned her attention to Vonnegut. “Get some rest, Napoleon.”

Napoleon considers. He’s not so weak in his current state that he couldn’t probably get Illya to drop him, but he’s afraid of the destruction that would occur in the meantime - not the least of which might be to his person - so he settles for vehement complaining. “You two are completely insufferable.”

Illya doesn’t bother responding to that. He carries Napoleon into one of the bedrooms - Napoleon’s own - and moves to drop him onto the bed, but Napoleon is suddenly clinging to him like an octopus. Illya doesn’t understand until Napoleon says mulishly, “If I go down, I’m taking you down with me.”

The Russian considers that for a moment. Then: “Fine.”

Napoleon doesn’t have time to react before Illya has him pinned to the mattress, looming close enough to steal Napoleon’s breath; then the Russian is slipping into the bed behind him, arms
around him to hold him in place, and holding up a book in front of his face.

“Study your French,” Illya says, his voice so full of satisfaction that Napoleon wonders dazedly how the two of them being in this compromising position together somehow turned into the Russian winning. But it seems that, somehow, that is what happened.

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Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20; but even now Napoleon can’t quite pinpoint the moment when he became so ridiculously, outlandishly, pitifully wrapped up in Illya Kuryakin.

It might well have been from that very first meeting, that human bloodhound tracking him all over East Berlin, chasing down a car, ripping the trunk off with his bare hands. He’d been almost sorry to see the KGB agent drop into the minefield between East and West Berlin, and had been almost relieved that he wasn’t instantly obliterated - though he might have retracted that sentiment when Illya was strangling him in a men’s washroom in front of both of their bosses.

Or maybe it had come later. Illya competing with him subtly as they broke into Vinciguerra’s factory, effortlessly disabling a security guard (it had looked like witchcraft to Napoleon), then looking dumbfounded and reluctantly admiring when Napoleon opened the safe. The way he mirrored the American’s turn of phrase when the alarm went off (loving your work, Cowboy).

Maybe from that very first time he saved Illya’s life - driving off the pier instead of driving away to safety, dragging Illya’s limp form to the surface, pumping his abdomen until he threw up all the water in his lungs and feeling an unexpected surge of intense relief. Or maybe when the tables turned and Illya saved him, that face in Uncle Rudi’s window with a finger to his lips, that genuine concern (you doing okay, Cowboy?), the steely calm and patience as he secured Rudi and freed Napoleon.

Maybe back in his hotel room after he’d invited Illya and Gaby up for a drink. With one glance at the Russian, he had known that the jig was up; Illya knew about the disc, and was here to kill him.

He hadn’t given Illya the watch merely as a strategy of saving his own life. If he had only been concerned about his own life, he could have easily taken the other agent out before the KGB ever discovered that the disc had survived - long before Illya would know to expect a double-cross. But he had thought that, if he was clever and careful, and his timing was impeccable, he might be able to forge something between them, something the CIA and the KGB couldn't touch.
And his gamble had paid off. He remembers the naked shock and vulnerability on Kuryakin’s face at the sight of his father’s watch. He remembers, too, the struggle, the uncertainty when he presented the possibility of betraying their respective agencies.

And he remembers drinking on the balcony with Illya, the disc burning on the table, satisfaction burning in his chest.

Only looking back did Napoleon realize what a turning point that was for him. Not the part about betraying the CIA; the part about trusting someone.

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Illya is holding him, murmuring to him in Russian as Napoleon comes to sweaty, shaky consciousness.

“P-Peril.”

“Da. Ya zdes’. Take deep breath, Cowboy.”

He’s not sure what possesses him to do it, except maybe the nightmare-fueled adrenaline, the silken texture of Illya’s eyelashes, the overwhelming smell of him in the bed they’re sharing; but Napoleon leans forward, catching the Russian’s mouth in a kiss - and for a split second, Napoleon would swear he was kissing back, lips moving softly under his.

Then Illya jerks away, rolling out of the bed, and Napoleon chases his warmth, sitting up and stretching his hand out to snag the other man’s wrist. “Illya. Wait.”

“Let go.”

Napoleon tightens his hold. “I want to talk about this.”

Illya keeps his back turned, shoulders stiff. “You don’t let go, I break your fingers.”
“Please don’t.” Napoleon gives his partner's wrist a tug. “Peril. Please. I’ll pour us a drink. We can talk. Gaby said we should.”

Mentioning Gaby’s name seems to do the trick, as it nearly always does when it comes to the giant Russian. After a moment more of being frozen, he shakes Napoleon off, muttering, “There is nothing to talk about,” but he doesn’t try to leave.

Napoleon gets up, a little displeased to see that he is still in his vest, dress shirt, and slacks of the evening, now quite rumpled. He sighs, thinking longingly of his robe as he pours amber liquid into two glasses and offers one to Illya - but he thinks that now is not the time to start taking off his clothes in front of his partner.

Illya takes the glass, staring pointedly past Napoleon’s left elbow instead of looking at his face. Napoleon sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose with his free hand; he feels exhausted again already, and a little chagrined by how inviting the curve of Illya’s neck looks, and how much he wants to fold up next to the Russian on the bed and tuck his head there.

Instead, he stays standing, because he doesn’t want to chase Illya away (though he doubts whether he can keep the KGB agent in the room long enough to have this conversation). “Peril, I feel there may have been a misunderstanding between us.”

Illya takes a long swallow of his liquor and doesn’t respond.

Napoleon looks down into his glass, swirling it idly. “If I’ve offended you, I hope you can forgive me. That certainly wasn’t my intention.”

Shaking his head, Illya lifts one hand to scrub at his face. Napoleon watches him carefully.

“Help me understand,” he says softly.

“Understand what?” Illya bites out.

Napoleon gives a hard-edged smile. “Come on, Peril. That’s hardly fair.”
“You are the one who wants to have conversation, Cowboy. Not me.”

Napoleon sighs, crossing his arms over his chest and hunching his shoulders. He looks defensive, and unhappy, and he knows it; he’s beginning to think he might actually be able to get somewhere with Peril through vulnerability, where his usual flippancy would earn him nothing but a few broken bones. “Well, I think it’s clear enough how I feel, where you’re concerned.”

Illya nods, slowly. He looks pointedly over Napoleon's left shoulder, jaw twitching madly for a moment before he finally manages to ask, “And what do you want from me?”

Smiling ruefully, Napoleon shrugs. “What don’t I want, Peril? That’s the question.”

Illya’s up and off the bed in less than a breath, standing in front of the American. Napoleon jumps, scotch sloshing in his glass; Illya’s hand comes up to rescue it, taking it gently from Napoleon’s compliant fingers and reaching back to set it on the bedside table; then he’s just there, a few inches between them, his eyes cold and blue and searching.

Napoleon’s heart pounds as Illya lifts a hand. He tries to convince himself that he doesn’t believe the Russian will actually snap his neck for this.

Illya drops the hand, warm and heavy, onto his shoulder, and curves one thumb around to brush over the pulse point in his throat. Napoleon’s breath stops somewhere halfway up his windpipe.

“When I found you…” The Russian’s voice is husky and low, quiet as a secret. “...I thought you were dead.”

Napoleon swallows. He doesn’t need to ask what Illya’s talking about; after being strapped to a mortician’s slab and injected with a reality-altering drug that made the colors around him blur and run together like water mixed with ink and the moving figures in lab coats look like shadows with burnt skin and clawed fingers, he thought he was dead for a while, too.

“It seemed like your heart was not beating at all. And I thought… I thought, ‘Please, God, don’t let him be dead. I have just found him. Don’t let me lose him.’”

_I didn’t know you believed in God_, Napoleon wants to say, only maybe that’s just it. Maybe it was a sign of desperation, that Illya would find himself turning to heaven for help.
Illya’s hand closes lightly over his throat, and Napoleon can feel his heart beating a tattoo against his partner’s palm. Illya studies him.

“I don’t have any answer for you, Cowboy. I don’t know what you want. I don’t know what I want. Except… I never want to have to feel your heart stop again. Never. Everything else is not important. As long as I can keep you alive.”

If Napoleon’s knees go any weaker, he’ll be depending on Illya’s hand around his throat to hold him up. *Peril*, Napoleon calls him, and he is, he is; his ice blue eyes are full of danger, his voice a vibrato deep in the thief’s bones. Napoleon feels dizzy, like he’s about to fall off some kind of edge, and his heart is pounding madly, pounding, pounding -

“Cowboy?”
The first time (although not the last, Napoleon would be chagrined to admit) that Napoleon fainted in Illya’s arms was after being tortured by Uncle Rudi.

It was only momentary, blackness eating up the edges of his vision as the room tipped violently one way - and then he regained awareness, and Illya had gathered him to his chest with a patient expression.

“Easy, Cowboy,” the Russian said, low and oddly gentle.

For an absurd moment, Napoleon almost took that as permission to black out again - to slip into warm darkness and leave everything up to Kuryakin. He was almost certain that the KGB agent could somehow save him and figure out what to do about Gaby and disarm the warhead and defeat the Vinciguerras. He seemed superhuman like that.

Instead, he used Illya’s arms as railings to ease his weight back onto his own feet, and said, “I really am pleased to see you, Peril.”

“You said that.” The Russian steadied him with a hand on his back, raising an eyebrow when Napoleon finally looked like he could stand on his own. “Should I kill him?”

Napoleon glanced at Rudi’s unconscious body and thought how satisfying it would be to watch Illya break his neck.

“Better not,” he said glumly. “We need his information.”

Illya nodded thoughtfully, then said, “I would like to kill him after.”
Napoleon looked at him in surprise. Kuryakin looked back passively.

“I suppose he offended you somehow?” the ex-thief asked drolly.

Illya’s jaw twitched. He looked hard at Napoleon and said, “Yes.”

------

He wakes up in another hospital, different in some ways but mostly the same. Someone’s shouting out in the hallway - a furious mixture of English and Russian. Is he in Russia? No. It’s Peril.

Glass shattering. A woman screams.

“You can’t go in there - ”

“Proch’s dorogi, nedorostok - get out of my way!”

“Let him go, André! Don’t try to stop him - ”

The door bursts open, and there’s Illya, chest heaving, blue eyes glittering in a pale, pale face. When he catches sight of Napoleon, his hands curl into fists.

“Debil bezmozgly - idiot, what did I say? What did I just say?”

Is the man seriously blaming him for having a heart attack? Napoleon tries not to crack a smile, but it’s just so absurd.

“Well, I’m sorry, Peril,” he manage to croak as the Russian crosses the room in three long strides, “I honestly am.”

“Ya ne khochu eto slyshat’.” Illya kneels by the bed, now on eye level with Napoleon, and his
hands slide up to catch the American’s face between two large palms. “Solo. Idiot. What am I going to do with you? Ty men’ya do smerti doved’yosh.”

“Oh, don’t say that. You’ll break my poor heart.” Napoleon smiles hopefully, inviting him to share in the humor. “It’s been through enough already, wouldn’t you say?”

“You joke? Now?” Illya’s expression is suddenly furious, and his hands tighten on Napoleon’s jaw. “Tupoy ublyudok! Do you know how afraid I was? I thought you were dead. Again! I thought I killed you! I should kill you now!”

“Don’t shout at him!” Gaby, newly arrived, flies to them from the door, seizing Illya by his shirt collar and hauling him up and away from Napoleon. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Waverly, hovering in the doorway, winces a little. “Can we, all of us, perhaps try to keep the shouting down a bit? Just a bit.” He shuts the door quietly behind him, nodding to Napoleon. “Mr. Solo, glad to see you’re awake. Again.”

Gaby is still yanking at Illya’s lapels, though she can’t physically budge his weight. He responds her hurled accusations with a face of stone; then, when she collapses against him, banging softly on his chest and making a noise that sounds suspiciously like a sob, he wraps an arm around her back, staring into the space over her head like he’s not really aware of what’s happening.

Napoleon raises his eyebrows. “I didn’t mean to cause all this fuss, I assure you.”

“Yes, well, it appears that you may be suffering from some… side effects.”

“You don’t say.”

“The drug is definitely gone, at least as far as we can see. It metabolized as quickly as the doctors expected. Unfortunately, it, ah. It appears to have… done some damage in the meanwhile. Set fire to the house on the way out, as it were.”

Napoleon looks at Gaby, hiccuping into Illya’s shirt, and Illya, whose blue eyes flick to him for just a moment before he looks away as if meeting Napoleon’s gaze is too painful. Then back to Waverly.
“Set fire,” he repeats, slowly.

Waverly removes his glasses and begins to polish them on the lining of his jacket. “The damage is… rather extensive, I’m afraid.”

Napoleon wishes he had finished his scotch before succumbing to heart failure. He wishes he had another one on hand. He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“How extensive?”

Waverly has the gall, the gall, to look at Illya with pity, pursing his lips as if wishing someone would take the words away before he has to say them; then he turns back and says,

“Your body systems are shutting down, Napoleon. There seems to be very little they can do.”

-----

The first time Napoleon had ever been shot was long before he met Gaby and Illya.

In April on 1945, scant weeks before the Nazi surrender to Allied forces on the 8th of May, Napoleon was swept along with the Twelfth United States Army Group as they crossed the River Rhine and plunged into the hornets’ nest, doggedly attempting to reach the heart of Germany before the Soviets. They had penetrated some way into the Saar-Palatinate area to the south, part of the plan to rout out the German 7th Army a la Lieutenant General George Patton, and Napoleon was on the verge of commenting to a buddy that everything looked strangely quiet when he got shot.

He stumbled, and sat down in surprise, looking down at where the bullet ate a bloody chunk out of his trousers. He couldn’t even feel it at first.

“Medic,” he croaked, voice lost in the cacophony that had risen around him with that first shot, then raised his hand and bellowed, “Medic!”
As if the floodgates gates had opened with his shout, the pain all came rushing in, paralyzing him from the hip down; he bent over with a strangled groan.

A fellow American soldier ducked through the noise and chaos to drag Napoleon behind cover. Then he bent over to examine the wound. “Nicked you a little, there, killer.”

“Please don’t let me die here,” blurted Napoleon. A leg wound that had missed any major arteries shouldn’t be enough to kill him, but soldiers abandoned on the battlefield for any reason never fared well.

“Die? You’re not gonna die, son. You’ve just been baptized.”

_Baptized_, a common figure of speech at the time for sustaining one’s first battle wounds. Equating the pain and suffering to a new lease on life.

“You’ll live,” the soldier said, and Napoleon did.

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Waverly escorts Gaby out. Her tears have all dried up and her face is set as if in stone. She and Illya appear to have performed some sort of trade of cosmic energies; now he is the one who looks like he’s on the verge of tears.

He’s sitting by the bed with his head bowed, hands clasped between his knees, and the silence has stretched for so long that Napoleon is beginning to grow uncomfortable.

“Peril?”

Illya doesn’t raise his head, and Napoleon can’t decide if it’s better or worse that his partner won’t look him in the eye just yet. He pauses for a moment to see if Illya will decide that he’s ready to respond; when he doesn’t, Napoleon prods again.

“Peril.”
“I’m praying,” the Russian grinds out, and Napoleon retreats into silence, a little stunned. So perhaps Illya’s reference to a Higher Power earlier had not been so out of the blue, after all; or, Napoleon thinks grimly, perhaps his earlier conclusion was still correct, and Kuryakin is still just desperate.

He wants to make a joke to break the tension, or maybe say something snide, purely out of habit, but it doesn’t feel right to disturb Illya’s prayers. So he waits awkwardly, gazing with disinterest around the room and wishing that Waverly had left Gaby with them and gone to get coffee by himself (or perhaps not - perhaps Gaby would only add to the tension in the room, with her cold face and her old, old eyes, a girl raised in a warzone, surprised briefly by impending death but not shocked by it, never shocked).

Heaving a sigh that shudders his massive shoulders, Illya looks up slowly, dragging his eyes each inch toward Napoleon’s face. Napoleon looks back at him with wide eyes, so cowed by the Russian’s raw expression that he can’t even summon up an insouciant smile.

“Illya,” he says, hesitant.

Illya sucks in his breath, and he honestly does look ready to cry.

“Cowboy.” His voice is thick, like he has a cold.

Napoleon is struck by the absurd thought that Illya thinks this is his fault. As soon as it occurs to him, he knows it’s true. But why? Because Illya doesn’t have x-ray vision, couldn’t see the damage being wrought inside Napoleon? Because Illya didn’t know enough about the experimental drug to know that it would affect him this way? Because Illya said something meaningful, something tender, and Napoleon’s heart gave out right afterward?

Yes. All of the above.

“Peril, you know this isn’t your fault, don’t you?” He watches sharply, catching the way the Russian’s eyes flicker guiltily to the side. “I’m serious. The doctors are now saying that I was doomed once the drug hit my bloodstream, so there’s really nothing you could have - ”

Illya’s hands are suddenly buried in the front of his hospital robe, balling up the material as he yanks the American forward into an aggressive kiss.
He breaks it off before Napoleon can even register that it’s happening, and then he’s panting against Napoleon’s lips, their foreheads pressed together. Illya’s eyes are squeezed shut, and when he speaks, it sounds like his teeth are clenched:

“Ne umirat’, Napoleon. Please. Ya prosil tol’ko ob odnom.”

“I know, Peril. And I’ve failed you, and I’m sorry for that.” Napoleon snakes his arm around Illya’s neck - a move that feels almost natural, now that Illya has already breached that barrier between them. (He thinks with dim disappointment that Illya has chosen a poor time for it; sooner would have been better, perhaps when he and Illya had spent the night in the same bed before he wound up back in the hospital.)

The sound of the door closing has them both jumping, Illya’s hand going straight to a hidden waist holster - but it’s Gaby, leaning back against the door as she stares at the two of them, the centers of her cheeks sunken in as if she’s biting them in an effort to keep her face frozen.

Illya starts to pull away, but Napoleon whips around to give him a pleading look, arm tightening around the Russian’s neck. Illya looks at him like a deer in headlights.

Gaby considers them for another moment, then crosses the room and climbs into the bed on Napoleon’s other side, kicking off her shoes and tucking her little bare feet under the sheet. She wraps both arms around Napoleon’s waist, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder.

“We are going to do something about this,” she says, low and firm.

Napoleon puts his free arm around her, the other tightening around Illya’s neck. “I think the doctors are doing everything they can, schatzi.”

Gaby shrugs. “Then we find better doctors.”

“Oh, yes?” He kisses the top of her head, his looming mortality excusing this liberal expression of affection. “And how do you suggest we do that, Miss Teller?”

“We will think of something.”
“Although he hasn’t made contact, he was spotted by our agents leaving Grimma, to the east. It is suspected that he has continued traveling in that direction.”

“He’s gone back over the wall?” exclaims Gaby.

The second time he’d been shot was on-mission with Illya and Gaby. He was in the back seat of the getaway car with Illya, who was pressing a blood-soaked rag against his wound and complaining viciously that Cowboy was always the one getting himself hurt, though Napoleon was quick to point out that Illya seemed all too eager to drown himself when the opportunity was there.

Tipping his head back against the Russian’s shoulder, Napoleon closed his eyes - the pain was making him nauseous, and the movement of the car didn’t help - and spoke to the air. “You’re not worried about me, are you, Peril?”

Illya frowned down at him fiercely, though he knew Cowboy couldn’t see it. “Why do I need to worry? You are stupid, and you get yourself hurt, but you will not die. We will take you home. You will be fine.”

“Hmm,” Napoleon hummed, and he thought, this isn’t so bad. He’d always thought he would die alone, a victim of his own failed charms and half-baked improvisations when something went horribly wrong in a heist, or, later, in an “errand” for the CIA. But this - in the car, on the run with Gaby and Illya, the Russian’s hands pressed against him to hold him together - no, this was not so bad.

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When he wakes, Gaby is still asleep next to him, curled up with her hand under her cheek and a little wrinkle on her forehead. Illya is gone.

Napoleon curls closer to Gaby, wincing as he does so; his insides feel bruised and tender. He wants to bury his nose in her brunette hair, but feels that may be a little forward even under the current circumstances.
She shifts slightly, one hand moving to touch his chest lightly right over his heart. She’s awake, but she doesn’t say anything.

He runs his fingertips up her spine, along the smooth curve of her shoulder. “Did Peril go for breakfast?”

She opens her eyes at that, frowning slightly as she sits up and looks around. “I didn’t know he had gone.”

“Perhaps taking out his impotent fury in a more suitable location.” Napoleon tries to tug her back down onto the bed, but she shakes her head.

“Something is wrong,” she says, at the same time that the door opens.

Waverly, a little breathless and giving off a disheveled air despite his impeccable appearance, clutches the door handle and tells them both, “There’s been a development.”

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Napoleon blinks. “So he’s really gone.”

“Although he hasn’t made contact, he was spotted by our agents leaving Grimma, to the east. It is suspected that he has continued traveling in that direction.”

“He’s gone back over the wall?” exclaims Gaby.

“It appears that way.” Waverly resettles his glasses on his nose. “We think it possible that he is seeking help from his contacts in the Soviet Union, perhaps hoping that they can provide us with some as-yet unknown resources for treating Mr. Solo’s condition.”

Napoleon has the sinking feeling that he knows what Illya’s plan is. He swings around to Gaby. “Will you try calling him? He’ll answer for you. You can bring him back, tell him to come home - ”
Gaby lifts a hand and shakes her head, stopping his slow, desperate rise in volume.

“That would be like telling him to give up on you,” she says, her expression genuinely pained. “Even I can’t convince him to do that.”

“But he's going to get himself killed. And for nothing!” Napoleon drags a hand through his hair, falling back against the pillow and feeling exquisitely exhausted.

“Maybe not for nothing.” Gaby is looking at her lap as she says it, picking at the bedsheets with immaculately manicured fingernails. “Maybe he has a plan.”

Waverly sighs. “Well, I'm afraid that all we can do for the time being is keep an eye out, and hope he knows what he’s doing.”

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Their first time in Paris together, Napoleon bought Gaby a book.

An expert at sniffing out vices and personal quirks, he had quickly realized that reading was her secret love. It was a pastime not much encouraged under the thumb of the USSR, and something she had had little time to pursue since they had begun working for UNCLE; but he had watched her devour airport novel after airport novel on their travels, and had finally decided to help her out.

“What’s this?” she had asked, flipping through it carelessly before stopping, turning back to the beginning, and flipping through again, more attentively this time. “It’s in French.”

“German translations are on the reverse.” He tucked his hands into his pockets, trying to look like he wasn’t invested in her reaction. “I thought it might be... challenging... to get good literature on the other side of the Curtain.”

She squinted at him suspiciously. “It is.”
Smiling, he took his hands out of his pockets and gestured sweepingly at the city around them. “Well, where better to begin your classical education than Paris?”

She gave him a bemused look, then shook her head. “Alright,” she said. “Teach me.”

-----

Napoleon spends a day steadily getting worse, pain like methodically laid coals beginning to line every fold of his body. To take his mind off things, Gaby brings him the French book he left on his bed at home.

“Teach me,” she demands, and he obliges, incapable of telling her no.

He tires quickly, however, and she trades out the French book for Vonnegut. “Now I will read to you,” she says, and proceeds to do so. The familiar English is a comfort. Something he can still handle.

He goes into cardiac arrest in chapter twenty and is very difficult to rouse even after they start his heart beating again.

“He’s fading quickly,” a nurse tells a white-faced Gaby, with a look of endless pity. “If there’s anything you want to say, you should say it now.”

Gaby takes Napoleon’s cold hand in hers, and nods.

He does wake, eventually, though he doesn’t know where he is at first. Then he asks for Illya.

She thinks that “He’s not here, Napoleon,” might be the hardest thing she’s ever had to say.

“Ah.” He falls back against the pillow, face crumpling, and nods. “I remember.”

She rubs his fingers between hers, trying to warm them up. “I’m sure he’s fine.”
“Yes, although probably not due back anytime soon,” Napoleon replies ruefully. He sighs. “Gaby, when you see him next - ”

He stops, seeing her shake her head, but then she tells him in a thick voice: “It’s alright. I’m sorry. Go on.”

“ - will you tell him that… tell him I said…” He sighs, lifting his free hand to scrub at his face. “Tell him - Christ, I don't know. You're clever, Gaby. Tell him I said something witty and romantic. I'm sure you'll come up with something.”

If she were Illya, she would tell him that he's an idiot, that she absolutely refuses to pass on his fake dying words because he is not going to die.

Instead, she squeezes his hand. “I’ll tell him.”

Absurdly, the pleased and grateful look he gives her makes her want to cry more than anything else.

“Thanks, **schatzi**.” He smiles wanly, a ghost of his former effortless charm. “You'll take care of him for me, won't you?”

Smoothing sweaty bangs off his forehead, she leans over to kiss his brow. “Yes. Of course.”

“I don't know what I did to deserve you.” His eyes are already closed again.

“Carried me over two ten-foot walls and a minefield out of East Berlin.” He doesn't react to that. Gaby has the feeling that he can't hear her anymore.

-----

Gaby Teller was six years old the first time she saw someone die.
Hitler had been in power for a little over five years when she was born, and he had been eliminating his political opposition for twice as long by her sixth birthday. Fear reigned everywhere, but Gaby’s father was a nuclear scientist working for the ruling party, and a German citizen of good standing and aristocratic heritage. He was not afraid, so Gaby was not afraid.

Their neighbors were not all so safe, though. And Gaby remembers being up past her bedtime, looking out the window of the first story of their house in Berlin and watching a lady get dragged out the door of the house across the street by her hair, a man prodded out after her on the end of a rifle. The soldiers pushed them down onto their knees in the street, shouting at them until they locked their hands behind their necks; then two small children were led out, a girl of about twelve and a boy of eight or nine, both crying. As the children exited the house and looked up at their parents kneeling on the cobblestones, one of the soldiers took out his pistol and shot their father in the head.

The children’s screams would be echoed many times over by many others throughout Nazi Germany. Their tears were all wasted on the soldiers, and Gaby thought that if she ever had to trade gazes with one of those stone-faced men, that her face would be even harder, and colder. If they were stone, she would be ice.

-----

The doctors report that this is the terminal coma. Gaby wishes she had taken the nurse’s advice about saying what needed to be said - although she's not sure what else she would have chosen to say, really. It's nothing Napoleon doesn't know, anyway.
He stops in the doorway of Napoleon’s room, surveying the scene. The American lies in bed, skin white and almost translucent; Gaby sits at his side. She doesn’t look up when Illya enters the room.

“Where,” she says in a low, trembling voice, hard and cold as bones, “have you been?”

When Illya comes barreling into the hospital, a Russian behemoth covered in blood with a metal case handcuffed to his wrist, it’s natural that many of the orderlies and security personnel try to stop him. And it’s equally natural that he tosses them away like so many rag dolls.

He stops in the doorway of Napoleon’s room, surveying the scene. The American lies in bed, skin white and almost translucent, bruised eyelids closed. Gaby sits at his side, cross-legged in a chair; her head is bent over his limp hand, which is cradled in both of hers. She doesn’t look up when Illya enters the room.

“Where,” she says in a low, trembling voice, hard and cold as bones, “have you been?”

He doesn’t respond, just moves to the bedside to press two fingers to Napoleon’s neck, even though he can hear the lackadaisical beeping of the heart monitor. He wants to feel it for himself.

Gaby looks up. There’s makeup crusted around her eyes. She looks like she hasn't slept in days.

“I found better doctors,” Illya says, and opens the case.

Gaby watches him hollowly while he prepares a syringe. By the time she hears Waverly shouting “Someone stop him!” from the hallway, Illya has already slid the needle into the crook of Napoleon’s elbow.

It’s too late but she still reaches across their friend to grab Illya’s wrist. “What will this do to him?”

“Keep him alive, for now,” Illya replies, pressing the plunger down.
Waverly appears in the doorway, thunderous. “Kuryakin, what the devil - !”

Illya doesn’t look away from Napoleon as he draws the needle from his arm. “Parking lot. Zwickau F8, 1953, black. In trunk, there is doctor who designed drug. Go get him.”

Rather than shocked, Waverly merely looks mildly taken aback as Illya bends over his partner, brushing his fingertips down the line of Napoleon’s jaw.

“Mister Waverly,” Gaby says quietly, lifting an eyebrow at him, and he clears his throat.

“Right. I’ll just take care of that, then.” He turns smartly and disappears from the doorway, and Gaby leans over Napoleon.

“What did you give him?” she whispers.

“More of same.”

“More?! Illya!”

“Keeps him alive. That's why used for torture.” His accent is getting thicker with every word, cold blue eyes fixed on Napoleon’s face; he seems too preoccupied to explain fully, but fortunately Gaby cottons on.

“And you brought the scientist. So this will keep him alive while we use the doctor to find a way to fix it.”

Illya grunts an affirmative, pressing his fingers into Napoleon’s neck again.

“There's just one thing.” Gaby tries to tamp down on the hope fizzing up inside her. “What if he can’t fix it?”
“He will figure out.” Illya looks up at her. His eyes are like pale river stones. “I motivate him.”

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Although the THRUSH agents had been smart enough to move their base after Illya escaped with Napoleon the first time, they weren't too difficult to track down. Not for Illya Kuryakin.

The question of locating the Surinamese scientist was even less of a problem; Illya merely broke a lot of bones, starting with small ones and moving on to the bigger ones, until he got the directions he asked for.

Not killing the man on sight was a test of his self-control. But he could rein in his rage for Napoleon’s sake. His partner was dying and this man held the key to saving him.

Illya, quite skilled at all manner of math and science in addition to torture, managed to not only extract the information he was after, but to make sense of the drivel coming from the South American doctor's mouth as he howled and gibbered in agony, organizing the data into some semblance of a conclusion.

The drug had been created for the purpose of information extraction - a chemical that would tell the brain that the body was in pain (drowning, burning, suffocating, being ripped to shreds) while sparing the captors the actual effort of torturing the subject. Not only that, but the scientist had figured out a way to infuse an incredible regenerative compound into the recipe; that way THRUSH would be able to interrogate a target indefinitely, their horrifically perfect health keeping the subject from escaping into the sweet solace of death. Then, once THRUSH decided that a subject had outlived their usefulness, they would stop giving them the drug, and the subject’s body would break down from the stress of extensive psychological torture combined with the strain on their body systems caused by the constant regeneration.

Intellectually, it was all very interesting, but Illya’s lizard brain had latched onto only one thing: the drug kept the subject alive. If they stopped getting it, they would die.

It wasn’t a long term solution. But it would do.

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It's been a day and a half since Illya turned the scientist over to UNCLE, and it's time for Napoleon to receive another dose of the drug. Illya - who will not allow anyone else to administer the substance to his partner, not the hospital staff or anyone else - is preparing to slide a syringe needle into Napoleon’s arm when Napoleon whispers, “Don’t.”

Illya pauses. “It will be over soon, Cowboy.”

“Illya, please.” Napoleon’s lips are white, and when his bruised eyelids flutter open slightly, Illya can see that the pupils have swallowed up all the color in his eyes. A soft breath wisps out of him before he speaks the next words: “I’d rather die.”

Feeling like he’s been punched in the stomach, Illya puts the syringe down on the bedside table and leans over, reaching up to smooth the American’s limp, dark hair off of his pale forehead. “You’re not going to die, Solo.”

“Please.” Napoleon’s eyes slip shut again. His chest barely rises as he breathes. “No more.”

The Russian shakes his head, hand trembling where it rests on top of Napoleon's head. “I don’t like to hear you talk this way, Cowboy. You must keep fighting. You must give me time.”

Ragged breath in. “I can’t.”

“Solo.” It might be the wrong thing to do, but Illya braces his elbows on either side of Napoleon’s head and dips to kiss the corner of his mouth, his jaw, then, finally, his lips. “This is all I ask you for. Give me this chance. Let me save you.”

“Peril,” Napoleon murmurs against his mouth.

“After that, I give you whatever you want.” Illya kisses him slowly, wanting to breathe into him. If he could keep the American’s heart beating by the labor of his own hands, he would do it. He will do it.

“Peril,” Napoleon says again, weakly.
“Ya klyanus' na moyu zhizn’. I promise.” Smoothly, Illya slides the needle into the crook of Napoleon’s elbow. “Hang in there, Cowboy.”

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It takes the scientist a week and a half, with all of UNCLE’s resources at his command, to synthesize a cure. In actuality, the “cure” is simply another version of the drug - a slower-metabolizing version, one that will hopefully grant Napoleon at least part of the regenerative effect without wreaking the horrendous damage of earlier.

Which means, of course, that Napoleon spends a week and a half in a state of constant psychological torment, empty-eyed and white as a sheet, barely twitching in response to any stimulus.

Noticing the way that Gaby and Illya take shifts at his bedside, the day nurse takes pity and explains to them in French that they should try to talk to him, try to make him aware (however dimly) that they haven't abandoned him. She says it's the best way they can help him, now.

When Gaby is with him, she reads aloud from Vonnegut’s Player Piano. Sometimes, if her voice starts to roughen or the English gets too frustrating, she puts the book down and just strokes his hair, or takes his hands and rubs them between hers, breathing warm air on his cold fingers.

Illya speaks little. Gaby sometimes hears him murmuring to Napoleon in Russian, but she doesn’t recognize most of the words - except for some simple endearments, things she’s never heard him say to anyone, in any language.
Chapter Summary

We don't split up. That's the whole point, isn't it?

“Ilya?”

He’s awake already, having heard her come into the visitors’ lounge, but he lets her sit on the edge of the cot and touch his shoulder before opening his eyes.

“He’s awake,” Gaby says softly, pressing down on his shoulder in a futile effort to keep him lying down. When he sits up, shrugging her off in the process, she places both hands on his chest, giving him a look of iron. “Illya, listen to me. He’s going to live, but he’ll need some time. He’s been through a lot.”

“I am going to see him.” The KGB agent’s tone dares her to argue.

“I know you are,” she replies ruefully. “But you must be careful. Don’t upset him.”

“I will be careful.” He removes her hands gently from his chest and rises from the cot.

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Napoleon doesn’t greet him when he comes in, which is, in itself, uncharacteristic. But the American’s blue eyes do fix on him like he’s the only thing in the room, the only thing in motion, the only thing in color in all the world.

“Ah,” says Waverly from the bedside, “Mr. Kuryakin. I’m sure the two of you will want a moment alone.” As he bustles the nurses and orderlies out, however, he stops at Illya’s side to murmur, “Do try not to upset him. I’ll be sending Miss Teller along in a little while to check on you.”

Then it’s just him and Cowboy, and he moves at once to Napoleon’s side. Neither says anything
for a long time; then Napoleon cracks a grim smile.

“Go on,” he says, in a voice that's light, self-deprecating as usual, but still somehow off - “ask me if I’m doing okay.”

Illya’s throat tightens. He reaches out to smooth a tousled piece of hair behind Napoleon’s ear. Napoleon closes his eyes, stilling under the touch.

“You know,” the ex-thief says softly, “I really can’t decide if I love you or hate you right now.”

Illya shakes his head. “Ne nenavid’ menya, Cowboy. You would have done the same.”

“And you would have happily hated my guts forever.” Napoleon turns his head a little, pressing into the hand that hasn’t moved away. “This was a horrific experience, Peril. The absolute worst of my life.”

Truly contrite, Illya says quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“Not to undermine the occasion of you apologizing to me for the first and possibly the last time in our lives, but that doesn’t really change anything.” Napoleon rests his temple against Illya’s knuckles for a moment longer before pulling away, opening his eyes. “I think I’d like to talk to Gaby for a while. Send her in, will you?”

Illya can’t find any words to say. He swallows, and nods, dropping his hand back to his side.

“Peril,” Napoleon says as he begins to leave, and he turns. “It’s hard to tell what was real and what was an effect of the drug. I wonder if you could clear something up for me.”

He nods again.

“Did you promise me something?” The American’s gaze is steady, unreadable. “If I lived?”

Illya knows what he's asking. “I promised anything you want. I will keep that promise.”
“Always good to have favors owed.” Napoleon smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Thanks, Peril.”

Dismissed, Illya leaves the room, and shuts the door gently behind him.

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“We’re going to put him into rehabilitation,” Waverly tells them both, seated on a plastic chair in the visitors’ lounge. “It’s an excellent program designed by some of the greatest minds in the psychology field, the world over. They’ll be able to fix him up if anyone can.”

Gaby sits, alone and cold and pretty like a porcelain doll, on one end of the cot, a cup of tea that has gone cold cradled in her perfectly manicured hand. Illya sits on the other end with his elbows resting on his knees, bent nearly double, head in his hands as if he has no more energy with which to hold himself up.

“We will be asking you two to go through the program with him,” adds Waverly gently. He may appear unaffected on the surface, but he’s not a fool, nor is he heartless; he knows what they’ve all been through. “You have all had to fight this battle as a team, it seems only fair that you receive treatment as a team.”

“Medical leave?” Gaby clarifies.

“You’ll all be taken off active duty for the time being. Yes.”

“In England?”

“At least part of the rehabilitation will take place in the U.K., yes.”

Gaby glances over at Illya. He doesn’t look up, nor does he give any indication that he’s been tracking the conversation. She turns back to Waverly. “What does Napoleon say?”
“Mr. Solo has already agreed that it would be in everyone’s best interest to take him out of the thick of things for now.”

“But does he want to be with us?” Illya’s voice comes muffled from his hands. He looks up, face flat, expressionless. “Does he want us with him?”

“I have informed him that that is the expectation. He made no protest.” Waverly eyes them both sharply. When neither seems inclined to respond, he sighs, then stands, brushing off his trousers. “I will give you all some time to get used to the idea. If there are any objections, I expect them in writing by the end of the week. Barring that, you will be given all the information necessary for your resettlement, and expected to report to your temporary living quarters no later than the coming Monday. Mr. Solo will be along as soon as he is well enough to travel.”

Illya shakes his head. “We don’t split up. That is whole point, isn’t it?”

Delicately, Waverly replies, “Mr. Solo has requested not to have visitors for a few days. Besides, this will give the two of you time to settle in, grow comfortable with the situation and perhaps be better prepared to receive him when he is released.” He pauses, then adds quietly: “I’m afraid no one can help you know what to expect at that time. It’s impossible to tell how any man will come out the other side of a trial such as that which Mr. Solo has experienced.”

Gaby’s voice is hard. “Are you saying he’ll be a danger to us?”

“I would ask you not to be surprised if that were the case.” Waverly fixes Illya with a keen eye. “I trust that you will be adequately prepared to handle matters if something of that sort were to occur, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“He is my responsibility,” the Russian replies coldly. Gaby gives him a sharp look, which he ignores. “I will handle it.”

“Very well,” says Waverly.
what they really took

Chapter Summary

"All I wanted was to go home."

When Illya was very young and in training for the KGB, he knew of a woman called Galina Brusilova. Brusilova was a good agent, smart and tough, loyal to the USSR. But it was impossible to serve for as many years as she did and not get captured once or twice.

Rescue missions weren't a part of KGB policy. When Brusilova finally came stumbling back, ten weeks later, half-crazed and jumping at shadows, she was taken in for psych eval. Her brain was in shambles; although she hadn’t had the information they were looking for, the enemy agents kept her detained on principal, and their brutal and seemingly aimless torture had reduced her to a babbling madwoman. She would never be fit to return to service.

The only time Illya had ever seen her in person, she was crying - slow dribble of tears from glassy eyes - limp between two stone-faced agents who were escorting her down the corridor in the opposite direction.

“All I wanted was to go home,” she said in Russian, seeming to be addressing the air in front of her rather than her guards or Illya. “I thought everything would be alright if I could just survive, escape. Now I know what they really took from me.”

By the next morning, she was gone, and no one spoke of her again. The KGB always cleaned up its messes.

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“It’s been more than an hour. You haven’t even started unpacking?”

Illya merely grunts in response, staring down at the duffel sitting unopened on his new bed. He hears Gaby shift in the doorway; then she says, more gently:

“Come and have a drink with me.”
He shakes his head. She presses, "You'll feel better."

“You’ll feel better.”

“I don’t. Want. A drink.”

“Well, I do, and if you’re not going to have one, then at least you should come and sit with me.” She doesn’t bother to wait for a reply; she turns and disappears down the hallway, confident that he’ll follow.

He does, after a moment, and finds her in the parlor, pouring herself a generous serving of Imperial. She swirls it in the glass for a moment before knocking back the whole thing in one go.

He can almost hear Solo’s voice: *I don’t know who you’re mistreating more right now, yourself or that Scotch.*

Moving toward her as she pours herself another helping, he gently takes both the bottle and the glass from her hands, and sets them aside before wrapping his arms around her and pulling her in tight. She worms her own arms around his waist, pressing her face into his shirt and speaking, muffled and tired:

“Illya, what are we going to do?”

He lays a large palm across her small shoulderblades, staring sightlessly at the wall across the room as his jaw works.

“Bring him home,” he replies at last.

End Notes

I've put a lot of effort into making this a period-accurate piece, so if you have any corrections or suggestions, please share.
Also: Anything you want to see in the next part of the story? Leave a comment below.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!